The breakdown of the Washington policy process has four manifestations. First is a chronic inability to focus beyond the next election. “Shovel-ready” projects squeeze out attention to vital longer-term strategies that may require a decade or more. Second, most key decisions are made in congressional backrooms through negotiations with lobbyists, who simultaneously fund the congressional campaigns. Third, technical expertise is largely ignored or bypassed, while expert communities such as climate scientists are falsely and recklessly derided by the Wall Street Journal as a conspiratorial interest group chasing federal grants. Fourth, there is little way for the public to track and comment on complex policy proposals working their way through Congress or federal agencies.

These failings take a special toll on the challenges of sustainable development because there is no quick fix, for example, for the challenge of large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Instead of getting long-term strategies for adopting low-carbon energy sources, upgrading the power grid, encouraging electric transportation and so on, we are getting cash for clunkers, subsidies for corn-based ethanol, and other ineffective and highly costly nonsolutions delivered by large-scale lobbying.

Some free-market economists say sustainable development should be left to the marketplace because there is no quick fix, for example, for the challenge of large-scale reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Instead of getting long-term strategies for adopting low-carbon energy sources, upgrading the power grid, encouraging electric transportation and so on, we are getting cash for clunkers, subsidies for corn-based ethanol, and other ineffective and highly costly nonsolutions delivered by large-scale lobbying.

Greater transparency and limits on lobbyist influence would promote better long-range strategies

BY JEFFREY D. SACHS

Jeffrey D. Sachs is director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University (www.earth.columbia.edu). An extended version of this essay is available at www.ScientificAmerican.com/feb2010