

Fixing the Broken Policy Process

Greater transparency and limits on lobbyist influence would promote better long-range strategies

BY JEFFREY D. SACHS



The breakdown of the Washington policy process has four manifestations. First is a chronic inability to focus beyond the next election. “Shovel-ready” projects squeeze out attention to vital longer-term strategies that may require a decade or more. Second, most key decisions are made in congressional backrooms through negotiations with lobbyists, who simultaneously fund the congressional campaigns. Third, technical expertise is largely ignored or bypassed, while expert communities such as climate scientists are falsely and recklessly derided by the *Wall Street Journal* as a conspiratorial interest group chasing federal grants. Fourth, there is little way for the public to track and comment on complex policy proposals working their way through Congress or federal agencies.

These failings take a special toll on the challenges of sustainable development because there is no quick fix, for example, for the challenge of large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Instead of getting long-term strategies for adopting low-carbon energy sources, upgrading the power grid, encouraging electric transportation and so on, we are getting cash for clunkers, subsidies for corn-based ethanol, and other ineffective and highly costly nonsolutions delivered by large-scale lobbying.

Some free-market economists say sustainable development should be left to the marketplace, but the marketplace now offers no incentive to reduce carbon emissions. Even putting a levy on carbon emissions, either through a carbon tax or carbon-emission permits, will not be sufficient. The development and deployment of major technologies potentially crucial to more sustainable energy—such as nuclear power, wind and solar power, biomass conversion and transport infrastructure—are matters of systems design requiring a mix of public and private decision making.

Herein lies the policy challenge today. When we let the private sector enter into public decision making, we end up with relentless lobbying, money-driven politics, suppression of new technologies by incumbent interests and sometimes miserable choices devoid of serious scientific content. How can business and government work together without policies falling prey to special interests?

First, the administration should initiate a more open, transparent and systematic public-private policy process in each major area of sustainable development. Highest priorities would include renewable energy, nuclear power and carbon capture and sequestration. A high-level roundtable would be established in each area, perhaps under the National Academy of Sciences, with representatives of private business, nongovernmental organizations, gov-

ernment officials, scientists and engineers. The proceedings would be open to the public, Web-based, and available for submissions and testimony by interested parties. Each roundtable would prepare a report within six to 12 months containing a technical overview and policy options, prepared for both the president and Congress. Second, the administration would prepare draft legislation, on which the experts on the roundtables and the general public would be invited to comment through Web-based submissions. Third, the congressional processes, too, would become Web-supported. Hearings and testimony would be open to the public, and Web sites would encourage comments and additional evidence.

These measures would infuse the policy process with vastly more accountability and technical expertise and would help keep the lobbying in check. They would open the policy process to the public to ensure ample and vigorous discussion. They would force the administration and Congress into a systematic review of the technical knowledge in each field as a basis for policy making, rather than letting misguided policies such as corn-to-ethanol biofuels reap billions in subsidies without public scrutiny.

Currently lobbyists are still allowed to contribute massively to congressional campaigns and to political action committees. The largest lobbying sectors—including finance, health care and transport—have spent billions to promote policies that favor narrow interests over broader public interests. A major step toward re-



form would be to prohibit campaign contributions by individuals employed by registered lobbying firms. The right of individuals to make campaign contributions would not be infringed, but they would have to make a choice between their lobbying activities and their personal financial contributions to the political process. ■

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