

opinion

Shaping a Sustainable Future

Professor Ian Lowe, Spirituality and Sustainability Forum – 6 June, 2007

I begin by thanking His Holiness the Dalai Lama for being in Australia to share with us his wisdom and unique insights, as well as for giving me the opportunity to share this occasion with him. I also acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, because a sustainable future has to be built on genuine reconciliation with the original Australians.

I'm delighted to speak here today as President of the Australian Conservation Foundation. For forty years, ACF has been a strong voice for the environment, promoting solutions through research, consultation, education and partnerships. Our members and supporters have played a key role in protecting outstanding natural areas and raising public awareness of the importance of our unique environment.

The most important question we face is: what sort of Australia do we want? The future is not somewhere we are going, but something we are creating. Will it be a clean, green sustainable future? Or will it leave our children a dreadful legacy of climate change, radioactive waste and derelict land? The Australian Conservation Foundation has analysed the growing threats to our continent. We have developed an ambitious strategy to inspire Australians to move to sustainable practices within a generation. To focus our attention on what that means, let me take you through an exercise called negative brainstorming. Imagine we have been asked to develop strategies to ensure an unsustainable future. How could we achieve this goal?

We would start with a population growing exponentially. No species can expand its numbers indefinitely in a closed system. If we don't stabilise our population by socially acceptable means, they will be limited in time by starvation, disease and fighting among ourselves.

We could increase the impact of our growing population by increasing consumption per person, putting compounding pressure on resources and the natural environment. We could deplete important non-renewable resources, such as oil, and over-use renewable resources like water, forests and fisheries. We could do serious environmental damage, like causing a major loss of species or changing the global climate. To ensure our economic decline, we would adopt the trade pattern of a Third World country, exporting raw materials and importing value-added goods and services. To increase social instability, we could widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots. As a moral foundation for this unsustainable society, we would embrace consumerism.

I don't think I need to elaborate. The way we are currently living is not sustainable; it doesn't satisfy any of the main criteria. Despite the evidence that our consumption is degrading our environment, we encourage both growing numbers and increasing consumption per person. If the optimists are right and we haven't yet passed the peak of world oil production, we are certainly near it, and there is no prospect of scaling up production to meet the demand which has been stimulated. The evidence

is overwhelming that we are over-using water and degrading our major river systems. We are changing the global climate, with serious economic and social consequences. We are in the middle of the sixth major extinction event in the history of the planet, with global warming adding to the driving forces of habitat loss, introduced species and chemical pollution. In economic terms, we have had more than 50 consecutive trade deficits, a trend that should have alarmed our leaders. Their only solution is to urge us to export even greater quantities of low-value commodities. The Australia I grew up in was one of the most equal nations in the world, but we are now the third least equal country in the entire OECD. Finally, consumerism is now our unofficial national religion, with ever larger shopping centres being built to allow us to worship at all hours. The policy settings in Australia would lead any outside observer to conclude that we just have not noticed that we are living unsustainably – or, even worse, we just don't care.

We can achieve a sustainable future, but it will require fundamental changes to our technologies, our social institutions and our values, in our approach to the natural world and to each other. My message of hope is that human systems can change radically and quickly. The transition we need may be catalysed by growing community awareness of the problem. A serious obstacle is the dominant mind-set of our decision-makers and opinion-formers who still see no problem, or think potential solutions threaten their short-term interests.

We have a beautiful and unique environment and many aspects of it are in good condition by international standards. But several national reports have documented the scale and seriousness of our environmental problems: loss of biological diversity, degradation of inland waterways and destruction of the productive capacity of rural land. These problems are getting worse, because the pressures on natural systems are still increasing. Each year the Australian population grows by about 250 000 and our material expectations increase. Each year we use more resources, produce more waste – and put more pressure on natural systems.

The UN has published three reports on the Global Environmental Outlook. They show some successes, such as the concerted international effort to repair the ozone layer and “encouraging reductions in many countries” of urban air pollution. They also document “environmental challenges” – increasing emissions of greenhouse gases, over-exploitation of water, 1200 million people without clean drinking water and twice that number without sanitation, species being lost at an increasing rate, fisheries in decline, land degradation and a range of serious problems caused by our disruption of the natural cycles of the planet. Our activities are now affecting global systems in complex, interactive and accelerating ways.

