Playing with Magic Lanterns?
The New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development and Corporate Triple-Bottom Line Reporting

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Stream #7: Critical Accounting
Environmental action and environmental discourse, when carried on in the name of “sustainable development,” implicitly or explicitly position themselves with respect to the crisis of justice and the crisis of nature. Different actors produce different types of knowledge: they highlight certain issues and underplay others. How attention is focused, what implicit assumptions are cultivated, what hopes are entertained, and what agents are privileged depends on the way the debate on sustainability is framed.

Wolfgang Sachs, Planet Dialectics, 1999, pp. 77-78

Introduction:
Sustainability as a concept is contested and ambiguous (Barbier, 1987, 1989; Bishop, 1993; Dixon & Fallon, 1989; Milne, 1996; Norgaard, 1989, 1992; Pearce, 1988, Redcliff, 1987; Sadler, 1988; Toman, 1992; Turner 1993; WECD, 1987; Zovanyi, 1998). In defining sustainability, New Zealand’s Resource Management Act 1991 5(2) includes reference to economic, social and environmental values for resources and ecosystems, but is less clear as to how such economic, social and ecological values should be integrated (Horsley, 1991; Fisher, 1991; Grundy 1997, 2000). Whether ‘biophysical thresholds’ or ‘environmental bottom-lines’ should act as constraints over social and economic matters, or be balanced or traded-off against them, is widely debated in the legal, planning, geography, ethics, economics and environmental literatures (e.g., Buckingham-Hatfield & Evans, 1996; Johnson, 1996; Norton, 1989; O’Riordan, 1993; Sagoff, 1988; Turner 1993). Less well understood, however, is how New Zealand business organisations and their managers view and act on the interrelationships between economic, social and environmental values.

Substantial research indicates that the concept of sustainability has radical and important limitations for conventional economic analysis, the market allocation mechanism (Costanza & Loomis, 1994; Jansson et al., 1994; Toman et al., 1993), and conventional business behaviour (Beder, 1997; Gladwin, 1993; Welford, 1997, 1998). Academic definitions of sustainability emphasise not just an efficient allocation of resources over time, but also a fair distribution of resources and opportunities between the current generation and between present and future generations, and a scale of economic activity relative to its ecological life support systems (e.g., Daly & Cobb, 1989; Daly 1991, 1992; Dobson, 1998; Low & Gleeson, 1998; Noble & Costa, 1999). Daly (1991), for example, in defining sustainability specifies: (1) rates of use for renewable resources that do not exceed their rates of regeneration; (2) rates of use for non-renewable resources that do not exceed the rate at which sustainable renewable substitutes are developed; and (3) rates of pollution emission that do not exceed the assimilative capacity of the environment. To these three, the OECD (2001) has added a fourth: avoiding irreversible impacts of human activities on ecosystems.

Such definitions of sustainability suggest broader ecosystem-based approaches that require an understanding of cumulative environmental change (Canter, 1999; Costanza & Folke, 1994; Odum, 1982; Piper, 2002), and new and alternative decision-making arrangements and institutions (e.g., Young, 1992; Bryant, 1995). To give effect to sustainability, calls have come for cumulative effects assessments of economic activity based on regional ecological criteria (e.g., Rees, 1988; Canter, 1999; Piper, 2002), for ecological footprint analyses (e.g., Wackernagel & Rees, 1996), for precautionary decision-making principles (e.g., O’Riordan & Cameron, 1994), for bioregionalism (e.g., Sale, 1980, 1985; Welford, 1995; Harrill, 1999) and for more just, democratic and participatory decision forums (e.g., Bryant, 1995; Low & Gleeson, 1998; Young, 1992). Despite their strongly anthropocentric bias, all of these approaches represent profound challenges to existing capitalist systems and business behaviour. As Zovanyi (1998, p. 151) notes, on the basis of Daly’s definition, there are clearly limits to the human enterprise, and there appears to be little evidence so far of sustainable behaviour at either global or lesser regional scales. He suggests that:
Among those seeking to formulate measures of sustainability during the closing years of this 20th century, there appears to be a growing awareness of the need to end growth in both human and economic terms if there is to be any hope for a sustainable future. In terms of operational measures of sustainability, further human and economic growth would therefore be considered to present evidence of unsustainable behaviour under current demographic, economic, and ecological realities.

It is against this backdrop that we aim to examine businesses’ response to the sustainability debate. In particular, we focus on the discursive positions on sustainable development being constructed and promoted by the New Zealand Business Council on Sustainable Development (NZBCSD) and those of its organisational members. Numerous business organisations, in an attempt to ‘demonstrate’ their behaviour is sustainable, are beginning to adopt environmental management systems, undertake social agendas, and issue stand-alone “sustainability” or “triple bottom line” (TBL) reports. Such practices are beginning to become adopted in New Zealand business, and, most notably, include members of the NZBCSD. Early reporting examples include Meridian Energy, Mighty River Power, Sanford Seafoods, Landcare Research, The Warehouse, and Watercare Services (Milne et al., 2001). The apparent purpose of such practices and reporting is for organisations to account to a more diverse group of “stakeholders” for their social and environmental impacts, as well as for their more traditional financial performance. Business-led commentators on organisational change (e.g. Schmidheiny, 1992; IISD/DT, 1993; WICE, 1994, NZBCSD, 2001) stress “win-win” solutions: changes that are both good for the environment and society and good for business (i.e., reduced costs, competitive advantage). Such practices are also being packaged and ‘sold’ as means by which organisations are contributing to the sustainable development of society.

