

Realities for a Sustainable California

by Shirley M. Hufstедler

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I think it is fair to say that the visions of the California panel have been neither beatific nor apocalyptic. Rather, one gets the distinct impression that the speakers, in an optimistic frame of mind, decided that the problems have been solved. Few of the speakers have leaped forward to offer their visions, either frightening or intoxicating, of a hundred years hence. I find this rather surprising, because I think it is a wonderful exercise; unlike talking about things in a nearer time frame, you know full well that neither you, the speaker, nor your audience will be around to find out if you are right.

I think we may be rather timid about our assumptions of what is going to happen in a hundred years. We should not make the mistake of believing that technological change and innovation are going to proceed only linearly or perhaps arithmetically; change could proceed exponentially and create opportunities which we can be only dimly aware of at this time. Who knows? It's even possible that we might make a breakthrough in what really needs doing—changing the habits of mind that have afflicted and only occasionally inspired human beings. These are the most difficult things to change. Most of the speakers at this symposium have talked about the natural environment—its distortion, destruction, or enhancement. But the life processes that we depend on, the processes of *human* creation and survival, so awe us that we tend to reject thinking about them at all.

Can you envision a period a hundred years from now in which the war between the sexes would finally end in a treaty that was fair? Can

you imagine a time when men would not consider it necessary to launch a big power trip over women; when women and girls would be valued individually, not simply for their recreational or procreational capacities; when women would not end up having to do all of the work, paid or unpaid, that men have never wanted to do; when women are treated as human beings with the kind of aspirations and opportunities that men have always enjoyed? Then we would move into a true partnership. Among the many things that might result is a significant reduction in the level of violence in all societies. I think it would also mean that the children of the future would have a better opportunity for rewards in their own lives and for contributions to their societies.

But if we try to predict such rosy qualities merely 50 years from now, we run into trouble, because we know some things about who will be here at that time and what they will be like. Millions of Californians who will be here then are here now. They are being born every day; they are in playpens and in preschools, and some of them are in elementary schools.

What do we know about these children? Today, more than 15,000 babies are born every day in California. Of those, more than 20 percent are born into poverty—into conditions that we like to think are associated only with the sadder developing countries. And the proportion of California children living in deep poverty is growing extremely rapidly. In the past decade the number of very poor children increased by 50 percent in 40 counties and doubled in 17 other



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counties. As many as 20 of California's 58 counties have rates of low birth weight that are worse than those in Egypt. More than half of all children are not vaccinated against the most common infectious diseases. Thousands of California children are homeless. In many of California's school districts, 40 percent of the youngsters drop out of high school. Quality day care for young children in every economic stratum is inadequate, and for the children of the poor, the situation is desperate.

Now, what kind of California are we going to have 50 years from now with a population that has been reared under such conditions? If a natural disaster or a foreign enemy were destroying hundreds of thousands of the children of this state, there would be an immediate outcry. We would demand that governments take action. We would expect an outpouring of voluntary contributions. But that isn't happening. Why not? Children of the poor are invisible to the affluent. Those children don't play in *my* playground. They don't even walk in my street. The care of young children does not provide desirable jobs for men; child care has traditionally been an occupation of unpaid women or very poorly paid women. It still is. Taxpayers' rebellions that so successfully swept California and moved across the United States and settled into Washington, D.C., have dismantled the basic infrastructure available to children, particularly to poor children. Medical clinics serving these youngsters, Head Start, nutritional programs, family-planning programs, have all been cut to pieces. It doesn't take a vast fortune to take care of those

kids. We could meet the basic needs of these youngsters for about \$20 per taxpayer per year.

The failure to coordinate the services designed to serve children is pervasive in this state and across the United States. This is yet another aspect, and, I think, the most important one, of a problem that has been discussed throughout the California sessions of this symposium—the lack of coordination between the various arms, legs, and toes of government. But we can fix it if we have the political will to fix it. The only thing standing in the way of changing the future of this state and of the United States is building the political will to do it—to insist that the agencies that are supposed to provide social services to children and others be run for the benefit of those who are supposed to be served, rather than for preserving the turfs and the jobs of those who happen to inhabit them as bureaucrats or political figures. Everybody can do something. Just as we need to have concerted action to compel attention to managing our natural resources, we need to insist on attention to our human resources. We've got to clean up our act as well as our air and water if we are to have a future state of California in which we ourselves would be willing to live.

