

# Sustaining sustainability

## Maintaining the whole while working on the parts

Dr J Morgan Williams  
Parliamentary Commissioner  
for the Environment



Each year in my annual report to Parliament, I endeavour in my preface, to draw together some of the themes that have emerged from my team efforts of the previous year. Because Parliamentary annual reports are not renowned for getting on best seller lists I thought I would share with *Survey Quarterly* readers my summarised comments for the 2001/2002 year and in the process market some of our studies which *Survey Quarterly* readers may find of interest.

So what were the threads from my 2001/2002 years' work?

### Review of progress

During the year our studies built very strongly on work of the previous two years and in particular focussed on progress with advancement of environmental sustainability. Our major study was a review of New Zealand's progress on sustainable development since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992. Other investigations examining elements of sustainability included the role of native plants on private lands, the management of wetlands in the Tasman District Council region, an exploration of a Treaty-based environmental audit framework and urban sustainability via a study tour to Curitiba, a Brazilian city that has earned global recognition for its sustainable development thinking and action.

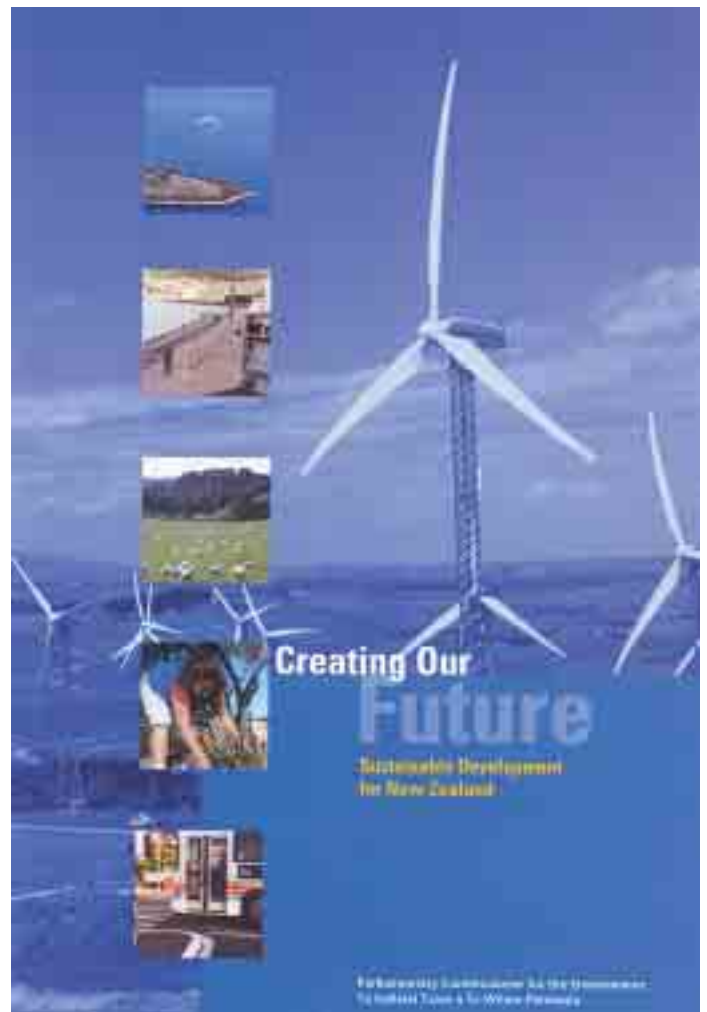
The year's work highlighted that New Zealand has many of the building blocks to be more sustainable. But 10 years after implementing the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) and signing up to Agenda 21, we are still struggling to think, design and turn sustainable development into a reality at national level. So where should our focus be?

### Sustainability dimensions

There are six sustainability dimensions that present challenges and opportunities for New Zealand.

- 1 The need to move beyond 'environmentalism', which has been the dominant paradigm of resource management over the last 40 years. Environmentalism is primarily a response to the need to protect nature and people from the ravages of human activities, while sustainability is a movement towards redesigning the ways we meet societies' needs and wants within the environment's capacity to do so. Most of our current legislation is focused on managing environmental effects. This has been a necessary phase,

but one we must now look beyond if we are to meet the broad challenges of sustainable development. To do so will involve ongoing legislative changes, but more importantly the development of policies, economic instruments and other tools that incentivise efficient use of resources and connect environmental, social and economic strategies.



Creating Our Future: Sustainable development for New Zealand, published in 2002

2 Our review of sustainable development in New Zealand since 1992 found that, in the last three years, there have been a number of strategies developed that are potential contributors to sustainable development. However, a notable weakness of these strategies is how few of them are interlinked with others where there are opportunities to advance sustainability. Advancing sustainable development necessitates an integrated systems approach to the way we do things. Sector strategies such as for energy, transport, health and tourism, are clearly desirable but they must be consciously interlinked.