The paper builds on the earlier work of Ball et al. (2000); Bebbington, (2001); Bebbington & Gray (1993); Beder (1997); Beder & Gray (1992, 2001); Gray & Bebbington (2000); Livesey & Kearins (2001); Milne (1996); Owen et al. (1997, 2000, 2001); Welford (1997, 1998) by examining the discursive positions on sustainable development being constructed by the NZBCSD and its members and locating them in a wider and more inclusive framework of other (more radical) positions on sustainability, environmentalism and nature. We are interested in showing what the NZBCSD and its members define sustainability to be and, by corollary, what they define it not to be. We do this by examining the contents of the NZBCSD’s website and documents posted there, the contents of recent conferences it has sought to support and organise, the “case” it has developed in materials to promote “sustainable development reporting” through its existing and potential members, and how it is portrayed by media commentators. We also examine the content of eight NZBCSD members’ triple bottom line (or sustainable development) reports. By examining the report texts in a qualitative fashion, we scrutinise the use of language, and reveal several “themes”. In particular, by carefully examining the language within the reports, we seek to explore how organisations conceive of and represent sustainability/sustainable development.

While such an analysis might be considered to be a descriptive portrayal of ‘what’ or “what not’ business and its associations define sustainability to be, we believe it reveals more than this. We believe that a discourse produces through differing practices of representation, and particularly when propounded by influential and powerful groups in society, a knowledge of something (Hall, in Wetherall et al., 2001, p.338, also see Hajer 1995). We seek, then, not only to (re)present the subject position of the NZBCSD to make sense of the discourse currently being used by New Zealand’s leading reporters, but also to reflect on the possible ramifications of such a discursive position for public policy and civil society.

The New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development
Founded in 1999, the New Zealand Business Council for Sustainable Development (NZBCSD) has about 40 members ranging from very small consultancies to New Zealand’s largest manufacturers, retailers and service organisations (see, www.nzbscd.org.nz). Membership is by invitation only, and large organisations pay $20,000 p.a. membership fees. One of the conditions of Council membership is accepting a commitment to publicly release a TBL report.
within three years, but the Council has been far more proactive than that. Since its inception, and in addition to the promotion of triple bottom line reporting or what it refers to as sustainable development reporting, the Council has been proactive with zero waste, climate change, youth employment, schools partnership, and sustainable labelling projects. And these have recently been extended to include supply chain management, emissions management and economic incentives for sustainable development.² The council itself is constituted of the CEOs of the member organisations. In addition, however, a small but active staff organise events, make presentations, manage the website and a newsletter, issue press releases and promote its activities and projects to wider forums.

**Sustainable Development**

The NZBCSD conceives of approaching sustainable development via “the three pillars of economic growth, environmental protection, and social progress”, and has set its mission to be a “catalyst for change”, and “promote eco-efficiency, innovation, and entrepreneurship” (NZBCSD, 1999, 2001, 2002). A further key aim of the NZBCSD has been to influence policy development, and a particular mechanism the NZBCSD has employed from early on are “leadership forums”. As Roger Spiller, previous Executive Director of the NZBCSD, states:

> The NZCSD Leadership Forum in February 2000 was a meeting of 50 minds from New Zealand business, government, and society. As part of its work the forum produced a definition of sustainable development for New Zealand. Sustainable Development means systematically fostering a responsive, knowledge-intensive economy and a participative, caring society, in ways that enhance eco-system services and our unique natural environment. A summary of the common elements of the NZBCSD’s Leadership Forum are presented...below (Spiller, in Boardroom, February 2001, p. 1).

![Sustainable New Zealand Scenario](source: NZBCSD website, [www.nzbcsd.org.nz](http://www.nzbcsd.org.nz))

Despite the arrogance that “50 minds” could provide a definition of sustainable development for New Zealand, there is some indication, taken from presentation slides at the first leadership forum³, that a broader more inclusive conception of sustainability was possible than

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² Details on all these projects, including detailed progress reports for some of them can be found on the NZBCSD website [www.nzbcsd.org.nz](http://www.nzbcsd.org.nz)

³ The powerpoint slides from this forum are available on the NZBCSD website at [www.nzbcsd.org.nz](http://www.nzbcsd.org.nz)
subsequently emerged in the vision. At that time the NZBCSD suggested the following perspective in answer to the question “What is sustainability?

![Illustration of sustainability as a holistic concept](Image)

Source: Leadership Forum, NZBCSD Website

Not only does this slide include reference to “ecological systems”, “life-sustaining functions”, “social and ecological limits”, “future generations” and issues of equity, other slides and commentary refer to “ecological footprints…demonstrating that current patterns of production, consumption and waste management are unsustainable”, that “we need two more planets to sustain everyone at US standards of living”, that sustainable development is about “promoting social outcomes too”, “social accountability” and a need for “full environmental and social costs”, and that sustainability is about “balance, but not trade-offs”. While these early slides also contained ample reference to “technological innovation”, “market-based sustainability”, “eco-efficiency”, and “business viability” being based on being “financially sound”, they clearly demonstrate an awareness of wider issues of sustainability that have entirely disappeared from NZBCSD pronouncements.

The Business Case

Indeed, having established its vision for a sustainable New Zealand, and in sharp contrast to any wider notions of sustainability, the Council has moved on to strengthen and consolidate its “business case” for sustainable development. Spiller suggests:

> There are many cases that can be made for sustainable development: moral, ethical, religious, and environmental. While all of these cases are valid (and as individuals we may believe deeply in them) the NZBCSD is essentially a business council, and therefore we emphasise the business case. The case has a financial bottom line (Roger Spiller, NZBCSD Executive Director, NZBCSD 2002 Annual Review, p.2).

