

Chapter 5

Why change is essential

Six large interlinked global threats now loom as threats to our future. They are climate change, the current operation of the global neo-liberal economic model, ecosystem destruction, global inequity, peak oil and the risk of nuclear conflagration. All are global problems and all require collaborative action across the world. Constructive action in the next two decades will be critical and we cannot afford to be paralysed by fear of lesser order problems such as terrorism. Australia should be in the vanguard of action on these issues. Hopeful action begins with concerned and committed individuals and communities. We need to assure our politicians that we are ready to take the difficult decisions that are now required.

We must distinguish legitimate concern for the future from fear. Informed concern is likely to lead to constructive action while ill defined fear can lead to paralysis and denial. Since September 11th 2001 fear of terrorism has been heavily promoted by Australian politicians for reasons which are not entirely clear. The result is that fear of terrorist attack has diverted us from a range of much more serious and more likely determinants of our future.

The six leading threats to Australia's future are interlinked and shared with the rest of the world. They are:

- global climate change and CO₂ emissions
- the current operation of the neo-liberal economic model,
- ecosystem destruction
- global inequity
- peak oil
- risk of nuclear conflagration

That's a pretty daunting list of problems. Each is very serious in its own right and they are interconnected. Considered collectively, they are a marvellous justification for switching off and concentrating on the cricket. And that is mostly what Australians are doing; ignoring or denying the existence of these challenges at a time when we should be taking vigorous mitigating and adaptive action.

Denial, “spin” and diversion are the hallmarks of modern Australian politics. There are structural reasons why our politicians currently appear to lack the motivation to look beyond the next election. We must now insist that short term thinking is unacceptable and by our actions as an electorate, demand that serious attention is paid to the needs of the next generation as well as our own.

The reader might be forgiven, judging from the public statements and actions of our political leaders on both sides of the political spectrum, for wondering why terrorism is not on this list of leading challenges. In my view, it is much less serious than any of the other six. It is linked to some of them and is likely to diminish if we can manage to defuse the ongoing clash between the “have-mores” and “have-nots” in coming decades. Others may wonder why pandemics of infectious diseases is not listed. They are certainly threats that could cause massive dieback and serious chaos in coming years, but in my view they offer a less fundamental challenge to human survival than the listed six.

Continued avoidance of national and international action on these main issues is certainly increasing the risks of terrorism. A hopeful future for Australia’s children demands that we develop a new dynamism in Australian society and that we confront, rather than ignore, these real threats.

These problems will not melt away without concerted and deliberate action that radically adapts the world’s social, economic and political systems to the new realities. A number of European countries have commenced this journey. We Australians are currently lagging behind the leaders, in company with our American allies.

The difficulty for doomsayers

To be fair to our politicians, we must acknowledge the struggle that has been going on for some time between biologists and ecologists on the one hand and most economists and some statisticians on the other. Australian politicians have tended to take their lead from the economists with whom they work most closely.

In 2001, Danish statistician Bjorn Lomborg wrote a controversial but useful book, “The Skeptical Environmentalist”, in which he challenged the environmental “doomsayers” for what he argued was an overstated and unduly pessimistic assessment of the state of the world. (Lomborg)

Lomborg’s book opened with the prediction by economist Julian Simon and proceeded in this vein.

“This is my long-run forecast in brief. The material conditions of life will continue to get better for most people, in most countries, most of the time, indefinitely. Within a century or two all nations and most of humanity will be at or above today’s Western living standards. I also speculate however, that many people will continue to think and say that the conditions of life are getting worse”.

Lomborg’s scepticism of the doomsayers was enthusiastically endorsed by “The Economist” and roundly rejected by “Science” and “Scientific American” and by environmentalists around the world. Lomborg did not dispute the then known facts about climate change but questioned its magnitude and seriousness and doubted that it constituted the serious threat that is perceived by the huge majority of climate scientists. He established, and led until quite recently, the Danish Environmental Assessment Institute which developed in 2004 “The Copenhagen Consensus” on priorities for action on global challenges. Lomborg brought together a group of leading economists to debate how best to use \$50 billion to address the world’s most pressing problems. The conclusion by the economists was that such funds should be spent, not on addressing climate change but on HIV, malaria, removal of trade barriers and the provision of micronutrients to manage malnutrition in developing countries. Predictably, the group did not question the prevalent economic paradigm. Recently, the global recognition of the seriousness of climate change has made Lomborg’s assessment of the climate risk no longer politically or scientifically tenable.

