



## A Politician's View of Policy Making

Posted by [Debbie Cook](#) on February 16, 2010 - 8:13am

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*Editor's note: Below is an essay by new TheOilDrum.com contributor Debbie Cook. Debbie was formerly Mayor and Councilmember of Huntington Beach, CA from 2000-2008 and a US Congressional Candidate, 46th District, in 2008. She is also President of the Board of Directors of the Post Carbon Institute. Long active in resource depletion related outreach with TOD, ASPO and PCI, she also is involved with local energy/water and permaculture issues in Southern California.*

Jeffrey Sachs, economic advisor to the UN, in his recently published article, [Fixing the Broken Government Policy Process](#), articulates four manifestations of the breakdown in Washington:

1. Inability to focus beyond the next election
2. Decisions are made through negotiations with those who will be funding the next election (i.e. industry lobbyists)
3. Technical expertise is ignored or bypassed
4. The public is largely excluded from the process

Sachs asks, "How can business and government work together without policies falling prey to special interests?"

He suggests that government initiate a more "open, transparent and systematic public-private policy process in each major area of sustainable development"—high-level roundtable proceedings that are open to the public, web-based, and include representatives from private business, nongovernmental organizations, government officials, scientists, and engineers.

While this all sounds good in theory, my eight years in public office tells me that one more group, no matter how it is constituted, issuing one more report, is not going to drive better public policy.

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In my opinion the best way to influence policy is for the “scientists and engineers” to influence policy makers directly—and you don’t do that in a report, in a letter, on a petition, or a blog. It requires a commitment to face-to-face relationship building, nurturing, and maintenance—not the kind of activity typically selected by the pocket protector/lab coat types.

Rarely does a policy discussion center solely around facts. Emotions like trust, loyalty, anger, contempt, and sympathy are often just below the surface of every discussion. Facts become attached to emotions in large part because of the relationships that have developed between individuals, groups, and ideas. Words like “politician” and “government” evoke strong emotions that may have very little to do with facts and everything to do with how we synthesize information.

Here is a real life example of policy making on the fly.

On the same day that Scientific American published Professor Sachs’ article, the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) was taking up the issue of E85 ethanol fueling stations. See [here](#) and [here](#) for the agenda items. SCAG is the largest Metropolitan Planning Organization in the United States covering 6 counties and 19 million residents. It is guided by an unwieldy 83 member governing board whose members are elected representatives of cities and counties within the region. SCAG is mandated by the federal government to undertake planning and policy initiatives within the areas of transportation, growth management, hazardous waste management, and air quality.

This particular policy debate surrounding the E85 fueling stations serves as a good example of the fragmented decision-making process described by Sachs. It is also an example of the cast of characters whose relationships will have influenced the issue prior to it reaching the policy making body: a lobbyist who had applied for and won a grant in the agency’s name but without their knowledge; a businessman who was the sole source recipient of the grant; an Executive Director concerned over rejecting a DOE grant for fear it would affect future grant awards; an elected official or two whose communities are being targeted for an ethanol plant; air quality officials whose mandate is to reduce emissions; and a former colleague (myself) who spent her years on



the board introducing concepts like peak oil and energy return on investment.

Every member's vote represented a unique "truth" to that member based on facts filtered through their relationship matrix. It was the interactions between and among the characters that influenced the range of expressions preceding the vote. There were votes of loyalty for the Executive Director; votes of trust for a former colleague; votes of sympathy for the businessman who was losing out on an opportunity to build 55 fueling stations; and votes of anger against a lobbyist who may or may not have obfuscated information from the agency.

For me, the [result](#) was both unexpected and unsatisfying—unexpected because the inertia behind the industry seemed insurmountable, and unsatisfying because many board members are still holding onto the belief that cellulosic ethanol will displace transportation fuels and bring the U.S. closer to "energy independence." Dissuading policy makers from these and other fantasies is going to require many more conversations.

The hope for cellulosic ethanol appeals to the same [fantasy themes](#) ascribed by Dr. Benjamin Sovacool, researcher on issues related to energy policy, to the hydrogen economy: independence, patriotism, progress, democratization, and inevitability. As Savacool says, "The desire to experience these sorts of fantasies will likely continue even if the hydrogen economy does not come to fruition."

Indeed, the ethanol fantasy continues even as targets come up 90% short.

I have my own fantasy—to see CBS news journalist Dan Rather pay atonement to [Robert Rapier](#) for Rather's [60 Minutes](#) piece. Something akin to Mad Money's host Jim Cramer's repentance to Jon Stewart, host of the Daily Show:

Cramer: I always wish that people would come in and swear themselves in before they come on the show. I had a lot of CEOs lie to me on the show. It's very painful. I don't have subpoena power.... But Dick Fuld, who ran Lehman Brothers, called me in—he called me in when the stock was at 40—because I was saying: "Look, I thought the stock was wrong, thought it was in the wrong place"—he brings me in and lies to me, lies to me, lies to me.

Stewart [feigning shock]: The CEO of a company lied to you?

Cramer: Shocking.

So returning to Sachs' idea that we can work together to fix government policy-making, here is my prescription for scientists, professors, and engineers:

1. Participate in the public discourse
2. Publicly challenge your peers who put forward junk science
3. Be mindful of fallacies in your own assumptions
4. Relationships are primary and every policy is derived primarily from relationships, not facts.

To each critic sitting in their ivory tower, I challenge you to create the conditions for these relationships to flourish.



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