Eric Barratt (Vice Chair, NZBCSD) echoed these comments (verbatim) when addressing another Business Leaders Forum in September 2002. On numerous occasions, potential council members are informed that:

> …the NZBCSD allows companies to contribute their experiences and thinking to the policy debate on sustainable development… In short, companies gain competitive advantage. They exert greater influence

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4 This later forum was to launch the World Business Council’s latest book “Walking the Talk”.

on the framework conditions under which they operate by being represented by a credible advocate… All this helps companies operate more effectively, and gives them an edge on the competition by being aware, ahead of others, and thus able to anticipate the emerging environmental and social trends, which might impact their business. (Spiller, in Boardroom, February 2001, p. 2).

Further articulating the benefits of being involved in sustainable development, and the Council, businesses are being told that “doing good leads to doing well” and more specifically that involvement leads to:

- Increased financial return for and reduced risk for shareholders
- Attracting and retaining employees
- Improving customer sales and loyalty
- Growing supplier commitment
- Strengthening community relations
- Contributing to environmental sustainability⁶

While the latter two aspects to the case at least hint that some wider notion of responsibility and accountability to society and for the environment might have been retained, they are often presented in terms of their economic and instrumental value to the business organisation. In advocating a case for sustainable development reporting, for example, the NZBCSD suggested such reporting would “comfort and reassure stakeholders regarding a company’s management values and approach to business”, and it can “…potentially lessen adverse comments from the community about a business and enables the company to profile the positive contribution it is making to the community” (p.9). Further, such reporting can “assist businesses in identifying opportunities for reducing waste, and thereby costs…” (p.10). These extracts appeared in The NZBCSD Sustainable Development Reporting Guide for New Zealand Business (2001), which was subsequently publicly released in 2002 as a Business Guide to Sustainable Development Reporting. In the process of revising the guide for public release, however, direct reference to “contributing to environmental sustainability” has disappeared, and more generally appears to have been transformed into “reduce environmental impacts and associated costs” (Spiller, NZBCSD 2002 Annual Review, p. 2).

The NZBCSD’s business case for sustainable development (reporting) is clearly entity focused, strongly argued on economic grounds, and strongly couched in terms of increased financial returns, enhanced reputation and reduced risk for organisations. Consequently, while the NZBCSD claims to have produced a vision of sustainable development for New Zealand from its initial leadership forum, much of the subsequent articulation of its business case has tended to produce a narrower argument for sustaining business. Indeed, as we shall see below, there is growing reference not to business contributing to the sustainable development of New Zealand, but to growing “sustainable business”.

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⁶ These benefits are also echoed by other New Zealand organisations keen to promote business involvement with sustainable development projects, and triple bottom line reporting. The sustainable business network (www.sustainable.org.nz), for example, state that “sustainable development makes good business sense”, and go on to list an almost identical set of benefits. For a similar list, also see the New Zealand Centre for Business Ethics and Sustainable Development (www.nzbesd.org.nz). Similarly, a visit to many accountancy firms’ websites reveal a host of references to: “Adding Value Through Sustainable Development” (www.icanz.co.nz), “A sustainable business enhances long-term shareholder value by addressing the needs of all its relevant stakeholders and adding economic, environmental and social value through its core business functions” (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2002, www.pwcglobal.com), and “Reduced risk exposure and liabilities, more efficient use of resources and the development of new markets for green products and services. Some business are also benefiting from an enhanced reputation and loyalty with their customers and suppliers as a result of their commitment to SDR.” (Sustainability Reporting, DeloitteNZ, 2002, www.deloitte.co.nz). ⁶ Landcare Research, a prominent member of the NZBCSD, who also offer TBL consultancy services, too, argues a case for organisational TBL on the grounds building relationships, managing risk, enhancing internal management, contributing to sustainable development, reducing costs, benchmarking, and gaining competitive advantage. (see, Triple Bottom Line Advisory Service, Landcare Research, www.landcareresearch.co.nz).
**Actions not words**

Another aspect to the NZBCSD’s approach is its pragmatism. Participants at the initial leadership forum were told the NZBCSD is “not just about talk”, and were invited to consider several projects the NZBCSD had initiated including its schools partnership programme and its sustainable development reporting project. Since then, other leadership forums, a national conference, and other projects have been initiated, and the NZBCSD has adopted slogans like “dedicated to making a difference” and “walking the talk” — the theme to the inaugural sustainable business conference in 2002. Stephen Tindall (NZBCSD Chair) recently reiterated the point when he suggested belonging to the council meant participating in the projects using your own resources, or “we ask you to leave…we believe in actions not words.” (Tindall, quoted in the NZ Herald, 31 March, 2003).

Coupled with its slogans, the projects represent tangible evidence of the council’s pragmatism, and that members are actually doing something. The council has also sought central and local government, and NGO partners in these projects. Such partnerships, which include partners providing funding, have included the Ministry for the Environment, the Ministry for Economic Development as well as the Mayor’s Taskforce. Such partnerships, the NZBCSD argues, “…are increasingly viewed as the most effective route to social cohesion, environmental stability, and equitable economic growth.” (2002 Annual Review), but clearly they are also the means by which to shape political thinking and “…exert greater influence on the framework conditions under which they operate…” Evidence of this influence can be seen in congratulatory statements from the Prime Minister, the Minister for Energy, the Chairman of the Association of NGOs of Aotearoa, and Christchurch Mayor (NZBCSD Annual Review, 2002), and in that both the Executive Director and Chairman were part of the official NZ delegation to the World Summit on Sustainable Development. National press reports suggest that “…the council has extremely close links with Government.” (NZ Herald, 24 September, 2002), “The council has brainstormed with key Cabinet Ministers…” (NZ Herald, 24 September, 2002), and “…the council is increasingly staking its claim as a force to reckoned with…a newer voice which is increasingly being heard” (O’Sullivan, NZ Herald, 30 September, 2002).

