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# Parliaments and Sustainable Development

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by Geoffrey Kelley, MNA

*Sustainable development is a broad concept that touches on different facets of the daily life of individuals and organizations. This article looks at what is being done by the Québec National Assembly and other legislatures to promote sustainable development.*



The use of the expression sustainable development spread with the publication in 1987 of a report entitled "Our Common Future" (also known as the Brundtland Report), published by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development. The Brundtland Report defines sustainable development as follows:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Later, in 1992, participants in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, including Premier Jean Charest, who was then the federal environment minister, endorsed this concept. They noted that sustainable development is essential to ensuring the well-being of human communities and the preservation of life-sustaining ecosystems.

In 2002, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa, the leaders in attendance renewed their commitment to the objectives set in Rio de Janeiro by pledging to "walk the talk" and translate the positions they had adopted into action, in partic-

ular by implementing national sustainable development strategies.

Indeed, progress in sustainable development in our societies, whether we are talking about the public administration, parliamentary institutions or private organizations, depends on the combined action of everyone involved.

As parliamentarians and members of institutions that are the foundation of modern democracies, it is incumbent upon us to exercise strong leadership so that our administrations become models for others.

In Quebec, the *Auditor General Act* has been amended by the *Sustainable Development Act (2006)* to provide for the appointment of a Sustainable Development Commissioner reporting to the Auditor General, who, in turn, comes under the authority of the National Assembly. The Commissioner will file an annual report, and will testify about his findings to a standing committee of the Assembly. This will provide parliamentarians with a valuable tool when they study the sustainable development plans from each government department and agency.

In addition, the *Sustainable Development Act* sets out 16 principles that reflect those of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and serve as guidelines for action based on a sustainable development perspective. Allow me to list a few of these principles and describe them briefly to illustrate the scope of the actions that may be taken to promote sustainable development.

The principles encourage the integration of social, economic and environmental considerations. For instance:

- *Health and quality of life* – Human beings, their health and their quality of life are at the centre of our interest in sustainable development. Each and every one of us

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should be able to lead a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature;

- *Social equality and inclusiveness* – Development must be undertaken in a spirit of intra- and inter-generational equity and in a way that is ethical and takes into account our increasingly diverse population;
- *Protection of the environment* – To achieve sustainable development, environmental protection must constitute an integral part of the development process;
- *Economic efficiency* – Quebec's economy and its regions must be productive and innovative, seeking to achieve an economic prosperity that is both conducive to social progress and respectful of the environment;
- *Participation and commitment* – The participation and commitment of citizens and citizens' groups are needed to foster a concerted vision of development and ensure its environmental, social and economic sustainability;
- *Prevention* – In the presence of a known risk, preventive, mitigating and corrective actions must be taken, with priority given to actions at the source;
- *Protection of cultural heritage* – Cultural heritage, made up of property, sites, landscapes, traditions and knowledge, reflects the identity of a society. It passes on the values of a society from generation to generation, and the preservation of this heritage fosters the sustainability of development. Cultural heritage components must be identified, protected and enhanced, taking their intrinsic rarity and fragility into account;
- *Responsible production and consumption* – Production and consumption patterns must be changed in the interests of greater viability and social and environmental responsibility. Adopting an eco-efficient approach that avoids waste and optimizes the use of resources is just one example of how this can be achieved.

These principles serve as an analytical tool for both the Commissioner of Sustainable Development and for parliamentarians. They are reflected in several recent government initiatives, including:

1. the Quebec energy plan (2006), which calls for more hydro-electric and wind power projects, including Eastmain I-A (900 mw/h), La Romaine (1,400 mw/h) and the new wind power projects (2,500 mw/h) ;
2. the creation of the position of "Forester-in-chief" (2005) to ensure a more careful management of Quebec forests;
3. the preservation of unique land formations inside protected areas, and the creation of new parks. Since 2003, the land protected has doubled from 3% to 6% of our surface. The target is 8%.

These are the measures we took to strengthen our legislative roles. But what about our internal management? How green is our own Assembly?