In his 2002 book “The future of life”, Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson (Wilson) contrasted the views of the doomsayers and the sceptics as being fixed on different points in the space-time scale. He said that they differ in the facts they take into account in forecasting the state of the world, how far they look into the future and whether they take into account the complexity of the relationship between human and non-human life. Biologists and ecologists think in terms of interconnected and interdependent systems while many economists think of linear systems and have little understanding of the economy of nature.

Richard Eckersley has characterised the debate as a struggle between “systemic pessimists” and “linear optimists”. (Eckersley) Linear optimists tend to base their views on linear extrapolation from what has gone before, whereas systemic pessimists, (I prefer to call them realists) base their thinking on the concepts of resilience, thresholds and the tendency for complex interacting systems, when pushed beyond a certain limit, to flip into chaos or profoundly different and unpredictable new states (Capra, Davies).

Many of the scientists who have been trying to alert the global community to the warning signs of an overstressed planet for several decades, are becoming desperate that their warnings will be ignored until it is too late. The revered scientist who formulated the Gaia Hypothesis, James Lovelock, now in his eighties, has in early 2006, published a book outlining his reason for believing that it may be already too late to halt what he describes as “Gaia’s revenge,” which he thinks will make much of our planet unfit for human habitation in the not too distant future. (Lovelock) Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis has always been controversial and he could well be wrong about where the balance is located at the moment. But we cannot afford to ignore the man who played a significant role in rescuing us from destruction of the ozone layer through CFC refrigerant use. Whether he is correct in his assertion that we are already beyond the point of no return or not, there can be little doubt that climate change is the most pressing and urgent problem that we must now confront and we have absolutely nothing to lose by setting out to prove Lovelock wrong.

Climate change and CO₂

Our planet is warming and the central concern is the contributory role that human activity is playing in elevating greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere as a consequence of our relentless demand for fossil fuelled energy.

Already the arctic ice cap, most glaciers and the Siberian permafrost are melting at alarming rates leading to changes in the activity of the North Atlantic Gulf stream and compounding the release of CO₂ with massive release of methane, another greenhouse gas.

The pre-industrial level of CO₂ in the atmosphere was 280 parts per million(ppm). Currently it is nearly 380 ppm and rising at about 2 ppm a year. In ten years it will be higher than it has been in at least the past 400,000 years. Without concerted global action there is little prospect of the level reaching a plateau. Once released into the atmosphere CO₂ persists for up to 100 years. Predicting the precise long term consequences of the greenhouse problem is very difficult but all are serious. They range from continuing massive loss of biodiversity, to a 6-7 metre rise in sea level which would wipe out vast human populations, to a flip to ice age conditions for the northern hemisphere.

As the highest per capita CO₂ emitter in the world, and as a country whose economy is deeply dependent on the export of coal and on energy derived from coal, Australia has a particular responsibility to rapidly lower its CO₂ emissions.

Yet the Australian government, while recognizing the global problem, has not committed to a realistic national strategy to bring our emissions into line with

what will be required globally to avert catastrophe. Our national strategy is focused almost exclusively on hope for a technology to reduce the atmospheric CO₂ consequences of generating electricity from coal by storing CO₂ underground through the technique of geo-sequestration. Climate scientists tell us that to avoid catastrophe we must reduce global CO₂ emissions by at least 60% in the next four decades and even the most optimistic assessment of geo-sequestration cannot justify our current policy stance.

The development of mandatory caps on national emissions and a market in CO₂ credits is a minimum strategy whether or not we sign the Kyoto protocol which is the first of many internationally collaborative steps needed to bring global CO₂ emissions to acceptable levels

Profound cuts in greenhouse gas emission are feasible and there are many ways to achieve them. All will have some cost for Australian society. This will be a difficult task but it is fully achievable if we have a mind to do it. To meet essential targets will require a significant change in the current Australian approach to environmental stewardship.

The first step must be for the electorate to understand the problem, to become activated, and to convey to our parliamentarians that this issue is at the top of our agenda and that we are ready to pay the price for vigorous remedial action. The potential consequences for our children if we do not act quickly and decisively, which are carefully documented in “The weather makers” by Tim Flannery (Flannery) are enough to make us all pause and think.