The UN's Millennium Assessment Report found that life has got better for many people in the last fifty years, but the overall level of human production is now using the Earth's resources at an unsustainable rate. We need to move beyond the simplistic view that economic growth will solve our problems.

In societies like ours where most people have the essentials of a decent life and more, economic growth does not necessarily make people happier or more fulfilled, especially when we factor in the social and environmental costs. Yet we are constantly being urged, as Dr Clive Hamilton says, to use money we don't have to buy things we don't want to impress people we don't like. Dr Richard Eckersley recently noted that the traditional seven deadly sins – pride, greed, envy, lust, laziness and so on – have been re-packaged as the marketing imperatives of the modern world! We need a different approach, one that recognises our responsibility

to future generations. We should see the economy as a means of serving our needs within the limits of natural systems, rather than an end in itself, and focus on our quality of life. Australia ranks 23rd in the world in wealth per head, but I can't think of any country in the top 22 I would rather live in. It wouldn't make sense to destroy our quality of life to be slightly richer.

There is a growing awareness around the world that a sustainable future will involve significant change. Great advances could be made by policy reform, which could dramatically cut resource use and the environmental consequences of our lifestyle, but the political will to implement such a strategy is nowhere in sight. While politicians are more concerned about the next election than the next generation, the necessary reforms won't happen.

Market-led wealth generation is necessary. So is technological change. But these must be supplemented and guided by a values-led move to an alternative vision of our future. So we need courage and real leadership at this critical juncture. We need a technological transition based on the principles of renewable resources, efficient use and "industrial ecology" – using the waste of one industrial process as the feedstock of another. Hunger could be eliminated if we stabilised our population and improved distribution systems; more generally, the UNDP recently estimated that the entire world could have adequate food, clean water, decent shelter, basic health care and education for 5% of the global military budget!

Above all, we need a future of genuine globalisation, recognising that we share a common fate with the whole human family, rather than the false globalisation that considers only economic issues.

We have known about the problems of peak oil and climate change for decades. But Australia still has no concerted response, no overall energy policy. We need a serious target based on the climate science that says global greenhouse pollution must be cut by at least 60 per cent. That requires us to do much more. We can't afford to keep using old technologies that are changing the global climate – like coal-fired electricity. The natural energy flows like solar and wind are thousands of times greater than human energy needs. Renewable energy might cost a bit more than burning coal, but it won't impose the large and growing costs of climate change. A recent study by the Australian Conservation Foundation and other NGOs found we could get 25 per cent of our power from renewables by 2020. It might cost a typical household about a dollar a week extra – a small price to save the planet.

Instead, some irresponsible politicians are canvassing the notion that nuclear power might be the answer. Nuclear energy is too expensive, too slow and inevitably creates a dreadful legacy of radioactive waste and the potential for nuclear weapons. Just as we no longer mine asbestos, we should reject all elements of the nuclear fuel cycle and develop clean energy alternatives. We should also recognise the benefits of turning energy more efficiently into the services we want. A government report four years ago concluded we could reduce energy use by up to 30 % using existing cost-effective technology. Several European countries now have a target of cutting energy use to a quarter of the present level by efficiency improvements.

The call for a new approach is now coming from the community, from local government, from the professions and from the business sector. The Australian Business Roundtable on Climate Change called for a long-term aspirational target for cutting greenhouse emissions, like the UK goal of 60 per cent reduction by 2050 or the California goal of 80 per cent, as well as a short-term binding target, like a 20

per cent reduction by 2020.

We also need a clear financial signal to drive investment. Putting a price on carbon will encourage industry to invest in cleaner technologies and help our economy become more efficient.

There will always be some who say we can't afford to do things better. As the International Chemical Secretariat showed in its report, *Cry Wolf*, some vested interests always resist change by over-stating the costs and ignoring the benefits. When the catalytic converters that have dramatically cleaned up our urban air were proposed, some in the car industry claimed they would cost over \$1000 each with a fuel consumption penalty on top, for no obvious benefit. In fact, they cost about \$100 each, led to more sophisticated engines and improved fuel efficiency, and are estimated to have cut health care costs in the UK alone by about \$5 billion a year.

