

**THE U.K. ROUND TABLE ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:
A CASE STUDY**

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I. Origins

In the year following the 1992 Rio Summit, the government of the United Kingdom, carried out a series of internal reviews to assess the adequacy of existing policy to meet commitments made at the summit. These assessments led to the re-formulation of a 1990 environmental strategy, *This Common Inheritance*, and to the articulation of a sustainable development strategy, as well as action plans to meet other Rio commitments (*Sustainable Development: the UK Strategy*, *Climate Change: the UK Programme*, *Biodiversity: The UK Action Plan*, *Sustainable Forestry: the UK Programme*). These strategies were largely internally driven exercises, although there was a degree of consultation before their final adoption by the government.

The 1994 sustainable development strategy recognized explicitly that sustainable development could not be attained without the engagement and participation of Agenda 21 groups (business and industry, labor, environmental and social advocacy groups, women, youth, educational and expert institutions, local authorities, etc.). In response, the strategy established three mechanisms to permit interaction and collaboration between the government and civil society. One of these mechanisms was the UK Round Table for Sustainable Development (UKRT).

Originally the UKRT was envisioned as a forum that would bring together government ministers and civil society representatives to compare notes on trends in different sectors, and develop a consensus on how to work towards sustainable development. The other two mechanisms created were the Government Panel on Sustainable Development to serve as a strategic advisory body that reported directly to the Prime Minister, and a Citizen's Environment Initiative designed to promote and orchestrate voluntary actions in support of sustainable development, an initiative later dubbed, "Going For Green."

II. Mandate and Organization

The government announced the creation of the Round Table in January 1994, but members were only appointed at the end of that year, and met for the first time in January 1995. Rather than a combined membership of government ministers and a spectrum of social interest, as originally foreseen, the Round Table drew almost exclusively from civil society. A total of 30 members were appointed, a large number being drawn from environment and nature conservation groups and from the energy production and consumption field. Other interests represented on the Round Table included labor, religious organizations, tourism, consumer advocates, research institutions, local development authorities, and manufacturing. Two chairs, one drawn from government and the other from civil society, were appointed to lead the UKRT: John Gummer MP (the Minister for the Environment), and Sir Richard Southwood (Professor of Zoology and former Vice Chancellor of the University of Oxford).

In the general discussions during 1994 (before the appointment of any members) the UKRT's remit or mandate was also given greater specificity. Five specific objectives were established: (a) to identify priority issues within the sustainable development framework; (b) develop areas of consensus or reduce differences on difficult sustainable development issues or subsets of issues; (c) provide advice and recommendation on actions; (d) evaluate progress in moving toward sustainability; and (e) engage and inform additional civil society actors in or about the Round Table's work. A delicate balance of both engagement in and distance from the government was anticipated. The UKRT's recommendations and findings were not to be endorsed by government, but were supposed to inform policy questions. Consequently, more direct leadership of the group's deliberations was assumed by the civil society co-chair, while Minister Gummer was to support and introduce the Round Table's recommendations to other Departments.

The Round Table's internal structure and work process were left largely undefined. The UKRT was to meet with ministers on a biannual basis to discuss the Round Table's recommendations. No other temporal or structural clues suggested how the UKRT might organize itself. A small secretariat, located within the Department of the Environment, was staffed by four full time posts (including clerical and support staff). Staff size increased in 1997 with the addition of two staff seconded by private sector members of the UKRT.

III. Evolution of the Round Table's Work

A. Searching for a Niche

The U.K. Round Table for Sustainable Development began its life among a rather crowded field of players working to shape the UK's path to sustainability. In addition to the "sister" mechanisms created in 1994, other multi-stakeholder groups were active in this arena, such as the Advisory Committee on Business and the Environment, the NGO forum UNED-UK, and the European Environment Group, among others. This presented members the challenge of identifying a niche where they might make useful contributions. Not surprisingly, during the course of its first year and a half the UKRT's members grappled with the questions of how to work and where to focus in terms of substance.

The Round Table's co-chair, Richard Southwood set the tone for the approach the UKRT adopted and encouraged the group to address specific questions. The UKRT did not attempt to define what sustainable development might look like in the UK or to articulate challenges the UK faced in building the three legs of the sustainable development stool: social equity, economic growth, and environment. Rather, the group decided to target specific questions where members' combined experience and expertise could articulate a set of feasible responses by government, local authorities, and other social actors.

The UKRT selected three issues that it believed other bodies were not exploring, and which were politically ripe for consideration by the government: transportation, energy and environmental mechanisms (environmental management and policy tools). Of the three topics, the Round Table invested most of its energies in the first and second. The first was divided into three distinct projects: defining a sustainable transport sector, freight transport, and a city-region project that examined transportation issues in a specific local context. On the topic of energy the Round Table decided to assess the process of energy privatization and deregulation and its potential impacts on sustainable development goals. The work on environmental mechanisms involved a general review of different economic and policy instruments and their ability to enhance sustainable development objectives.