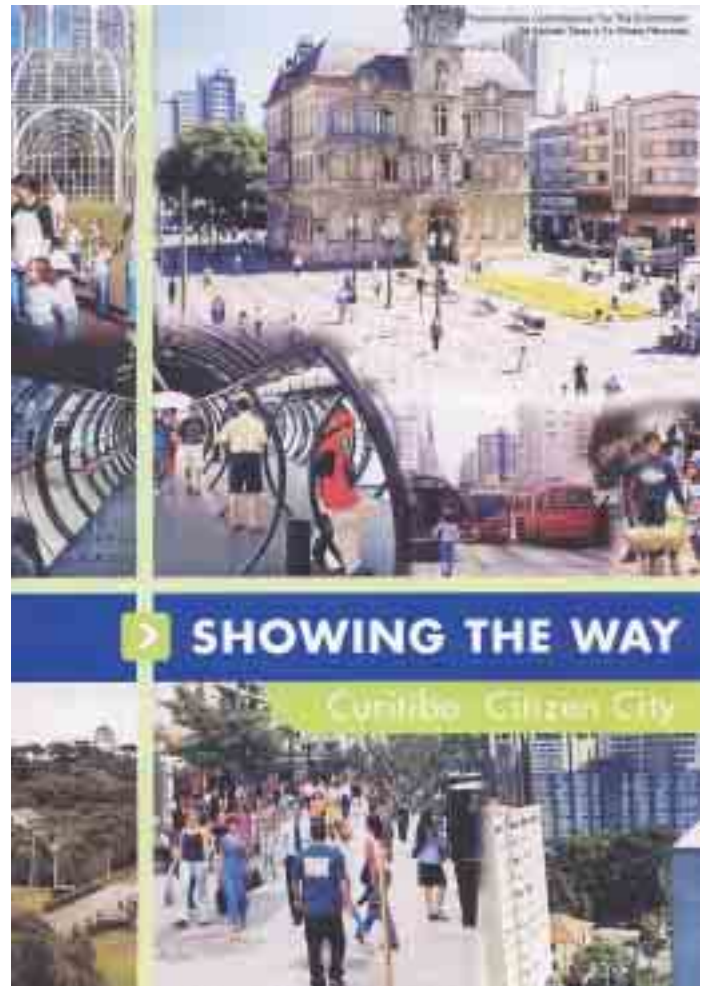
The potential to make these linkages is via a national sustainable development strategy. This can be an over-arching glue for all other strategies but will require ongoing effort to ensure its effectiveness.

3 Several of our studies revealed that while the public, local government and businesses may desire to do things in more sustainable ways, there can be significant disincentives to do so. One example that emerged from the investigation of the place of native plants on private lands, showed that current taxation policies favour the planting of exotic trees over indigenous ones. Other examples are evident in the electricity sector where RMA resource consent processes focus on managing effects on the local environment, while taking less account of environmental effects at a national or international level. This has the potential to lead to more thermal electricity generation being established rather than renewable energy sources such as hydro or wind.

It is important that such impediments are identified and addressed. Major shapers of our economy and society, such as the RMA and taxation, need to be rigorously examined to determine how they can influence a change to more sustainable behaviour, investment and production. For example, further research and pilot study work on environmental taxes is needed which draws from an already rapidly growing body of international experience.

4 Becoming more sustainable, as a family, community, business or a nation, necessitates means of measuring progress or indicators. Our sustainable development review identified that the failure to develop indicators during the 1990s has made it difficult to assess progress towards implementing sustainable development. Statistics New Zealand has recently identified potential sustainability development indicators. However there is also an opportunity to develop a composite indicator such as the genuine progress indicator (GPI) or the human development index (HDI). The great value of composite indicators is that they provide a national sustainability measure to use alongside the dominant but narrow economic indicator, gross domestic product (GDP). In contrast to GDP, indicators such as GPI and HDI measure both environmental and social 'goods' and 'bads'. However, they deduct the bads, such as crime, pollution and depletion of non-renewable energy resources, from the goods instead of including them all in the total, as GDP does.

5 The study tour to Curitiba, building on our major urban investigation in 1998, highlighted again the importance of focusing on the environmental sustainability of our cities and settlements. The success of settlements, particularly larger cities, in getting to grips with sustainability is a key to the successful development of an urbanised nation such as New Zealand. City sustainability starts with good design, which must be within a long-term planning framework. The key ingredients of the sustainability cake are land use, corridors to connect and maintaining efficient mobility. These ingredients are the building



Showing the Way: Curitiba: Citizen City, an urban sustainability report, published in 2002

blocks to developing and maintaining a quality human habitat of safe open spaces, adequate vegetation, good air quality, low noise levels and clean water.

In comparison to cities like Curitiba, New Zealand has a limited capacity to design and develop more sustainable and habitable towns and cities. A major gap is our urban research and planning capacity, now recognised by the Foundation for Research Science and Technology (FRST), and mechanisms for incorporating research knowledge into local government short and long term planning.

6 Finally, our review of sustainable development, exploration of the concept of a Treaty-based environmental audit, wetlands study and native plants study all indicated that we have many examples of people, businesses, communities and councils trying to do things in more environmentally sustainable ways. However, the many small actions will not weld into an enduring nationwide sustainability trend unless there is sound leadership at all levels of government and in all sectors of society. All leaders have to pay more attention to future needs and pressures, while better integrating the policies and actions of today.

So can New Zealand make the transition to a more sustainable nation? Yes, provided a large number of our shakers and movers acknowledge that it requires major shifts from a business as usual developmental pathway. What is now needed is leadership in all sectors of society to support innovative individuals, businesses and community groups who are showing the way. Societal leadership will in turn encourage government, local and central, to provide the essential facilitation and empowering contributory process. 