**Journeying**

The NZBCSD projects are also portrayed as the “thin end of the wedge”, and as the basis on which to advance “towards sustainable development”. Indeed, the metaphor of ‘a journey’ is one that looms large in many NZBCSD publications, and more generally in much business and political discourse on sustainable development.

**NZBCSD Project Structure**

In the 2002 Annual Review, for example, the diagram carries the heading “Leading the way towards sustainable development” with the following caption:

As illustrated in this diagram, NZBCSD project participants are at the forefront of leading the way towards sustainable development. Other NZBCSD members are able to leverage this work in fulfilling their commitment to sustainable development. The NZBCSD shares its project reports and insights with all NZ business to assist others to progress. (The NZBCSD 2002 Annual Review, p. 5).

Reference to journeying also appears in the Forward to NZBCSD Business Guide to Sustainable Development Reporting (2002), in which Roger Spiller concludes “…I wish you all the best in your sustainable development journey” (p.3). The Executive Summary of the same guide also refers to “NZBCSD member organisations that have embarked on the SDR [sustainable development reporting] journey…(p.5). Similarly, NZBCSD Chairman, Stephen Tindall, emphasises the ‘waste journey’ as follows:


Even the Business Guide to Youth Employment (2003) could not escape references to journey, where businesses are invited to “Join in the Youth Employment Journey”, and where we are asked “If, like us, you believe that our country should be a place of opportunity for all, then please join our journey to achieve ‘zero waste’ of New Zealanders. (p.12, Business Guide to Youth Employment, March 2003, NZBCSD).

The journey metaphor is not only being used to encourage participation in worthy endeavours, it is clearly also being used to signal worthy participants, and, as the following quotations show, companionship and camaraderie, and progress.

We recognise this is a journey and we are constantly looking to challenge the way we think and operate. We do so further encouraged by the knowledge that we are just part of a wider group of New Zealanders travelling the same road together. (p. 14, Industry Guide to Zero Waste, August 2002, NZBCSD).

This conference programme shows that the New Zealand sustainable development is coming of age. New Zealand has come a long way on its sustainable development journey, and the early adopters in the business community have an important contribution to make in terms of inspiring others…(Roger Spiller, quoted in Today, September 2002, p.3)

The run up to the 2002 inaugural sustainable business conference, in fact, seemed to encourage even stronger statements. Not only were business council members “on the road to contributing towards sustainable development”, they considered themselves as getting there. Moreover, the references seemed to become increasingly about producing “sustainable business”.

Sustainable development offers business the ability to increase returns and reduce risk…It is led by individuals and business who know there is more to good business than the next quarter’s bottom line. It is not business as usual and it is not necessarily easy…The council’s projects answer the why and how of sustainable development…business is an indispensable part of the solution to the problems of the world…sustainable development is good for business and business is good for sustainable development (Spiller, NZ Herald, 24 October, 2002).

Over the past few years, questions after my presentations have switched from why have sustainable business practice to ‘how to’. This conference succinctly gives an answer to the ‘how to’ question, by giving practical examples of how to ‘Walk the Talk’. It provides answers to the proactive businessperson on how to implement sustainable business practices in their organisation (Dick Hubbard, quoted in Today, September 2002, p.1)
NZBCSD Members' Triple-Bottom-Line Reports

Qualitative analysis of eight NZBCSD members’ triple bottom line reports reveal a set of themes to emerge from the reports that illustrate the way organisations represent sustainable development. Each theme is not present in each of the eight reports, but, taken as a set, these themes are strongly represented, and reflect the earlier analysis of the NZBCSD’s pronouncements. The themes are labelled (1) the sustainability journey (2) expert management—rationalism and scientism (3) double winning (4) caring and sharing (for stakeholders), and (5) the art of balancing. Taking extracts from the texts to illustrate, we discuss each of these themes in more detail.

**Sustainable development as a journey**

The metaphor of a journey was particularly prevalent in the early reporters of this sample. Landcare Research and Watercare Services, both established reporters, did not invoke the imagery of a journey to the extent of the other reporters. The early reporters represented sustainability as a journey in three key ways, to depict sustainable development as a process, to explain the transformation of the company and its activities (journey to TBL reporting) and to highlight that progress is occurring.

Reporters often depict sustainable development as a process, and, to capture movement along this process, use the journey metaphor. One key advantage gained through the use of this metaphor is to limit the focus on the ‘journey’, and thereby concentrate on current and future actions. By conceptualising sustainable development as a process, companies are able to celebrate their achievements without drawing attention to things yet to be achieved, or things that can never be achieved. Meridian Energy’s 2001 report, for example, suggests “Nevertheless we recognise that we are at the early stages of the sustainability journey” (p5). Underlying this statement is the identification that the company is a long way from being sustainable, but through the use of the metaphor they are engaged in the process of sustainable development.

Through focusing on the journey of sustainable development the reporting companies do not have to deal with some of the harder issues, e.g. identifying or describing an end point. Mighty River Power’s 2001 report addresses this explicitly. In their report they express their commitment to the sustainable development process and identify that there is no end point - the destination is not definable. “And there is no defined end point – the commitment is to a journey” (p17). In many cases the journey metaphor was not only used to conceptualise sustainable development as a process but also to express commitment to this process. The reporting companies often identified the publication of a report as a sign of this commitment. “As part of producing this report Hubbard Foods re-affirms its commitment to continuing down this path” (Hubbard Foods, 2001, p4).

Another way the journey metaphor is utilised is to illustrate that the company, and the companies activities, are transforming. Urgent Couriers, for example, “…started down the path of sustainability by introducing an environmental management policy in 1996” (2001 report, p6). As perhaps expected, these transformations are largely positive and sustainable development is portrayed as something that helps improve the performance of the organisation. Meridian Energy’s 2001 report, for example, suggests “We see sustainability as a journey to improve our performance across all aspects of our business” (p3), while Mighty River Power emphasises its future orientation, suggesting “Our commitment to sustainable development is finally about the way that we want to take our business forward into the future” (2001 report, p29).

