

National Assembly for Wales
Environment and Sustainability Committee
WFG 66
Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Bill
Response from Professor Calvin Jones, Cardiff Business School

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Evidence to the National Assembly Environment & Sustainability Committee

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Introduction

Following is a summary of my thoughts and concerns regarding the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Bill (hence FGB) as set before the Assembly in July 2014. My (brief) evidence draws on some 25 years of advising policymakers in Wales, and undertaking academic research on, economic development here, focussing particularly on energy, sustainable development, tourism and sport.

I have been unable to restrict myself to a critique of the Bill in isolation, despite the thrust of your inquiry, for reasons that will become clear.

The Bill

In common with many other Welsh Government documents, strategies and policies the FGB is very good at outlining the principles for action and broad objectives (here largely for partner and to-be-created organisations and structures). It is very good on saying what *will* be done. What requires significant development (and quickly) are a number of areas:

- (1) **Conflicts and Synergies** – The objectives outlines in Table 1 of the Bill are interrelated, in interesting and complex ways. The actions an Authority might take to make Wales/a locality more 'resilient' may actually reduce 'prosperity' (encouraging use of more expensive but more local resources is a good example of this). There is no appreciation in the Bill (or in any wider Government policy) that these tensions exist. Table 1 just presents a list of 'things we'd like' with no appreciation that they are dimensions of the same socio-environmental landscape.
- (2) **Coherence** - There is no guidance on how overall coherence in movement towards objectives will be enabled. As, presumably, organisations will 'self-select' their area of concern and tools, there exists significant opportunity for organisations to hamper each other's progress. For example, Organisation A might construct (say) a new road or opencast mine in pursuit of its prosperity objective that impacts negatively on other organisations health or quality of life objectives in the same area.
- (3) **Supporting Conceptual Framework** – The above issues arise from the lack of any framing understanding of how Wales 'works' and how the economy, society and

environment interact. The glacial progress toward an Ecosystems Services approach to policymaking might help here, but I suspect it may be way too late.

- (4) **Timescales** – Setting future wellbeing objectives for/within a Ministerial term is baffling. This gives no certainty for partner organisations or any space to enable transformative change. If this process cannot, somehow, be made independent of the electoral cycle it is hardly worth the candle.
- (5) **'Quality Assured' Approach** – The FGB laudably devolves responsibility for goal setting to partner organisations, but there is no indication of the origin and level of resources that will be allocated to ensure these organisations can undertake the complex evidence gathering (in terms of scenario building and futures as well as surveys) to ensure their objectives are reasonable, sustainable and practical. Without this extra evidence, one suspects that FGB requirements will be moulded into existing organisational objectives and result in little change in activity in reality. The Commissioner seems to be available only to scrutinise national indicators, but if she is to scrutinise all FGB plans and objectives, this will require a substantial office
- (6) **Future Trends** - Related to above Section 12, future trends report for Welsh Ministers, it is worth noting that the dedicated 'horizon scanning' capacity in Wales consists of one dedicated academic. One suspects that the default here will be to procure these reports commercially with therefore zero capacity building or increased engagement with/understanding of with the reality of environmental and economic change on the part of civil servants or Ministers
- (7) **Sanctions** – Nowhere here is there any indication of the sanctions facing Chief Executives or Ministers who fail in the duty of the Bill, or who fail to deliver their own wellbeing objectives. If failure here does not clearly lead to negative personal/career outcomes for responsible persons, there will be little incentive to upset applecarts and make real progress.
- (8) **Wider Institutional Change** - The Bill envisages the creation of Public Service Boards at LA level. Thought needs to be given as to whether there will be 22 of these to be merged when whatever happens following Williams happens, or will this happen post-any LA reorganisation? Similarly, no link from PSBs to City Regions is made despite the fact many objectives will in reality stand or fall at this spatial scale.

The Context

Whilst the Bill is problematic in a number of areas, change and amendment is possible and to be expected. However, the context within which the Bill will be enacted is a far more fundamental concern. The following list some areas where I have particular worries.

- (1) **Silos** – There is so far little indication that any Minister apart from Mr Cuthbert has any stake in the Bill or its vision. There are a number of instances of very recent policy pronouncements – the M4 relief road and the Green Economy Prospectus to give two examples – where responsible ministers are (or were) setting in train approaches and projects that would have decades long ramifications, fundamentally impacting on the nature and workings of the Welsh economy, but where FGB seemed to play no part in

the decision process. Whilst the Bill is not yet law, it should not be beyond the wit of man (or woman) to prepare the policymaking process to make Bill-conformity easier.

- (2) **Past Progress**- The impact of long existing cross-cutting SD legislation & duties on Government approaches is difficult to discern. Real 'successes' in the field of sustainability are rare in Wales – the two highest profile, recycling targets and the plastic bag charge, arguably had more to do with the drive of a former minister than the impact of the Assembly's SD duty. I cannot say that the Governmental context into which the FGB lands is better than that existing pre-2010 in terms of enacting cross cutting, transformative legislation. The impression one gets, personally and in gauging peers' attitudes, is that WG is institutionally incapable of implementing cross-departmental programmes and policies.
- (3) **Goodwill** – Following closely from the above, it is my clear impression from my networks that since 2010 the current executive has frittered away the goodwill of a significant part of civic society, the third sector and NGOs in Wales – especially those who would be most helpful in working through the SD implications of the Bill. In a number of areas – M4 relief road; BREEAM standards for new housing; the effective capping of onshore wind capacity; Green Growth/economy interventions – the Government has rowed back from prior commitments; given very mixed signals on what are fairly clear environmental goods and bads; and been largely disinterested in collating or commissioning a robust evidence base for individual Ministers' policymaking. I have serious concerns that this disillusionment will impact on the wider engagement with FGB, especially in organisations that are not directly tasked. This is an issue for Wales where civic society is 'thin' and much is done *pro bono*. Frankly, if the government, rather than you, had asked me to spend a morning preparing this document I would have only done so if paid for it. I am pretty sick of wasting my time sitting in WG hosted meetings, that turn out in retrospect to be at best, pointless make-work for the bureaucracy, and at worst, a way to keep NGOs and academics distracted whilst the big decisions are made.

In summary then, the Bill is a bit ropey in parts, but the real drivers of its success will be:

- (1) the capacity to develop appropriate and holistic objectives, across a range of organisations and fully evidence based;
- (2) the ability to develop and implement long-term, consistent interventions at Government as well as partner organisations
- (3) the ability of Welsh Government to embrace the *spirit* of the Bill across all Ministerial portfolios

Unless there is significant institutional movement, and investment in research, data and evidence prior to enactment, none of these hurdles will be passed.