The task for SEE-Change Centres on climate change should be to engage Australians in a consideration of the many options that remain open to us and to promote discussion and debate on the issue right across the community.

The current operation of the neo-liberal economic model

In the modern nation state, economics reigns supreme as the determinant of government policy on issues ranging from taxation to government spending, overseas trade, competition, the relative roles of public and private sectors, employment, wages and working conditions, banking policies, superannuation and development of community infrastructure. The human economy has generally taken the economy of nature as a given without understanding it or acknowledging it. (This contrast between the human economy and nature’s economy is dealt with in more detail in Chapter 6) A determined effort is now being made by some economists to build ecological considerations into the human economic models that determine government policies. But for now, the human economy virtually ignores nature’s economy and is in many ways, hostile to it.

In the last 20 years, a fashion has swept through the discipline of economics that is variously labelled economic rationalism, structural reform, neoclassical economics, free market-ism and neo-liberal economics. The fashion has been adopted worldwide, often in response to coercive pressure from the “Washington Consensus” which includes the United States Government, the International Monetary Fund, The World Bank and The World Trade Organization.

Australia was a relatively early joiner but the fashion had developed under Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the United States in the late 1970s. This economic reform agenda grew originally from the ideas of Austrian, Frederick Hayek and American Milton Friedman. It was a response to the “stagflation” of the 70s and a reaction against the Keynesian economic paradigm which had held sway for several decades.

The key elements of the “Washington Consensus” economic package are de-regulation of the market, privatization, labour market reform, user pays, reduced government spending, intensified competition, and tax and welfare reform which usually means a lessening of the “tax burden” and a tightening of welfare support to those in the lower income bracket of society.

Both of Australia’s major political parties have broadly accepted the Washington Consensus. So Australians have had no real choice in the way our economy has been managed. With his comfortable re-election in 2004, John Howard, has moved further to deregulate the labour market and change the welfare system. These latter moves have offended the Australian Labor Party which nevertheless still seems wedded to the main elements of the Washington Consensus and to the belief that economic growth through consumer spending is the answer to community wellbeing.

That simplistic view of the world is firmly challenged by Clive Hamilton (Hamilton) and his colleagues at the Australia Institute. In “Growth Fetish”, Hamilton argues that, far from being the answer to our problems, a preoccupation with economic growth and the marketing society lie at the heart of many of Australia’s social ills. He believes they are corrupting our social priorities and political structures and are creating a profound sense of alienation in some groups. In their more recent book “Affluenza”, Hamilton and his colleague Richard Denniss (Hamilton) claim that Australian society is, as a result of current economic policy, addicted to over-consumption. They point out that rates of stress, depression and obesity are rising, as Australians wrestle with the emptiness and endless disappointments of the consumer life.

Geoff Davies, a Canberra geo-physicist, recently published a book entitled “Economia” (Davies) which provides a birds eye look at the discipline of economics in human society. Davies insists that economic systems are the creation of humans for the benefit of humans and that neoclassical economic theory that has dominated the organisation of the world in the past two decades is built on foundations and assumptions that are demonstrably false. He goes further and shows why this theory is incapable of solving the problems of the world’s poor and is actively promoting degradation of the environment on which the global population depends for its survival.

Is it possible that there is already more than enough wealth in the world to feed, clothe, educate, house and provide a satisfying life for all of the 6.5 billion people on the planet as well as the extra two or three billion that we are expecting in coming decades? Almost certainly there is, argues Davies, and the reason we are not doing it is that the current economic model around which the world is now organised, is deeply flawed. So, why has the theory survived and why wasn’t it ditched years ago? Primarily, Davies believes, because it serves the interests of the already rich and powerful and because it lacks essential feedback mechanisms.

Davies writes *“I find the present condition of humanity to be deeply shocking. Our vaunted economic systems don’t come even close to providing for the most basic needs of most of humanity. Their record is not one of mediocrity but of abject failure. They create human misery on a vast scale and threaten humanity with decimation or extinction either through the propensity of our present societies for violence or through our assaults on our own life-support system.”*

In his 2005 book “The Collapse of Globalism and the Reinvention of the World” (Saul) Canadian intellectual John Ralston Saul concludes that the current economic paradigm has passed its useful life. Global free markets are not the panacea that their advocates hoped. Saul believes that globalism has already effectively collapsed and left us with a vacuum and that the future depends on what he describes as “positive nationalism”. He thinks that the challenge ahead is to create a new era which is citizen based and focused on the national common good and on binding international treaties in a range of areas .

