

Towards a successful and sustainable Highlands and Islands 2025 – Seminar Series.
Speaker: James Curran, Sustainable development is a journey – but are we on a cheap day return?

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Summary of questions.

Q. Where do you see leadership coming from?

A. That is an interesting question, and one that has cropped up two or three times this week. I think we have to be honest, there's not much evidence of it at the moment, is there? We get the leaders we deserve, and rather than always pointing the finger of blame at our political establishment, it might be worth thinking "Do we actually box these people in so much that they daren't show the kind of leadership that we might want? The game is very much down to us as individual citizens, and the role we can play – every one of us has networks – in encouraging, or allowing, or leaders to show leadership. The sustainable development argument often gets involved in debates about wellbeing, but the government is mainly there for security, and climate change is a bigger threat to security than terrorism. Yet while the government response to terrorism can be quite rapid, their response to climate change is not. And maybe that's because our leaders are more constrained with what they can get away with. You don't have to go back very far to remember the riots that were brought on by raising the price of fuel. You see it in lots of ways, the objections we get to wind farms, etc etc. And it seems to me that as individuals we should say "Yes, we want fuel to be more expensive." Say to our political leaders, "You make it happen and we'll back you" Then we allow them to show some leadership.

Q. If we take the world of aviation. That is being run by individuals wanting to fly. How do we get some rationale into this throughout the world?

A. If you wanted to point the finger at one bit of government that was not joined up, it would probably be transport policy and climate change. The answers are not easy and there may be some areas that we cannot address right now, but we do need to come to some sort of consensus in the future. Right now it's very contentious and very difficult, but I don't think that should stop us taking lots of actions elsewhere to address the issue. We can, to some extent put some of these thorny ones on hold, and not distract ourselves. For years the Scottish priority was economic growth, but the recent Scottish sustainable development strategy says "...but not at any cost" So thinking is beginning to form a little bit. Give the UK government its dues, they have pushed the hardest of any government to get aviation part of the CO² trading scheme. That will happen,, so we will see incentives built in for aeroplanes to be designed, constructed, and run more efficiently, with fewer emissions. That is going to be overwhelmed by the growth in CO². Therefore, at the same time we will see the aviation industry having to offset their emissions by investing elsewhere in CO² reducing technologies. And undoubtedly air fares will go up. That's' all long term. At the moment there are all sorts of options open to us personally,

you can invest in tree planting, or you can invest in the open market in your own individual way in buying tiny bits of technology that exist elsewhere in the world to drive down CO² emissions.

Q. It seems to me there is a need for better dialogue needed between social sciences and natural sciences, perhaps a bit more respect between them. I wondered if you had any comments on that from your experience in SEPA?

A. One of my jobs in SEPA was dealing with the research portfolio. One of the programmes, RELU (Rural Economy and Land Use) is a multi-funded programme, and is dedicated to trying to break down these disciplinary barriers. And there is some really exciting work that is being done across many institutes, but more importantly, across many disciplines. And some of the thinking coming out if it is very appropriate. SEPA is beginning to grapple with some very different disciplinary issues. The Sustainability through Environment, Nature Community, and Enterprise Group brings together the government agencies that cover the social, the economic, and the environmental sectors of government policy delivery. It is purposely brought together to try to think about and deliver sustainable development – again, working across agency boundaries. It has the potential to do some very exciting work in the area of community re-generation and the empowerment of communities, and the health benefits that brings. The Scottish Chief Medical Officer is a great speaker on this issue, and he will refer to some really exciting work whereby you can tell that communities that are disempowered in their control over their environment suffer constant low-level stress. And that stress is expressed directly in health issues. He will convince you that knocks ten years off peoples lives. That belief is central to sustainable development, it's central to research and innovation, and it is central to breaking the barriers that you describe. Let's have more of it.

Q. The current model is 'economic growth' and constant growth ad infinitum. Sustainability is a big challenge to that. Big corporations and institutions are struggling with the whole sustainability concept because they have shareholders. How are we going to get over that?