Independent modelling by Allen Consulting shows that we can afford to take strong action to reduce greenhouse pollution. More importantly, that will be much better for the economy than inaction now, leading to a need for much more drastic measures in the future.

We won't achieve a sustainable future unless we embrace new values. I like the idea that we should aim to become what has been called *Globo sapiens*, wise global citizens. Rather than the inevitably futile path of trying to dominate nature, we need to understand the limits of natural systems and live within those limits. Rather than continuing to erode the social fabric for short-term gain, we must develop social institutions that will let us work together to solve our difficult problems, help us to take the hard decisions we need for a sustainable future. Rather than seeing the level of material consumption as an end in itself, we should recognise that consumption is, at best, only a means to the end of greater satisfaction. As a wise colleague said, the trouble with the rat race is that even the winner is still a rat!

Let me give some specific goals we could achieve within 10 years. We could dramatically cut greenhouse pollution and assume a global leadership role in avoiding dangerous climate change, mainly by using and exporting renewable energy technology. We could enjoy sustainable cities with households using much less energy and water, producing much less waste. We could have the world's best national park system with substantially increased protection for our forests, rivers, wetlands, tropical savannah and oceans. We should protect the great world-class landscapes of northern Australia, including the Kimberley and Cape York, working hand-in-hand with the traditional owners. We should help our neighbours in the Asia-Pacific region to protect their magnificent forests and coral reefs. And we could stabilise our population and consumption levels by concerted policies. Let this be the year we determine to work more effectively together to produce a sustainable way of life that will be better for all future Australians

You might think this vision is utopian, but that has been said about all the important reform movements. Those who opposed slavery two hundred years ago were told that no economy could function without slave labour. The suffragettes were persecuted when they demanded the vote for women a hundred years ago. Only forty years ago, Indigenous people did not count as Australian citizens. Twenty years ago it was still utopian to dream of Berlin without the Wall, or South Africa without apartheid – or even such modest social goals as good coffee in Queensland! Many of the reforms we now take for granted were initially denounced as utopian. They happened because determined people worked for a better world.

The US economist Lester Thurow said that it is hard to tell people the party is over, especially if they haven't got to the bar yet! In those terms, I am telling you that one type of party is coming to an end: the party based on the delusions of unlimited resources and fulfilment through increasing consumption. But I am also telling you about a better party that is starting up. It is a better party because it won't run out of food and drink. It is a better party because it won't leave you with a very nasty hangover of radioactive waste or disrupted global climate or despoiled natural systems. It is a better party because it is based on quality of human experience rather than gluttonous consumption.

It is a better party because the neighbours won't be enviously peering through the windows or throwing rocks on the roof, because they will all be invited. And it's a better party because our children will be able to keep enjoying it after we are gone.

Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, reminded British voters before their 2005 election that there are always excuses for avoiding these important issues. Without a strong mandate for change, he said, we can't be surprised or disappointed when courage fails and progress is limited. I have two postcards at home that inspire me. One says, in French, If it's not you, my little one, who will begin to change the world? Who will do it? It reminds me that we should all do what we can to produce the sort of future we want, rather than waiting for others. The second says Prendre des chemins de courage – take the roads of courage. As Rowan Williams said, we all have a responsibility to help change popular views and give courage to our leaders – literally encourage them to take responsibility for our future.

This is a Federal election year. We must urge politicians and candidates for elected office to have the courage to move beyond short-term economics and base their election platforms on planning for a sustainable Australia, thinking about resource limits, about global environmental issues, about social equity: in other words, about sustainable futures. They might be surprised at the response if they involve us in serious discussion of our future – as the Swedish government did to develop with its people a plan for responding to the challenge of climate change.

It would be much easier to ignore these difficult issues, to enjoy our material comforts, the natural beauty of Australia and our wonderful lifestyle – but your presence here today means you are prepared to think about these important questions. A sustainable future is clearly a better future. It is better morally, it is better socially, it is better environmentally, and it is also better economically. But fundamentally, working for it is simply our moral duty to the countless millions of other species that we share this planet with, and the future generations for whom we hold it in trust.