Triple bottom line reporting is also conceived of as part of the journey. Landcare Research tell about their “…journey to triple bottom line (TBL) reporting” (p9), and The Warehouse identify

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7 Landcare’s first report, however, released in 2000, contains ample reference to the sustainable development journey and its nuances, with the Chief Executive’s statement (p.4, 2000) in particular making reference to sustainable development being "not a destination, but a direction", with a need for radical targets to make "significant progress along the road towards sustainable development", and the report showing "our current progress and future direction".
that “Triple Bottom Line reporting is the next step in our sustainable development journey” (2001 report, p5). The journey metaphor connotes forward movement, and highlights that progress is occurring. Furthermore, this concept of moving forward is associated with some positive traditional business notions such as continuous improvement and progress. Thus the journey metaphor is used in these reports to highlight progress, and the perception that the reporting company is moving forward rather than standing still.

**Expert management: sustainable development as the means to an end.**

A strong theme to emerge from the reports is that measurement, management, and expert control will lead to sustainable development. This theme was evident in two major ways: (1) what can be measured can be managed — and this is often seen as a rational process tied to eco-efficiency, and (2) in some cases, the future success and continuation of the business was directly tied to a resource base that needed careful management.

Companies, through a variety of ways (e.g., scientific data, benchmarking, targets, and performance indicators), seek to communicate a sense of control and progress towards sustainability. Landcare Research, for example, state that:

> ...the old adage is true: what gets measured gets managed. At Lincoln, our main site, electricity usage has been monitored and staff informed monthly by email. The programme has led to savings of $303,000 over five years (2001 report, p10).

A year earlier, Landcare told us “We have recognised that to have policies is not enough—that having meaningful targets and monitoring their achievement is what counts” (2000 report, p.4). Watercare Services’ report, too, communicates a strong sense of measurement, management, and control. The report is littered with scientific data that gives the distinct impression that measuring and managing will lead to sustainability or that sustainable development means measuring and managing the organisation’s resources. For example, Watercare report that “Sustainable development also requires us to monitor consumption patterns, technology, manage risk and review the general business environment” (p5), and that “We are equally conscious that sustainable development means having the right people at all levels of the company” (p5). Measurement and management is also often strongly reinforced by verifiers of these reports. Tonkin and Taylor’s advice to Landcare, for example, suggested “In future reports, more comprehensive, quantified data and trends should be able to be reported” (2000 report, p. 51), while the advice from URS to Meridian Energy suggested:

> Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the future: what are the specific objectives that underpin the broad policy statements and how does Meridian Energy measure whether it is achieving these? Once the policy statements and specific underlying objectives are developed, the company can ensure that staff responsibilities and operational procedures are designed to meet these with reference to specific indicators (2001 report, p. 39).

The reporting companies, then, seem to consider that the right means will lead to the correct result and that ultimately their contribution to sustainable development is about the measuring and management of resources. Of course, these same companies suggest it is not possible to define an end point for sustainability or sustainable development, which rather begs the question how it is possible to set meaningful targets against which to monitor performance, and against which to measure progress towards sustainable development? If it is not possible to determine where we’re heading, how is it possible to know we’re getting there?

The need and rational basis for expert management is also communicated as being linked to the very existence and success of several of the reporters. Sanford fisheries, for example, report that “Minimising the impact of our operations on the environment and protecting the resources that we rely on are vital aspects of our business” (2000/2001 report, p2), while

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8 The measurement/management mentality, however, has not gone unquestioned by all reporters. Mighty River Power, for example, have questioned whether “For some organisations measurement is an end in itself” (2001 report, p21). They have also noted that: “Quality, not simply quantity, is a core element within sustainability. And quality is a difficult thing to measure” (p21).
“Meridian Energy takes its commitments to resource management and working consultatively with stakeholders seriously, as access to natural resources is critical to our ongoing success” (2001 report, p8). Similarly, Mighty River Power argue that “…responsible resource use touches all three elements of sustainable development — economic, environmental and social and, …is a key part of whole company performance (2001 report, p. 16). It is about “how to ensure that it [the organisation] can continue indefinitely into the future to hold the community’s licence to operate” (Mighty River Power 2001 report, p.16). The clear implication from these extracts, and one that is linked to our next theme, is that only an irrational management team would do anything other than operate their business in a way that did not sustain the underlying resource base on which the organisation exists.

Sustainable development as being both good for the environment and good for business

Again, the reporters echo a strong theme to emerge from the pronouncements of their umbrella council: that of “doing well by doing good”. And this, of course, is the “business case” for sustainable development. Sustainable development is linked with a “win/win” situation throughout the reports. “[M]aintaining economic viability is intrinsically linked with the ‘people and planet’ commitment” (Urgent Couriers, 2001, p7). The win/win scenario manifests itself in various ways throughout the reports, but fairly common aspects concern eco-efficiency gains (less inputs, less waste, and therefore less costs), competitive advantage (greater market share, greater sales revenues), and better risk management (less regulatory costs, protecting existing sales).

So at The Warehouse, for example, “…a small team within the Warehouse has made substantial savings on company energy costs” (2001 report, p20), while at Sanford Limited “successful management of these environmental issues can have many benefits, such as: ... Reducing costs by managing consumption and minimising wastage of resources such as fuel, water and electricity” (2002/2001 report, p.4). Hubbard Foods see other benefits including increases in “…worker morale, profit and increased competitiveness” (2001 report, p1 Environmental Section), and Urgent Couriers aims with its report to provide “quantifiable, independently verified testament of Urgent Couriers’ achievements to differentiate it in a competitive market place” (2001 report, p. 7). Watercare Services’ CEO also sees “The triple bottom line management approach is about creating competitive advantage” (2001 report, p5). Significant benefits from reporting are also noted by Mighty River Power when noting “reporting on the improving social performance of a business enhances its reputation, increases shareholder trust, creates new commercial opportunities and eventually lowers costs” (2001 report, p. 13). They also believe that the success of many overseas businesses is “based on the next point on the business curve, where greater overall corporate competitiveness may be achieved with strategies that incorporate the concepts of sustainability.” (2001 report, p. 16).