Despite the above definition of themes the group continued to struggle with the selection of topics, and to agree on findings and recommendations. Tensions emerged with regard to how recommendations would be defined or debated: within the subgroups assigned to study the problem in-depth or at plenary sessions? The appropriate role of members that had not participated in the subgroups also surfaced as an issue. Could such members suggest changes to the subgroups' final recommendations? How should disagreement with consensus recommendations of subgroups be handled?

A weekend retreat at Merton College, Oxford, in June 1996 helped members overcome these stumbling blocks. This retreat allowed members to interact under fewer time constraints and in a less formal setting. As a result, the group came to agreement on criteria for issue selection, and formal working procedures. Members devised a set of questions to assess the significance of an issue or problem and whether it merited the attention of the UKRT. Members also agreed that all subgroup and report recommendations should respect a set of five basic sustainable development principles, and six broad policy goals (these are detailed in Annex D of the Second Annual Report).

In a meeting following the Merton retreat, the Round Table formally agreed to a division of labor and working procedures (Annex C of the Second Annual Report). Round Table plenaries would be devoted to considering priority issues raised by members or outlined in reports presented by the Department of the Environment. Plenary meetings could also be used to guide the direction of subgroups' work and approve recommendations. If consensus on these recommendations proved impossible, minority opinions would be included in subgroup reports.

B. Digging into Policy Analysis and Reform

Much of the UKRT's reports and recommendations were aimed at the government. Consequently, members of the Round Table met with some "Green Ministers" (Ministers in different departments that take the lead on environmental compliance and policy questions), briefed members of parliament, reviewed official government responses to their recommendations, and tried to introduce the Round Table's ideas into government green and white papers. For example, the members of the Round Table met with the Energy Minister to discuss the findings of their work on energy deregulation, and also released its

report on defining a sustainable transport sector just previous to the government's publication of a green paper on transport policy. These efforts did produce impacts, but they were frequently indirect rather than direct. The Round Table's access to government was limited to largely "green" issues and ministers. Thus, gaining access to ministers and departments with portfolios that were sectoral rather than strictly environmental in character (transportation, urban development, and energy deregulation) presented difficulties.

A number of recommendations made by the Round Table did receive government support or endorsement, but often this was only to the extent that they did not contradict market liberalization and privatization efforts. For example, the importance of supporting social equity and long-term energy conservation goals in the regulation of a private energy market (as highlighted by the subgroup on energy planning) was never fully endorsed. In the area of transport, however, the UKRT managed to play a more prominent role and wielded some influence on policy discussion and formulation. In this case, the Round Table managed to have an influence because of the timing of its work. The government was in the process of rethinking the existing framework for regulating and developing transport infrastructure, in large part because the privatization of significant national transportation assets required it. As a result, the Round Table's comprehensive and numerous reports on transport-related issues were cumulatively able to influence the government's internal thinking as well as legislative reviews produced by the House of Commons.

C. Responding to a Renewed Mandate

With the election of a Labour government in May 1997 the U.K. Round Table received renewed support for its work. The new government accepted the body and recognized the centrality of sustainable development debates to its own policy agenda and priorities. Consequently, the new government chose to raise the profile of the U.K. Round Table, the Deputy Minister of the Environment becoming its president and Sir Richard Southwood the sole chairman. Numerous changes in the Round Table's management have also increased the UKRT's access to higher levels of government and freed it from the narrower confines of an environmental policy audience. There is also evidence of greater receptivity to the social equity dimensions of the UKRT's work. This was clearly demonstrated in the August 1998 white paper on integrated transport, and the new government's comprehensive response to the UKRT's previous work and recommendations. In the transportation arena, particularly, a number of the Round Table's key ideas are reflected in the government white paper: moderating market competition to protect wider public interests, encouraging integration of different transport modes, creating a space for public participation and improving consumer's access to information, among others.

During 1998-99, the UKRT branched out in new directions and experienced further change. The Round Table explored new topics such as the connection between industrial activity and biodiversity, and the integration of sustainable agriculture and rural

development. In early 1999, a new chairman assumed leadership of the Round Table, Mr. Derek Osborn, chair of the civil society group active on sustainable development questions, UNED-UK. In May, the government published a revised sustainable development strategy in the form of a white paper “A Better Quality of Life.” In the white paper it announced plans to create a Sustainable Development Commission in the year 2000 that will subsume the Round Table and the Government Panel on Sustainable Development that were created in 1994.

IV. Strengths and Successful Outcomes

During the short course of its near four year existence the U.K. Round Table on Sustainable Development has tackled an impressive array of politically sensitive topics. The Round Table’s members and chairmen addressed difficult questions because they believed such an approach would make the greatest contribution to the decision-making process. This helped the Round Table make three clear contributions to sustainable development and policy debates in the United Kingdom.

** Contributed to the Development of a New National Sustainable Transport Policy*

As evident from the above discussion, the UKRT made the greatest contribution to policy reform in the transport arena. Given the daunting complexity of this topic, the Round Table divided it into discrete issues for study to make it more manageable. Thus, the challenge of moving transport infrastructure and policy in a more sustainable direction was explored from a series of major analytical perspectives such as land-use and urban space, commercial and freight requirements, consumer needs, and public versus private roles in managing transport infrastructure. The Round Table’s timing was also opportune. Because the UKRT explored the issue at the same time the government was formulating a green paper on the subject, this created an opportunity to influence the policy selection and definition process both during the formulation of the green paper, the public consultation, and its translation into a government white paper.

