Is Sustainable Development sustainable?
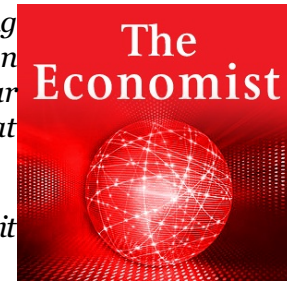
Posted by Luis de Sousa on July 11, 2009 - 10:20am in The Oil Drum: Europe
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The other day I got an e-mail from someone with The Economist asking me to participate in an on-line forum/discussion on that science fiction figure called Sustainable Development. Someone at this popular economics publication followed the series on the European Elections that was published here and at the European Tribune.

This time, instead of graphs and analysis, I opted for something a bit different.

Consulting an on-line Dictionary, a definition for Sustainability can be retrieved as the ability to perpetuate existence. In the same resource the definition for Development will be given as growth or progress. A concept gathering these two words together forms what the Greeks termed an oxymoron, an idea devoid of logical sense. Can Sustainable Development be sustainable? Naturally not, for merging together two antonymous concepts, it simply cannot exist.

So why is this oxymoron in the order of the day? Why does it get such attention? Why are so many so willing to discuss it so passionately?

Sustainable Development is one of several philosophical concepts (having as much eeriness as mythology) that emerged in the wake of a series of decades of breathtaking, unprecedented growth. Growth as in development, the physical expansion of the Human-sphere, its population and interactive processes with nature, harnessing energy and concentrated matter, deploying waste heat and dispersing matter. These mythological concepts are simply a reflex of a society intoxicated with growth in front of the first signs of physical constraints to its development.

Sustainable Development became the language of those that promise perpetual growth, and more, the profits that should come along with it. It is the language of those that do not want to reconsider their way of life. Of those who expect the XXI century to be the same as the XX century. Of those that expect to run all the cars on french fry oil or firewater. Of those who call Carbon Capture and Sequestration an energy source. Of those who promote the Hydrogen Economy, forgetting about the Nuclear energy system for which it was conceived. Of those touting Nuclear as Salvation. Of those touting Nuclear as Condemnation. Of those who expect Carbon Trading to reduce the OECD's dependence on OPEC. Of those dreaming with a CO_2 atmospheric concentration of 1000 ppm by 2100, accompanied by a 6ºC global temperature rise. Of those saying that the Earth's hydrocarbons are not fossil fuels. Of those drilling their way forward. Of those waiting for the Free Market to replace Fossil Fuels. Of those thinking all they need is changing light bulbs to continue living in 400m2 cardboard houses. Of those claiming to be in their hands a reduction of Fossil Fuels consumption.

Sustainable Development is the philosophy of those fooling themselves, thinking that the Earth is flat, refusing to accept that the planet is a spherical object and thus finite. Of those refusing to face

reality, refusing to wake up from their dreams.

A decade from now Sustainable Development will be out of the agenda. By then the word of the day shall be Survival. The Survival of a Culture, a Social and Political Framework, a Civilization.

Hopefully some will be able to wake up in time, leave the intoxicating dreams behind and face reality, however grim. Because then they'll be able to devise a New Future. A Better Future. A Future founded on the real physical entities that run through our Economy, not in abstract, growth dependent, illusions. A Future where each man and woman have their place and are not enslaved by a spiral of virtual accumulation and spending. A Future where having more than the next man isn't a goal in itself. A Future were work and excellence are rewarded by things that have real physical and meta-physical meaning.

A Future.