On May 28th, 2008, the Quebec National Assembly launched a consultation of the members of the Canadian Association of Parliamentary Administration (CAPA), inviting them to send in information on sustainable development policies, programs or other initiatives that had been adopted over the last few years and that applied to the Members and staff of their respective legislative assemblies. Eleven legislative assemblies responded. Judging from the information received, most actions taken so far have focused on environmental protection and waste management.

For example, the Senate and the House of Commons have set up environmental management programs on Parliament Hill. As the Parliament of Canada buildings are the responsibility of the Department of Public Works and Government Services of Canada, they are subject to the *Sustainable Development Strategy: 2007-2009* applicable to all buildings occupied by the federal government. The Senate and the House of Commons have also adopted additional measures specific to their staff and administration. Thus, in addition to the usual recycling and recovery programs for waste materials, invitations to tender and procurement policies now take sustainable development into account; the shuttles on Parliament Hill are at least partially ethanol-fuelled and the purchase of a hydrogen bus is planned. Employees are given reductions on monthly public transit passes, carpooling is encouraged and environmental protection initiatives are recognized under a program set up for that purpose.

For its part, the Legislative Assembly of Ontario has introduced recycling programs for paper, cardboard, plastic, beverage cans, ink cartridges, used batteries and some hazardous materials, as well as energy-saving measures. The Legislative Assembly of Manitoba complies with the general policies set by the provincial government, as all the other provincial legislatures doubtless do. In British Columbia, a parliamentary committee has been mandated to examine the issue of sustainable development.

Quebec's National Assembly already has a number of achievements under its belt. For example:

- diverse measures were put in place a few years ago to reduce paper consumption, including a new document-filing procedure that requires government departments to send an electronic version of any document tabled;
- the National Assembly has entered into a partnership with *Réseau de transport de la Capitale, Autocar Québec* and *Société de transport de Lévis* to encourage its employees to use public transit;
- the lights in the National Assembly buildings were turned off on Saturday, March 29, 2008, from 8 to 9 PM,

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for Earth Hour (*Heure de la Terre*), an awareness-raising event celebrated around the world;

- finally, on May 31, 2008, we closed the last of the designated smoking areas in the Assembly. We now work in a smoke-free building.

Other measures include recycling paper and other materials, switching from traditional to compact fluorescent light bulbs, introducing centralized controls, using recycled ink cartridges, making recycling containers available to staff, and conducting waste characterization studies.

The National Assembly authorities are determined to spare no effort in pursuing such measures so as to demonstrate their commitment to furthering the cause of the environment and sustainable development.

For that purpose, a committee representing all sectors of activity at our legislature has been mandated by the Secretary General to produce a sustainable development policy for the National Assembly. The committee's work is coordinated by a member of the management team reporting directly to the Secretary General and the committee is expected to submit its report before the end of September 2008. A draft sustainable development policy is to be presented to the Office of the National Assembly in the fall of 2008.

The committee will draw inspiration from various sources:

- Recently, the Standing Committee on Transportation and the Environment conducted a consultation on waste management and published its report on June 10, 2008;

- Parliaments worldwide and Quebec government departments and agencies have implemented best practices that are another source of inspiration;
- We are looking at ways to increase the use of computers in our parliamentary committees. The legislative process consumes far too much paper. We hope to reduce the need for paper through greater use of computers in drafting amendments, for example;
- Lastly, the committee will be supported in its work by the Chair in Eco-Consulting of the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi. This Chair was established, among other things, to foster training and continuous improvement in the field of sustainable development by partnering with businesses, professional and community groups, governments, and other outside resources to provide eco-consulting services to communities.

This is an exciting mandate and a major project for the National Assembly, and I invite you to monitor developments closely. After the draft sustainable development policy is presented in the early fall, a consultation process will be initiated, involving the parliamentarians and the National Assembly's political and administrative employees.

Our fervent hope is that everyone who works at the Assembly will feel a personal connection to the objectives we are pursuing. We are counting on full participation in this plan of action, and hope to receive many suggestions, which will be used to further improve the committee's work. Following the consultation process, a Sustainable Development Policy will be adopted by the Office of the National Assembly.