



# Fast

# FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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## “Sustainable Development” – What’s in a name?

**Q**uite a lot actually, labels matter! Manitoba Conservation and Water Stewardship is currently conducting an online “consultation” on a proposal to replace Manitoba’s Sustainable Development Act (1998) with a new Act, tentatively called the “Green Prosperity Act”.

We recall that the commitment to the Legislature in the 2009 Throne Speech was to “modernize” the SD Act, not to replace it. While we agree that the SD Act could perhaps use a modest refresh, the proposed “replacement” raises questions.

The previous “TomorrowNow” (Green Plan) online consultation apparently had an “overwhelming” response, but so far there has been no public accounting of comments by way of a “What You Told Us” document, a common step in public consultations. Individuals and organizations that took time to comment remain largely unaware of what other respondents’ proposals were or what areas of consensus or disagreement emerged from the exercise.

This one-way “comment in isolation” model of consultation is being used again and we doubt that the model is robust enough for doing away with an Act as important and historic as Manitoba’s SD Act. Truly productive consultations include face to face discussion and dialogue between interested parties to develop trust and move ideas forward.

Perhaps some history is in order. The policy work and consultations towards what became Manitoba’s SD Act began in 1986/87 under then NDP Environment Minister,

Gerard Lecuyer. In response to the Bruntland Commission’s 1986 visit to Canada, the Canadian Council of Resource and Environment Ministers established a national task force of business and environmental representatives, and Federal and Provincial Ministers, to begin a dialogue on environment and economy integration. This task force, chaired by Minister Lecuyer, tabled its report (Report of the National Task Force on Environment and Economy) at the General Assembly of the United Nations on Oct. 19, 1987.

A decade of sustained policy work, consultation and consensus building, conducted by several governments, ultimately saw the Manitoba SD Act proclaimed in July 1998. It was intended as an Act to guide the public sector and all provincial Departments, not only Conservation. In 1999 the SD Act was moved from the central authority of Executive Council to the authority of the newly combined Ministry of Conservation.

“Sustainable Development” (SD) is an established and internationally recognized concept; it requires integrated decision-making that balances the environmental, the social and the economic aspects of society (the famous “three pillars” of Sustainable Development). SD links us to the UN Millennium Goals and environmental initiatives around the world. The proposed new Act suggests a shift of focus away from this integrated approach to a more exclusive focus on environmental sustainability.

There is nothing in the existing SD Act preventing Conservation and Water Stewardship (CONWS) from focusing on

there is an alternative.

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the specific areas of its mandate, namely the environment. A shift away from the social and economic aspects of SD however, risks removing appropriate sustainability guidance on social and economic issues for other departments and public sector entities.

And there are other risks in moving away from the by now well understood Sustainable Development paradigm. For example, why would one undercut the Winnipeg based and internationally recognized “International Institute for Sustainable Development” (IISD) by moving away from Sustainable Development, in concept and name?

Another SD success story is Manitoba’s leadership in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). Manitoba is the lead jurisdiction in the Council of Ministers of Education and represents CMEC on the U.N. Economic Commission for Europe Steering Committee on ESD. Why would one risk Manitoba’s good work by de-emphasising Sustainable Development?

Also at risk of being undermined is the work of Manitoba’s various Community Economic Development (CED) organizations. Policy linkages to Sustainable Development are the foundation for a wide array of CED work. Given the recent heightened attention to social inequality and poverty, abandoning existing policy levers and departmental sustainability obligations seems unwise.

Manitoba’s Aboriginal Procurement Initiative, and various small business, local and CED purchasing initiatives are commendable sustainability achievements that should not be undermined. Fair Trade, Corporate Social Responsibility, and the Responsible Manufacturers Policy, are all supported by and linked to the global responsibilities inherent in Sustainable Development.

The SD Act already provides an organizational structure for implementing sustainability across departments. Its suite of “legacy” SD Goals, Guidelines and Departmental Action Plans provides CONWS and other government

departments with a ready-made mandate and structure for moving forward in social and economic areas. The SD Regulation for Cities, Municipalities and the Health and Education sectors has been instrumental in fostering attention to sustainability, as have the SD obligations of Manitoba’s Crown Corporations.

Think about the name suggested for the yet to be developed new Act, the “Green Prosperity Act”. “Green” has by now become a rather tired concept, and though it signals a claim to being environmentally friendly, it is all too susceptible to green-wash; it’s an advertising slogan, not a policy. And recall, when Premier Selinger attended the Rio+20 and India SD Summits, it was to talk about Sustainable Development.

We believe there would be negative consequences in de-emphasizing the Sustainable Development discourse and suggest that Manitoba stay with the internationally respected SD theory and practice. A modest SD Act refresh can still provide the organizing framework for new prosperity initiatives and community partnerships.

To conclude, let us say that we understand the need to occasionally re-launch legislation that may no longer be front and center in awareness or may need re-balancing on the basis of implementation experience. As important however is to end up with more than what one started with; to build on solid foundations and, most crucially, to do no harm! On that basis a more modest reworking of the existing SD Act is in order and, in this instance, less may be more. The comment period closes February 28.

Linked at: <http://www.gov.mb.ca/conservation/greenprosperity/index.html>

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