

CIELAP's Innovative Technologies Panel Discussion – November 16, 2006

Ellie Perkins – York University

Political scientists are putting forward that the public needs to be involved in decision-making processes BUT we need to be careful that public engagement processes don't take over policy decision-making. The government can't get out of playing this role.

If you're going to have a valid process you need to look into gaps, power imbalances, accessibility issues, time, and other barriers to participation.

Martha Hall Findlay – Liberal Leadership Candidate

There are 2 types of innovative technologies that we need to consider:

1. Technology that is advancing without thought to the environmental risks; many of these technologies need to be made more sustainable
2. Innovative environmental technologies (eg. Wind power – Denmark's biggest export is wind turbines)

The government needs to look at the economic realities and that there are many economic drivers for sustainability. We need to figure out how to make sustainability show up in the bottom line because it is what many people primarily look at.

There's a huge cost of delaying sustainable action BUT we often have a hard time thinking 20 – 30 years ahead.

We need to stay optimistic – Denmark's government has been hugely involved in promoting innovative technologies. These innovative technologies have advanced sustainability and have also been enormously economically productive.

Tracy McCowen – Ethicist and Geneticist

That the government has a huge role to play in emerging technologies. They should begin to ask "what technologies are best for the public?" rather than only looking at the business question "what makes the most \$\$?"

A Genetically Engineered canola plant is growing at the side of her road. She didn't plant it. The big question becomes – who owns that plant? This brings up questions of rights and responsibilities – with freedoms comes the right to behave.

Another question: if a group is granted the right to create a life form, do they also have the responsibility for that life form?

Once a strategy is created, how is it policed? Most farmers want to follow regulations but have trouble doing so. It's also impossible to tell whether or not farmers followed the regulations...

Questions:

Question: CNN recently showed a story about scientists wanting to use pollution to solve climate change (by injecting sulphate into the stratosphere).

Who is going to decide to monitor this? This approach is simply looking to technology to solve any problem we come up against, rather than looking at the root cause.

Question: While consultation is important can't we look to Japan and other economies for solutions? Other countries will move sustainable policies forward but we can't seem to get things through. How do we move forward? The government is paralyzed because so many publics oppose issues. Public consultation is actually preventing many progressive policies from going forward.

Sometimes we need to know when to stop consulting (often it simply drags on and on without ever achieving action). We need a mechanism for someone to make a final decision. The government often actually uses consultation to delay decisions.

Comment:

There's a big elephant in the room. The government doesn't act because of the power of industry.

We need to start talking about risks and tradeoffs.

Canada is not behind environmental education. Education needs to teach about values, not just money. Public policy on education is needed.

Final Thoughts:

Ellie – CIELAP should press for more environmental education at all levels – what does a measurable policy process look like? In Europe there are Citizens' Juries. The process needs to be a model that is expandable for global issues.

Martha – How do we achieve priorities? Realistic tradeoffs need to be considered. We need to be able to figure out priorities and what we can live with. 40% is better than nothing.

Tracy – Education is key. We need to learn how we can do wrong (ethics) at the same time as we learn how to do the science. Ethics is different from morality. Morality = good vs. bad; ethics looks at the lesser of evils. We need to revisit policy and look at the technologies we've approved. There needs to be a regular review process.