Sustainable development as committed to, and caring for/about stakeholders

All of the reports contain a strong emphasis on commitment to and caring for their stakeholders. Indeed, “commitment” is probably the most repetitively used word in these reports. Sanford Ltd, for example, report “By acting in a socially responsible manner and demonstrating our commitment to our staff, the communities we operate in and the future of New Zealand, we ensure staff and community support” (2000/2001 report, p. 2). Likewise, from Hubbard Foods, we read the company will deliver its vision through inter alia “a commitment to provide hope and inspiration to all stakeholders associated with the company.” (2001 report, p. 2), that the company has “a very strong commitment to its existing and potential customer base” (p. 6), that “an employer’s role demands a committed approach to employee welfare” (p. 1), and that the company has “an ongoing and demonstrable commitment to its local community” (p.8). Watercare Services suggest that:

Demonstrating the company’s commitment to sustainable development means recognising its role in the fabric of wider society. It also means the company must build strong relationships with, and create value for, stakeholders (2001 report, p35).

Most of the reporters saw their reports as a means to communicate with their stakeholders in “…an open, honest and transparent way” (Hubbard Foods, 2001 report, p1; The Warehouse,
2001 report, p. 5), and tended to emphasise “responsibility”, “accountability”, and “dialogue”. Indeed, several of the reports include the results of surveys and other consultative measures used to “engage” stakeholders, and while the motivations for such engagement are often couched in terms of responsibility and accountability, several reporters are also candid enough to report the instrumental benefits of such activities, echoing again, the business case. As Mighty River note “Stakeholder dialogue is also an opportunity to build trust and company reputation...” (2001 report, p. 20), and as The Warehouse states:

...managing risks, gaining stakeholder loyalty, attracting and keeping good team members, accessing the growing ethical fund management industry, gaining new customers, promoting innovation and maintaining broad credibility are all further benefits of the social accountability rendered through Triple Bottom Line reporting. I have no doubt The Warehouse shareholders would be very interested in these benefits and support them fully (2001 report, p. 2, emphasis in original).

A range of stakeholders are identified by the reporters and typically include employees, local communities, consumers/customers, shareholders, suppliers, and in some cases the media, government, Tangata whenua (indigenous people of New Zealand), the Business Council, NGOs and schools/educational establishments. By far the greatest attention across the reports is given over to employees, local communities, and customers, excepting the publicly-listed companies of Sanford and The Warehouse, who also give considerable attention to shareholders.

In defining “stakeholders”, both Hubbard Foods and Mighty River Power borrow from Freeman’s (1984) oft-quoted remark that a stakeholder is “any identifiable group or individual who can affect the achievement of an organisation’s objectives or is affected by the achievement of an organisation’s objectives.” The reporters tend to conceive themselves at the centre of relationships with stakeholders (e.g., Watercare Services, 2000 report, p. 12; 2001 report, p.35). As such, then, the conception is not what is the position of our company in wider society (eco-sphere) but how does everyone interact with us. And while most reporters do focus on both impacts they have on stakeholders and the impacts stakeholders have on them, it is clear that the focus in most cases tends to be on the direct and immediate relationships between the organisation and each stakeholder group, and typically on the positive impacts the organisation is having on each group.

In several cases, local communities were constituted as having groups in need of monetary, product or employee assistance. The Warehouse’s discussion of waste (2001 report, p.19), for example, tends to focus on reducing packaging waste in its stores and so benefiting shareholders, but not on the post-consumption waste from sales of products and the negative impact that has on local communities. Likewise, discussion of (2001 report, pp. 15-16) the social impacts of its out-on-the-edge-of-town stores tends to focus on the positive perceptions of local people on its economic impacts, and not on its secondary travel, transport, and energy impacts from consumers travelling to its stores. Likewise, the report claims to have had a 100% success rate in gaining planning consents for its stores, regardless of their location, but fails to mention at least one of these was bitterly contested by the local council (Dunedin City), and was only granted after the company appealed to the Environment Court.

In conceptualising stakeholders, Landcare Research was slightly different than other reporters. While the CEO refers to stakeholders in his report, the report thereafter refers to ‘partnerships' and that “developing effective solutions to environmental problems requires close partnerships between researchers, stakeholders and collaborators in central and local government agencies, business enterprises and local communities”. (2001 report, p. 26). This distinction, which reflects the nature of Landcare’s ‘products’ — research and consultancy — continued through the section of ‘stakeholders’ and gives the impression of the relationship being more mutually beneficial, closer and productive. Landcare’s report also more so than others creates the impression of its wider role in New Zealand society.
Sustainable development as a balancing act

Some reporters (e.g., Hubbard Foods, The Warehouse) do refer to the “dilemmas” and “challenges” they face in meeting the conflicting demands of stakeholders. However, they rarely report how the company has actually resolved them, or in whose interests. Most often, the reporters deal with this issue of conflicting demands with reference to “balancing”. When the triple bottom line approach is adopted it appears the way to deal with any competing interests is through balance. And since sustainability or sustainable development is seen as synonymous with the triple bottom line, it too becomes a balancing act. The most obvious example of this is found in Mighty River Power’s 2001 sustainability report, which is titled ‘An Intricate Balance’. Balance, indeed, is perpetuated throughout the report with statements such as: “... we are committed to keeping all the factors, all the issues and the company’s aspirations in balance – an intricate balance” (p.29), and “Intricately balancing sometimes competing needs is complex and our challenge is to maintain that balance within a world that is changing rapidly” (p.11). Meridian Energy, likewise, refer to striving to attain a “delicate balance” in “achieving outcomes where all interests can be met to the best of our ability” (2001 report, p. 12).