Not only is the current economic model failing to meet the human needs for which it was theoretically designed but, through its heavy dependence upon consumption of non-renewable resources, it is promoting the destruction of nature’s economy on which we all depend for our survival.

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While recognizing the benefits which de-restricted markets, enhanced competition, downsized bureaucracy and reduced taxation have delivered for many sectors of society, these benefits are now being extracted at unacceptable cost. The costs are not restricted to the environment. Both in rich and poor countries, the unconstrained free-market has widened the gap between rich and poor, distorted civil society, run down societal infrastructure and fostered corruption at the top and exploitation of those at the bottom of the economic heap.

The human economy is the creation of humans and it is modifiable. Economic theory is fallible and as in all human endeavours, it is constantly in flux. A slavish commitment to undifferentiated economic growth has now become a serious national liability. We now need to temper our commitment to growth with a new understanding about the interaction of the human economy with nature's economy and by a refocussing of the purpose of economics. New thinking is occurring in the economics faculties around the world and leading economic theorists are beginning to write about the economics of happiness and wellbeing (Layard).

Throughout social and scientific history, dominant paradigms have changed when they no longer served the purpose for which they were developed. Growing numbers of Australians are becoming disillusioned with the operation of the current paradigm and the religion of consumption which is driven by the unconstrained advertising of consumer goods.

Keynesian economics developed in response to world crisis and depression. The welfare state produced its own excesses of regulation and "nanny-statism". As a result of the stagflation of the seventies, neo-liberal economics evolved, has served humanity, and has nearly run its course. Inevitably a new economic model will evolve to better serve the needs of our now globalised world and we should be actively promoting its evolution.

There is a strong temptation to say that Economics is for the experts and that non-experts like me are hardly in a position to question the technical economic advice which experts are providing to our governments. But the economic model is now a significant part of the constellation of problems which could deny a future to our kids. It is both fallible and modifiable. As responsible electors, we must ask the difficult questions which it is unable to answer.

This is our economy and we must be its masters not its servants. It is closely interlinked to the other five issues being discussed in this chapter and we need to do what we can to modify it in ways that will promote a more just, sustainable and equitable world. That means we need to understand the role

that it plays in our lives and actively participate in redirecting it. And we need both to speak out and act with our parliamentarians to hasten the advent of its successor, which should address the linked issues of global equity, ecological balance, intergenerational equity (sustainability) and human wellbeing.

SEE-Change Centres could play a valuable role by encouraging open community discussion about the assumptions that are built into the economic systems that hold so much sway over our lives. Intelligent Australians have a right and a responsibility to challenge these assumptions and to discuss with their political representatives, the kinds of adaptation that will be needed to foster sustainability and equity.

Ecosystem restoration

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (Millennium Assessment) referred to in Chapter 1 and numerous recent scientific papers, point to a massive wave of species extinction which will continue unless human attitudes and actions change very quickly. The Millennium Assessment emphasises that ecosystem services must be recognized urgently as both precious and limited. Ecosystem services are the natural assets such as soil, plants, animals, air and water that are essential for us to obtain clean water and sustenance, to maintain a liveable climate and atmosphere, to meet our cultural needs and to provide options for the future through the maintenance of biodiversity.

Ecologists argue that loss of biodiversity is already seriously hampering our ability to feed, clothe and house the 6.5 billion people who now populate the planet. Yet, both in Australia and around the world, the plunder of natural ecosystems and destruction of nature's economy by our human economy continues at an alarming rate.

Wackernagel and his colleagues (Wackernagel) define the "ecological footprint" as the area of biologically productive land that is required by each human to provide resources and absorb wastes, given prevalent lifestyle and technology. It is currently estimated that with currently available biologically active land and the current world population, there is about 1.7 ha of land available for each human alive on the planet to use for these purposes on a sustainable basis. But globally, we are currently using on average 2.3 ha of land per capita which means that the planet is already in ecological deficit. That is why Earth is showing signs of decompensation. Worse than that, Australians currently use, between 7 and 9 ha of ecological services per person.

Add to that the fact that we expect another 2–3 billion people on the planet before population growth is likely to stabilize, and it is evident that our ecological footprint comes at the cost of ecosystem services that are essential to

people in poor countries. If all the people currently on the planet used ecosystem services at the current Australian rate, there would need to be three or four times our planet's worth of biologically productive land. And yet we are continuing to destroy our biologically productive land!