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Judge Hufstedler's talk opened the final panel discussion, which she moderated. Also participating were Bruce Cain, Glen Cass, Duane Georgeson, Mary Nichols, and Roger Noll.

Shirley Hufstedler's emphasis on *human* resources as key to California's future was echoed by the rest of the panel, which was charged with the task of wrapping up the day with a discussion of "Realities for a Sustainable California." Duane Georgeson and Mary Nichols both stressed the importance of education and diversity. Georgeson mentioned that, particularly with urban problems in a rapidly changing area like southern California, "we have to take advantage of all the talent that's available—all the ethnic groups and certainly women." He noted that in engineering the dramatic change in participation by women and different ethnic groups has "brought a lot of rich new ideas in terms of how we approach the solutions to problems of dealing with urban infrastructure."

"I'm bullish about technological fixes that can help us get out of our problems of air pollution, water quality, and transport," said Nichols, "but the software that goes with all of that hardware is going to require people who not only have a high degree of educational ability, but also who know how to work with people of different racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds."

Glen Cass was also optimistic about technology's potential to help solve California's problems, and he saw as the symposium's unifying theme the attempt to answer the question, "Which resources are truly limiting in terms of sustaining pleasant life?" He asserted that the availability of fossil fuels and water were not limiting constraints, nor was technological innovation. "The true limiting resource is clearly people," said Cass. "And I don't mean limiting in the

sense of quantity. I mean limiting in the sense of the need to increase the coincidence of values shared by the people in our society." He noted a willingness to cooperate and an improved educational system as necessary conditions for continued technological innovation. "And finally, we're going to have to provide environmental progress rapidly enough to prevent the flight of human capital from southern California, so that the people who have the skills to solve the problems still live here long enough to, in fact, solve them."

Hufstedler's remarks on the problems of education and children in poverty were picked up by Roger Noll, who claimed that a reduction in the size and scope of government expenditures did not occur in the eighties, but that there was "a shift in what was regarded as important. What happened was that the amount of money spent on older people went up dramatically, contrasted with the amount spent on younger people."

"Declining poverty among the elderly is one of the success stories in the United States in the past 25 years," continued Noll. When poverty became a dominant issue in about 1960, most poor people were old and most of the old were poor. This is now far from the case, and the biggest change has come in medical care, which represents 12 percent of GNP. "About half of the money we spend on medical care is for people in the last six months of their lives," said Noll. "When we started Medicare, the fraction of GNP spent on medical care was about 4 percent. So therein lies the problem with regard to the budget, with regard to the children, and with regard to long-term planning for the future of all forms, including energy and environmental policy." Noll hastened to add that he was not blaming the elderly. Nevertheless, their economic improvements have come at the expense of other federal programs and especially children. The challenge is to restore balance to national policy between consumption, especially for the elderly, and investment. On these issues, "California's problem is the national problem of shortsightedness."

Bruce Cain continued this theme: "The problem is not the number of people, or the capability of people, but the shortsightedness of people: the shortsightedness with respect to time—not seeing that what you do at this moment may have implications down the road; shortsightedness with respect to place—not realizing that the water you're draining in Mono Lake for southern California might affect the quality of life of people in the Sierra, or that the

Smog blows through Cajon Pass in 1975. Emission controls on automobiles since then have been responsible for dramatic improvement.



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housing project you build in Pomona might have implications for commuting in Pasadena.” Cain also mentioned shortsightedness within groups—“the idea that we take care of ourselves in the middle class and we don’t need to worry about what’s going on in the poverty areas of the state or what happens to children in the ghetto in terms of the waste of human potential.”

Part of this shortsightedness is due to the divisions within the state, said Cain—divisions between north and south, rural areas and urban areas, whites and nonwhites. “It’s particularly difficult in a fractured and decentralized political system to get people to see beyond the parochial parts of their world,” Cain continued. “It’s hard for people to see the connections and the interdependence when they don’t correspond to existing levels of government or representation.” Cain returned to the point he had made in his talk about the need for a regional level of government to deal with regional problems. But it’s hard for cities and counties to develop regional strategy without leadership at the state and national level, he said. “The lack of consensus in society is manifested in divided control at a lot of different levels with different levels of responsiveness to the public.” This is going to make innovation and radical change difficult, Cain said.