Balancing, then, is seen as a difficult challenge, but one that is both an essential element in becoming a sustainable company, and an essential objective for leadership. “Our decision to report triple bottom line is a further declaration of The Warehouse’s commitment to being a socially accountable and sustainable company in balancing our economic, social and environmental goals” (2001 report, p.1). “Stephen Tindall [Founder and Chairman] has long been passionate about ensuring The Warehouse balances the needs of these stakeholder groups...” (2001 report, p. 1). Similarly, reporting itself, as Watercare Services illustrates, can serve “...to provide stakeholders with a balanced view of the company’s role in society...” (2001 report, p.5).

Despite these references to balancing, however, they need to be judged in perspective, and an overwhelming sense gained from the reports is that business is capable of simultaneously satisfying all demands — there are no trade-offs. Indeed, for these businesses, sustainable development is largely defined in this way. Conflicting factors often appear with little or no comment about the tensions that might exist in achieving them. Mighty River Power, for example, in citing the UK’s Strategy for Sustainable Development, imply a capacity to simultaneously achieve “social progress which meets the needs of everyone”, “effective protection of the environment”, “prudent use of natural resources”, and “maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth and employment” (2001 report, p. 17).

That growing the business, making increased profits, and securing the financial viability of the business might come at the expense of the environment or social equity is simply not acknowledged as a possibility – almost by definition. So Urgent Couriers (2001 report, pp. 5-6), for example, can report they are able “to lead the way in minimising vehicle impact on the natural environment by reducing emissions and using alternative fuels”, while maintaining “a profit margin that will allow the business to expand and effectively participate in a highly competitive market place.” Similarly, “Sanford is committed to continually improving its environmental performance, operating in a socially responsible manner and maximising economic growth while ensuring financial stability, for the benefit of all stakeholders” (2000/2001 report, p. 26). And these sentiments are echoed for Meridian Energy by the verifier who notes “Staff are completely committed to maximising profitability, minimising environmental effects, enhancing stakeholder relationships and increasing efficiency of resource use” (Meridian Energy 2001 report, p. 39).

Indeed, for many, making profits and securing the long-term viability of the business is seen as absolutely essential to achieving these other goals. “Unless we continue to ensure that we are a financially successful organisation, we will not have the opportunity to put into effect all the proposals and strategies mentioned in this report” (Mighty River Power, 2001 report, p. 29). All our reporters seem to believe that “To demonstrate a commitment to sustainable development a company must be financially sound and it must foster the means of its own growth and renewal” (Watercare, 2001 report, p. 49). Unsustainable businesses, then, either seem not to
exist, or, with the right attention to stakeholders’ concerns, a sense of balancing them, and with expert measurement and management, they can be turned into ones that successfully contribute to sustainable development.

Discussion & Reflection
Despite early promises from the NZBCSD that sustainability was about recognising “social and ecological limits” and “future generations”, protecting “ecological systems” and “life-sustaining functions”, and dealing with unsustainable “patterns of production, consumption and waste management”, its members have produced a conception of sustainable development that is largely consistent with corporate social responsibility and “stakeholder reporting”. The NZBCSD have been quick to grasp the (eco) efficiency nettle (e.g., resource, waste and energy management), and more recently some concept of stakeholder engagement and dialogue, and especially in relation to those stakeholders closely associated with the organisation. Virtually unaddressed, however, are issues of equity and social justice (Gray and Bebbington, 2000; NEF, 2000; Owen et al., 2000), and completely unaddressed are issues of the scale of development, limits and constraints to that development, future generations, and indeed that organisations are not only systems of production but also “systems of destruction” (Beder, 1997; Gray, 1992; Milne, 1996; Shrivastava, 1994; Welford, 1997, 1998). And it is these issues, as far as we are concerned, that have always remained central to any concept of sustainability or sustainable development (see, for example, Welford, 1997, 1998; Rossi et al., 2000; Dyllick & Hockerts, 2002; Gray & Milne, 2002; 2003, PCE, 2002).

As Dobson (1988), Sutton (1999, 2000, 2001) and Devall (2002) observe, to discuss sustainability one needs to be thinking about maintaining or sustaining something. Sutton (2000, p.1) argues, sustainability “...is not “about” the integration of ecological, social and economic issues, nor is it “about” widespread consultation nor is it “about” improving quality of life. It’s about maintaining or sustaining something”. He goes on to argue that “If these things/conditions are worth sustaining, then their unsustainability matters...” and “treating the pursuit of sustainability as a [never ending] journey not a destination is highly inappropriate...”

What is to be sustained? How long is it to be sustained? And in who’s interests is it to be sustained? are fundamental questions that need to be answered in grappling with issues of sustainability.

What Dobson (1998) and Sutton (1999, 2000, 2001) note, with respect to concepts like “sustainable development” and the approaches illustrated throughout this paper, however, is that they do not ask these questions, or if one were to try and fit answers to them on the basis of what one reads it would have to be “the business” or “economic growth”, “for ever”, and “for those who own and control businesses” and nothing to do with the environment or society. Indeed, it is perhaps telling that Roger Spiller’s (then Executive Director of the NZBCSD) remark that “sustainable development is good for business and business is good for sustainable development” should bear such a striking resemblance to Roger Kerr’s (Executive Director of the Business Round Table) remark that “Sustainable Development and economic growth are quite consistent. Indeed, growth promotes sustainability.” Such approaches have been criticised as adopting “weak” conceptions of sustainability (see, for example, PCE, 2002), yet, as Welford (1997, 1998), Dobson (1998, pp. 54-55) and Gray & Milne (2002) note, these sort of approaches to sustainability are so weak as to be not about sustainability at all. They effectively continue to assume unlimited resource availability, infinite substitution possibilities, a lack of connectedness and collective peril, and no special place for the environment at all.