** Raised Important Social and Environmental Concerns in Government Policy Debates*

The UKRT also played an important part in bringing to the forefront the social and environmental dimensions of the policy questions it studied. Very few, if any, of the other mechanisms created in 1994 to encourage multi-stakeholder dialogues on sustainable development managed to make equal intellectual and analytical contributions in this area. The analysis of energy market deregulation, fresh water resources, and the comprehensive review of economic regulation in the United Kingdom are particularly noteworthy examples of such work. The Round Table identified “win-win” approaches when feasible, but never shied away from discussing the trade-offs implicit in the adoption and use of market instruments alone. Given the current government’s recognition of the need to balance a variety of development objectives, the UKRT’s past and present analysis of environmental and equity issues should receive greater consideration.

** Increased Political Support for Round-Tabling*

Several of the Round Table's qualities increased its credibility and generated political legitimacy over time. First, the Round Table refrained from devolving into a debating club and consistently defined and completed a serious and specific work agenda. In addition, despite extreme limitations in staff and budgetary resources, the co-chair and members succeeded in recruiting and engaging recognized experts, decision-makers and important opinion leaders in the substance of their work. In combination, these qualities earned the UKRT respect and helped to establish a specific niche among the variety of multi-stakeholder and civil society groups active on sustainable development issues. As a result, the previous government extended the life of the Round Table in 1996. As impressive is the fact that the incoming Labour government in 1997 gave this body its full support and raised the level of government participation. As such, the new government didn't perceive the UKRT as merely the creature of its predecessor, but a body capable of supplying substantive independent advice.

V. Current and Future Challenges

Like any new institutional experiment, the UKRT has struggled to find a way to work within old bureaucratic structures. Such a task is not simple, and the difficulty of successfully charting a way through such waters is often under-estimated. The Round Table has succeeded in meeting a great part of its remit or mandate, but given the broadness of that remit as well as the limited resources available, it fell short in some areas. In particular, the UKRT did not consistently focus on monitoring progress in meeting sustainable development objectives or manage to build wider support for its policy recommendations among other stakeholders. The Round Table could improve its effectiveness, and address some of the above shortfalls if it invests in three areas:

** Frame Specific Issues Within a Larger Sustainable Development Context*

The Round Table's examination of specific problems brings depth and analytical power to bear on important issues. The drawback, however, is that it becomes difficult to assess how addressing these specific questions, either individually or collectively, moves the UK closer to sustainable development. The Round Table needs to devote some of its intellectual powers and expertise to piecing together the puzzle of sustainable development. To date, the closest the UKRT has come to addressing this issue is the articulation of a set of underlying sustainable development principles. There are many ways the UKRT could set its work in a larger context. For example, a subgroup might assess how the Round Table's past and current work supports the government's sustainable development strategy. Alternatively, all government policy reforms since 1994 could be evaluated to gauge the degree to which they respect the Round Table's sustainable development principles or the government strategy. These suggestions do not

imply that the UKRT should abandon its current approach, only that equal effort should be made to connect discrete efforts to the larger objective.

** Engage Stakeholders More Creatively in the Round Table's Analysis and Outreach*

During the course of the last year the UK Round Table has branched out to engage experts, and stakeholders in a more creative way. As noted above, activities carried out by the subgroups on business and biodiversity as well as sustainable agriculture are example of a more interactive approach. The Round Table should build on these efforts in order to increase the visibility of its work, and to influence a wider set of actors, not just the government. The UKRT was organized as a classic government advisory body and continued to function in this manner. The members have not taken full advantage of this body's multi-stakeholder composition to carry the message of subgroup findings to a wider audience. This represents a lost opportunity that if seized would help the Round Table fulfill one part of its remit that remains unrealized: to build wider support for sustainable development.

** Explore the UK's Progress in Meeting International Commitments*

Finally, the Round Table has largely side-stepped the question of Agenda 21 commitments. The implication is not that the Round Table should assume responsibility for meeting the UK's obligations. Rather, that the UKRT can play a useful role in monitoring, reporting or assessing domestic efforts and the degree to which they support the wider international effort to attain a more sustainable form of development. The Round Table could produce an evaluation to carry to the government and interested civil society groups. For example, the impact of the UK's trade, foreign direct investments, or overseas development aid could be assessed from both a domestic and international perspective. To what degree do these economic activities support sustainable development both at home and abroad? The options for examining these questions abound. The Round Table's challenge is to build a bridge to a larger context without losing the analytical depth and power which has been a positive quality of its previous analyses. The importance of the larger national and international contexts is that they place the Round Table's contribution to sustainable development in much sharper focus. A more systemic approach would also support the identification of gaps, and in turn guide the Round Table's future selection of issues for study.

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