A. That is a question of whether we are going to contract our economy, in effect. That is just not going to happen. That's probably a step too far for any leader, however radical, to countenance. And personally I don't believe in the need for that. In certain things that I'm involved in at the moment, I've been looking at quite a number of suppliers of potential goods that we hope to stock in our shop. It is really inspiring visiting these premises. One in particular is a factory in Dumfries that recycles plastic recycles plastic material, and they make a loss year after year. They have stayed in the market because they are convinced that it is the right thing to do, and they now are just beginning to make a profit. They are actually having to import the raw waste plastic material from Ireland because farms in the south of Scotland don't provide them with their agricultural plastics. They also had to go into making things out of their own recycled plastic that sells, in order to market such things as street furniture, benches for parks etc because no-one else was doing it. They

had to really get into the market themselves and start pushing very proactively. In a way that's rather dispiriting because the lesson that we're learning,,, is that the UK is just not being innovative enough. But I do genuinely believe that there is a clean path to development, and that's one of the areas we need to work in. It relates to the earlier question about breaking down the barriers, mixing up the disciplines, working across boundaries, and creating new products, new policies. That way we can get a product that can grow, but in a clean way, not a dirty way.

- Q. Lots of people give lip service to environmental change. How do we ensure that the educational processes are such that it will come through?
- A. Obviously we need to make future generations aware of all of these issues, but I sometimes read into that the sub-text that "Oh, we'll leave it up to them." We'll pass on a complete pig's breakfast to them. We really have the responsibility to get this generation started thinking about a lot of the statements we make, particularly climate change. We cannot wait for the next generation. It is *so* urgent we need to tackle it now. Having said that, I am really, really impressed with the work that is being done, some really good work in the education system at all levels, primary, secondary, tertiary.
- Q. You gave us some alarming information on the loss of carbon from upland soils in Scotland. What urgent steps can we take in terms of land management, particular in respect to grazing, and natural vegetation to redress the situation?
- A. The Executive is aware of these issues and they have commissioned some quite interesting research into what is actually going on. Probably, as with most environmental problems, it has multi-causation. There are indications that erosion events could be triggered by overgrazing, by sheep or deer, it could be erosion that is prompted or stimulated by tourism, on paths, by walkers and so on. It could be there are actually vegetation changes happening because of climate change. Because eutrophication, deposition of Nitrogen, and so on, changing vegetation and actually de-stabilising it. So, lots of potential causes, we don't know all the answers, I wish we did. But the urgent thing is to look at all these possible causations and find out how we can manage it.
- Q. I was very interested that you are so down on trade-offs,,, but you then went on to demonstrate how important it is to understand trade-offs,,, and it seems to me that of course we should be positive, but before we come out with creative ideas, we should fully understand the trade-offs involved in alternative ways of going forwards.
- Q. I was wondering why are normal light bulbs still on the market if there are alternatives? Should there not be things taken off the market, or changed, so that we don't even have the choice to buy these things?
- A. That's a very interesting point. Legislation, or regulation by abolishing – banning light bulbs – traditionally does not enter into the market element. Business has not traditionally flexed its muscles in the retail area. The

Montreal Agreement banned some materials but allowed substitution. I don't think any of us would want to close businesses down overnight, but if you give notification that a particular product is going to be proscribed, made illegal, within five years, or whatever, it introduces a certain urgency, a degree of certainty. Transport is a difficult one, it always is. Personally I don't have a problem with roads – roads don't pollute, it's the vehicles that are on them that pollute. So when people get very het up [about certain roads] I can't really join them at the barricades, but I do get quite exasperated by the slow improvements in reducing emissions from certain vehicles. The Scottish National Transport strategy is published next week. It will be interesting to see if that indicates radical actions.,,, Let's just be a bit more adventurous. I see nothing wrong with building new roads, new motorways, so long as we make dual use of them. We don't just use them for driving cars on, but we use them as energy generators themselves, we line them with wind turbines. They are noisy, nasty things anyway so nobody will complain about the small amount of extra noise from them. Line them with coppiced forests, so we actually create energy out of these things. In Denmark they actually use road surfaces, car-park surfaces, as huge solar collectors, There are all sorts of imaginative things that we can do Let's just try to be a bit more imaginative. I genuinely believe, in many, many cases, that if you are creative and imaginative you honestly don't need to look at costs. I was looking at the example of land-fill sites, these people are now making money by cleaning up their act. Let's try and stretch the flexibility of the legislation. I know that SEPA and other agencies are very constrained by legislation. But we can look creatively again at getting the maximum flexibility that is permitted given the constrictions of that legislation.,,,, We could actually be enhancing biodiversity at the same time as saving money.