The NZBCSD’s position on sustainable development appears to be one of corporate social responsibility and stakeholder management designed to shore up and sustain the business

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9 This latter remark appeared in the New Zealand Herald, 4 April 2003, as part of an article titled “Wealth Creation environment’s best friend”. The Business Round Table is an older association of leading NZ businesses and is widely known for its pro-business, right wing, and free-market ideology and advocacy of business issues in New Zealand. Ironically, over the years the NZBCSD and the BRT have been, and continue to be, portrayed as contesting vastly different positions on business and its relationships with society and the environment.
organisation, and despite being dressed up as difficult, novel, and requiring pioneering leaders, it is an approach that has been recognised, argued for, and practiced for years. Early references to corporate social responsibility tended to focus on decisions and actions that went "beyond the firm's direct economic and technical interests" (Davis, 1960; Davis and Blomstrom, 1966), or responsibilities and obligations to society that went beyond "economic and legal obligations" (McGuire, 1963). Also contained in some of these early definitions is reference to the "expectations of the public" (Frederick, 1960), "voluntarism" (Walton, 1967), and "concern for the ethical consequences of one's acts as they might affect the interests of others" (Davis, 1967). Johnson (1971) also makes an early reference to stakeholders by referring to management balancing a "multiplicity of interests" and responsible enterprises taking into account "employees, suppliers, dealers, local communities and the nation".

What is more apposite is that a "business case" for such an approach has also existed for years. Such ideas can be found, for example, in Bowman (1973) and Bowman and Haire's (1975, 1976) early studies of corporate social responsibility and annual report social disclosures. Underpinning that work is clear reference to Cyert and March's (1963) notion of the corporation needing to maintain a viable coalition of all its constituents merely to perpetuate itself, and for corporations or rather their "dominant coalitions" 10 to reduce or avoid uncertainty by obtaining a negotiated environment. It is upon this basis that Bowman and Haire (1975, p. 54) see corporate social responsibility as "a diagnostic sign of an appropriate posture in dealing with a multivectored, changing environment." Bowman and Haire say little about the role corporate social disclosures might play in a firm's management of its environment, but they do suggest social responsibility behaviour is a signal of "good, sensitive, informed, balanced, modern, negotiating, coping management." The NZBCSD's approach, then, is hardly novel or deserving of (self-acclaimed) pioneering status, but what is novel is the way in which the approach is being systematically organised and promoted. Moreover, it is this systematic organisation and promotion that increases both its potential influence and, as we now conclude, its threat.

Conclusions
The discursive position adopted by the NZBCSD and its members is one that simply fails to recognise the clash of values associated with economy, environment, and society. It is a conception of sustainable development that simply fails to acknowledge the domination of nature and large parts of society by business and its powerful elites. It is a conception that requires change, but only at the margins, and, almost invariably, change that produces win-win outcomes. It is also a conception that fails to acknowledge the "systems level" issues associated with sustainable development, and to a large extent the problems of inter- and intra-generational equity. It is a discourse that promotes "eco-efficiency", but largely ignores "social justice". And it is a discourse that ignores issues of (over) consumption, and the scale on which development is taking place relative to the potential carrying capacity of the resource base. Indeed, it is a discourse that fails to explicitly address such fundamental questions as what is to be sustained? How long is it being sustained? And in who’s interests is what being sustained? (Devall, 2002). Consequently, it is not a discourse about sustainability at all. In Welford's (1997, p. 28) terms, it is a discourse that:

...represents not a break with what went before but a continuation of it. It adds an environmental [and now stakeholder] dimension to the development path but does not allow that dimension to radically change the path. In some ways it is a conjuring trick or a juggling act where industry espouses the need for environmental [and now stakeholder] action but never really tells the audience what it is hiding back stage.

The NZBCSD's position places sustainability in the shadow of development, and seeks not to preserve nature but to extend human-centred utilitarianism “For Ever” (Sachs, 1995). Paul Hawken (2002) has recently warned that “…as corporations and governments turn their attention to sustainability, it is crucial that the meaning of sustainability not get lost in the

10 Borrowing from Galbraith (1967), Bowman (1973, p. 31) refers to this group as the technostructure —managers, engineers, economists, lawyers, accountants, personnel specialists etc who run and control large organisations, and who are concerned more with the growth, relative stability and image of the corporation than "profit maximisation", though it may treat "sufficient" profits as a constraint which it must meet
trappings of corporate speak...I am concerned that good housekeeping practices such as recycled hamburger shells will be confused with creating a just and sustainable world.” It is with some irony then, that Paul Hawken’s earlier work should have played such an important role in the establishment of the NZBCSD, for this is exactly what the NZBCSD has done. In the process, however, the NZBCSD has acquired an influential position in New Zealand that may be increasingly difficult to challenge because, to quote New Zealand’s Prime Minister, Helen Clarke, “...with sustainability issues, any steps forward are worthwhile.” As its pragmatism gains ascendency, with it comes a discourse and ideology that seems ever likely to compel us “to adopt a narrow economic language, standard of judgement, and world view in approaching and utilising the earth” (Worster, 1995, p. 418). Indeed, to hear some members of the NZBCSD, the council has already got the answers to the how and why of sustainable development, and from what we can discern they are little different from business-as-usual.

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