All the panelists seemed optimistic about California’s long-term future, although there seemed to be a number of doubters among the questioners in the audience. Summing up the general attitude of the speakers, Noll claimed that “California is, in great measure, in control of its own destiny within the time horizon that we

are contemplating at this conference.” Cain held back a bit and maintained that, although he didn’t envision any cataclysmic scenario, such as mass starvation or a state in ruins, there are “intermediate steps of hell and heaven here.” He thought that “it’s quite possible that in the next 10 or 20 years there may be some deterioration on the margin in the quality of life, and we’ll have to cope with that.” Georgeson believed that “we should not too quickly despair of the ability of human beings to respond to challenges. I think that, as things change, they evolve, and human beings, with their various institutions, devise solutions to problems.”

Nichols, too, was hopeful because of California’s leadership in change. She mentioned California’s leadership in higher education and was even optimistic about some of the state’s bad features. “It gives me some hope,” she said, “that southern California, probably the worst example in the world of a wasteful, sprawling urban area, has already made changes that decouple our industrial and residential growth from increasing use of energy. If we can continue to make progress in our *worst* area, the transportation sector, I think we can have a claim to something that we can export to the rest of the world.” Cass thought that the optimism of the California sessions, as opposed to the pessimism of the symposium’s sessions on world sustainability, centered “around the concept of opportunity. What people are optimistic about today are the *opportunities* for sustainable lifestyles and improvement in California.” Noll, however, had commented earlier that “the fact that the opportuni-

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ties exist does not mean that we will, in fact, take advantage of them.”

Noll pointed out that in dealing with California, “we are talking about a very tiny fraction of the world’s total population. The fact is that there are 30 million of us and 5.3 billion of them.” But if we take into account the extent to which the world’s problems impinge on California, we can approach it in two ways. The first is the self-interest argument, which economists deal with in general equilibrium models—for example, global climate models. “If the rest of the world does itself in, it will drag California along with it.” But, using the self-interest argument, population growth in Africa or Southeast Asia is not perceived by most of us to have much of an effect on our personal income or lifestyle.

“Then, there’s the second argument—the altruistic argument,” Noll went on. “And that’s the ethically persuasive one to me. Even if my own welfare in my lifetime and my daughter’s welfare in her lifetime and everyone’s welfare in California is not much affected by, say, species extinction in the Amazon Valley, nonetheless, I still hold it to be of value and I’d be willing to do something about it. But the difficulty lies in the fact that we’re not living in an age with a long, altruistic time horizon. How are we going to convince people to respond to that kind of an argument?”

Shirley Hufstедler, as moderator of the last panel, continued the theme in her summary of California in the world community. Having been instructed to sum up not only the day’s sessions on California, but the entire symposium, “in a manner that is cogent, touching, witty, and encompassing—in four minutes,” she made a valiant attempt: “I think we can say that a consensus has been reached on a few points. One is that whatever reasons may have motivated governments in an earlier day to keep prices for

petroleum products unnaturally low, it is a policy that must go. Second, conservation and greater efficiency in the use of critical resources in the short term can help us bridge over to the point where technological advances will be able to stretch out the benefits of those resources. I think that in 50 years our grandchildren will find it preposterous that the world, and particularly the U.S., should have been so wasteful of irreplaceable natural resources. In various ways each one of the panelists has noted that many people who have the luxury of any choice at all will make a choice that is more beneficial to the globe and to the salvation of irreplaceable resources if the sacrifice that they are required to make is not so severe as to be unbearable.

Third, and extremely important to the United States, the allocation of the burden must be fair. It doesn’t have to be perfect. It doesn’t have to be exquisitely equitable. But it should not be grossly unfair, either in fact or in perception. And finally, I think that everybody on the panel has agreed that we have to develop some kind of policy to protect the commons. The commons may be variously defined—many things such as water or information that have traditionally been considered private property are now being redefined as part of the commons—but we must begin to develop a series of incentives and disincentives that push people into doing the right thing, at least until we can do better in the modification of human behavior. We also need to get together and talk to one another about these issues—and talk to legislators and to candidates for office. We should ask them what they intend to do about these issues, and not settle for the response that they’re going to run on behalf of anyone who is willing to give them enough money for their television spot. We can do better than that, ladies and gentlemen. We all can.” □