

The Roundtable Recommendations: An Approach Towards Public Policy

OFTEN TIMES WHEN GOVERNMENT ESTABLISHES A TASK FORCE, commission, roundtable or some other form of committee to look into some particular societal concern, the end product of the body's work is somewhat of a let down. This is not necessarily always the case (for example, the work of Dr. Peter Pearse on the Royal Commission on Forest Resources in British Columbia), but when the body is comprised of a multitude of members, each with his/her own interests and constituencies, the end result is often the diluted and scattered product of compromise. It becomes a political document rather than policy advice based upon principle.

Such is the case with the recommendations of BC's Working Roundtable on Forestry. The Roundtable is made up of many talented members who possess a depth of experience within the BC forest industry and related fields. Undoubtedly, these folks know what they're talking about and deserve our gratitude. That said, there are 21 of them. Twenty-one strong individuals, each who come to the task from different perspectives of what is and is not important. Compromise would necessarily dictate the content of the Roundtable's policy recommendations.

Not that there's anything wrong with compromise—it's essential to our democratic system of government. But it is a tool of politics designed to achieve political solutions, not necessarily principled solutions. Compromise is procedural (to use some lawyer speak) in the sense that the process validates the output, not necessarily the substance of the output. What matters is the achievement of agreement (or 'consensus'); the merits of the agreement are of secondary importance. Bold, innovative, and potentially controversial measures are rarely the path to consensus—they are more likely to scare off the people a consensus will need to have on board.

Nevertheless, when all of these talented people achieve consensus on a particular set of recommendations, we are supposed to take some comfort that we are on the right track. But are consensus recommendations really able to provide us with a useful strategic direction when they are directionless in the sense that they are based upon horse-trading and compromise rather than vision and principle?

What is missing from the consensus model of policy development represented in the Roundtable recommendations is political leadership and accountability. An alternative but, perhaps, more old-fashioned model of policy formulation is for political leadership to seek principled and uncompromised advice from independent advisors. Rather than appoint large committees of individuals ultimately beholden to a need for consensus, government could simply appoint these individuals to study

the problems of the forest industry and to make their own, independent recommendations. These individuals would have instructions and the opportunity to consult a broad array of perspectives and obtain a broad range of advice.

But, after the opinions are canvassed and the advice obtained, they could propose their own recommendations free of compromise and redundancy. They could focus on what they believed was important, and jettison what they believed was superfluous (rather than compromise for sake of consensus). Our political leaders would then receive principled, uncompromised advice to help them formulate public policy.

That's not to say that political leaders should necessarily accept or reject any particular plan in its entirety or that there is no need for compromise. However, in this model, management of compromise is the job of our political leaders, not those who provide government with policy advice. In the consensus model, political leaders follow the process—government is able to hide behind the consensus and defend the resulting policy with reference to the consensus (as opposed to the merits of the policy). So, not only does the consensus model provide for compromised advice, it also comes with a built-in blame deflection mechanism for when the compromised advice does not, ultimately, produce "a vibrant, sustainable, globally competitive forest industry that provides *enormous* benefits for current and future generations and for strong communities" and anything else that anyone could ever possibly want. 🌱

Jeff Waatainen is a past adjunct professor of law at UBC, has practised law in the forest sector for over a dozen years, and currently works as a sole practitioner out of his own firm of Westhaven Forestry Law in Nanaimo.



WESTHAVEN FORESTRY LAW
Big City Advice, Small Town Price

Jeff Waatainen
BARRISTER & SOLICITOR

Phone: 250.758.9485
Cell: 250.618.5776
Facsimile: 250.758.9486
Email: jeff@bcforestrylaw.com
Website: www.bcforestrylaw.com

5359 Bayshore Drive, Nanaimo BC, V9V 1R4