

4 - What lessons can we draw from radical practices that explore new avenues?

CLIMATE PROTECTION FOR A CONSERVATIVE POLITICIAN

Twelve years ago, during the time I was serving as Mayor of Växjö, the City Council decided to prioritise a number of profile questions so as to create national awareness. Today we find our municipality acclaimed as “best in the world” for climate protection. How did it begin and what were our motives?

I have always been interested in questions concerning the environment because they are essential to the human race (and the world's) survival and well being. For a conservative nothing is more important than the preservation of nature in ecological balance so as to give future generations the same opportunities as we, our ancestors and ourselves have had. One of conservative's most prominent figures, Edmund Burke, said that society must be a comradeship between the dead, the living and the unborn.

To me, economy and ecology have always been two sides of the same coin. It's about the usage of resources. The use of resources covers both economy and ecology, the two must be woven together. There can be no permanent ecological developments without development of economy, and no permanent economic developments without a balance in Nature. During the late 60's and early 70's alarm bells started to ring, for me one of the first warnings being Rachel Carson's book Silent Spring. Another wake-up signal for me was the awareness seeing the co-ordination of Nature – how everything works and fits together with everything else. No less a person than the Nobel Prize winner Konrad Lorenz emphasized how much the human race has distanced itself from Nature and thereby this simple connection of knowledge has been lost.

In Växjö we have a long tradition of political interest in local environment issues. Forty years ago the sole topic was the question of water. Since then we have tried to protect our water sources, restored contaminated lakes and in principle forbidden all discharge of noxious matter, apart from the nourishment we use in the working of farmland and forest. We have worked to eliminate the dumping of acid-forming elements and other harmful substances. We have organised the control of rainwater by infiltration. Today all the lakes in the County are suitable for swimming, all fish edible and the water clean and healthy.

In 1995 we started collaboration with the NGO Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, which resulted in a local Agenda 21 programme for sustainable development. The NGO educated us politicians and the senior staff of the administration, which was crucial for the development that was to come. We targeted industry, transport, energy, information, education, research, wastage, water and sewage, agriculture and city planning as primary targets. Furthermore, we decided to work towards opinion forming, locally, nationally and internationally, and also take part in various international environmental networks.

In 1996 the local government in Växjö made a unanimous decision that we didn't realise the political explosiveness of. As part of our work with sustainable development a motion was passed that we should stop using fossil fuels, and by the year 2010 the amount of fossil fuel used would be reduced by 50%. Luckily we did not ask whether this was realistic or not. One has to be allowed to be optimistic and to have visions for the future. Actually it looks like we are able to reach it the goal for 2010 but we still do not know exactly when we can be totally free from use of fossil fuels.

I must also explain how such a decision can be made in a Swedish municipality. Any municipality anywhere in the world can always express a local vision in a question that is both local and global. But Sweden is really, in spite of many faults and deficiencies, one of the most homogeneous and at the same time most decentralised countries in the world. The local government's autonomy is strong, there is a vigorous right of tax imposition and most of the taxes return to the municipality. The Local Authorities in Sweden are responsible for nearly all public businesses and is often the meeting place for various networks between companies and consumers. A local authority is responsible for the roads and the planning of the same. A Swedish local authority has power and authority. As a result there are also real possibilities for changes, and if these are successful there must be co-operation between business's and citizens.

Our decision to become free from fossil fuel is an ideological important decision that embraces two aspects. The first, a clear signal to all the participants within the local authority's area of what the local authority wants, and secondly, participation in the formation of opinions which are aimed at influencing politicians at both national and international level, building of opinions which is aimed at influencing citizens and thereafter the global market. If all the local authorities in the world could take the same line, there would be a speed-up of the emergence of vehicles using another fuel form and different engines, leading to an increased use of sustainable energy.

To succeed in mitigating greenhouse gas emissions a local authority will have to use all the tools available. Comprehensive planning, energy planning and transport planning are crucial to develop a city that makes it possible and hopefully also attractive for the inhabitants to live a life with less CO₂ emissions. We decide about how the city shall develop geographically and the regulations in connection with exploitation of new land.

Since we took the first steps to be free from fossil fuel the emissions of carbon dioxide have decreased by 24% in the year 2005 from 1993 years level and the share of renewable is now over 50%. The conversion of the energy industry is more or less self-regulating and economically favourable, if taxation and the continued use of coal and oil in neighbouring countries don't sabotage it. More and more companies recognise that they must search for renewable energy sources in order to obtain an environmental certificate that will secure their success on the market. Again, that market is driven by the public's demands and expectations and nothing else.

In our fossil fuel free programme, substitution of oil for biomass in combination with energy efficiency is the main strategy for the heating sector. Regarding the question of transport the situation is complex. At local levels we can influence driving habits, cycling and public transport. We can raise the demand for alternative fuel, energy saving cars, electric cars, hybrid cars etc. The market will supply the vehicles if the public demand them. Naturally we can influence the public's ethical approach to the question of ecological living. Paradoxically, it is difficult for some of those who call themselves conservative and aim to change others ways of life and habits towards a more generally moral lifestyle, but are unwilling to tackle driving habits of their fellow citizens. What does this say in respect of the traditional human ethics versus nature's ethics? People are a part of the natural order and if we wish to give the future generations freedom of choice, we must have a climate that functions. The matter is that simple. My vision and my responsibility as a Mayor is to make Växjö a city where it is simple and profitable to live a good life without fossil fuels. Symbolically the local authority has granted free parking for all ecologically modified cars – electric driven, hybrid models etc. Safe cycle paths in the whole city are an obvious necessity, and our ambition is to have a regional production of renewable vehicle fuel, for example DME.

I see myself as liberal and conservative. Liberalism stands for freedom and conservatism for responsibility. We must all take responsibility about the questions regarding climate and also to have the freedom to work in different ways. But we cannot sit around waiting for political decisions from above, which perhaps come too late, or not at all. The conservatives point of view is the 'safety first' principle, if one's unsure, it is wisest to abstain. There is sufficient evidence today to show the relationship between the use of fossil fuel and changes in the climate. We must all take responsibility for freeing ourselves from fossil fuel.

Is the climate a local or a global question? Clearly it is both local and global. We see the global problem and local effects. The problem of climate change can only be solved by making many decisions at a local level. Not least whilst waiting for the international agreements.

To me, as a conservative, the Sustainable Development perspective is purely a market perspective. The people decide what the market has to offer. Through the demands of wiser citizens and consumers, the demand for products and services will lead to a more ecologically sound community. That market is the hope our children will have and the world they will wish to live in. Sometimes the market is ahead of political decisions when creating a better environment. Chlorine bleached paper and CFC:s were removed from the public domain while politicians were still talking about what to do. However, there is a need for both political and marketing steering to improve the environment. Even if one feels that the political involvement could be lessened, there is still need for politics in survival questions. I am convinced that the politicians must give the market better incentives to move towards a world without fossil fuel. This is valid for both local and global market.

John Lennon coined the phrase "Think globally and act locally" This is what we are doing in Växjö, regardless of which political party we represent.

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