Most Australians now live in the cities. A declining national economic dependence on agriculture has left an ageing remnant population in rural Australia as young people, especially women, move to the cities in search of economic security. Small family farms are being aggregated into large agri-businesses. Those remaining on small farms seek, often desperately, to maintain a viable livelihood from a productive land base that is shrinking.

We still look to rural communities for management of our land and natural resources. Complicating any view we have of the future, are potential surprises that could rapidly exacerbate the already serious health of Australia's rural hinterland. Climate change will continue to produce such surprises.

To reduce Australia's footprint, we need to broaden national understanding of the implications of our current way of life. We will only do that when we appropriately value the vital services which the ecosystem provides. Currently they are barely factored into the price of production and we are destroying them at a terrifying rate. These ecosystem services are now more important to national survival than wool, wheat or beef markets.

Just as we have begun to recognize the importance of valuing and trading water, we must now develop proper trading systems in carbon, water filtration, salinity remediation and biodiversity credits. These, along with timber plantations and ecotourism, could become the new growth industries to support Australia's declining rural infrastructure.

Preservation of our ecological niche must replace undifferentiated economic growth as a very high national priority. Landholders could derive a significant part of their future income from salinity remediation, water filtration and biodiversity credits.

In their 2004 book "Going Native", Michael Archer, (Archer) and his colleague Bob Beale have painted a vision for Australia that depends much more upon the species of flora and fauna that have adapted to our landscape over millions of years. They suggest that we should explore the vast commercial potential of native trees and grains and the health and environmental benefits of harvesting kangaroos. They argue that we need to adapt to our unique landscape rather than to keep trying and failing to force it to adapt to us.

Archer's team at the University of NSW is developing proposals for pilot interventions that will combine conservation with conventional agriculture through management and harvesting of native flora and fauna. They have also been exploring new partnerships with groups of landholders, including indigenous people, and possibilities for new niche food markets based on Australia's native fruits and vegetables.

The UNSW group is also developing ideas about "Green-leasing" which seeks to enlarge the area of land managed for multiple objectives in strategic locations. Under these arrangements, landholders could sublease sections of their land to be managed by consortia that include urban investors. The Greenlease consortium would see its role as optimizing the use of that land for ecosystem services. Green-leasing would bring city investment to the country, building bridges across the rural-urban divide. Green leased properties could provide employment for some of the rural unemployed and could lead to significant expansion of land that is set aside to provide a high level of biodiversity and ecosystem services to the nation.

Large pockets of land in Australia are not profitable or are, at best, marginally profitable. So what should we do with this land? In the United States, the federal government pays farmers not to farm some of their land and to devote it to other things such as ecosystem services, wetlands, wildlife refuges and tree plantation. In the US Conservation Reserve Program, landowners can receive annual payments to establish long-term natural resource conserving covers on eligible farmland. Participants enrol for periods of from 10 to 15 years. We need to consider schemes like this.

There is plenty we can do to restore ecosystem services in Australia if we have the will to do it. Restoration will come at a cost. And we will not be willing to pay this cost until we change our value frame, recognizing first that we are temporary stewards of a priceless heritage that we must pass on to our children and secondly that we must adjust the human economy to make it compatible with nature's economy.

SEE-Change Centres can play a vital role in this debate. People in the cities need to understand the concepts surrounding our ecological footprint and ways in which it can be reduced. Groups from SEE-Change Centres should be peppering our political representatives with questions and encouragement to take the essential decisions about the valuation of ecosystem services.

We must move the national perception about land towards one which properly values the natural ecosystems on which the world's future will ultimately depend. Once community perceptions and values change, the essential policy changes will quickly follow.

Inequity

The disparities between rich and poor are increasing locally and globally. Inequity is contributing to the climate of hopelessness and despair in large parts of the world that breeds hate and desperate acts of terrorism. The inequities between the “have mores” and the “have nots”, beamed to us daily in our living rooms are obscene.

Ethicist Peter Singer and Canberra researcher Tom Gregg, in 2004, published a stinging commentary on Australia’s recent record as a global citizen. In “How Ethical is Australia?” they forcefully reject the notion that it is in our national interest to look after our own needs and not play a responsible role as a highly privileged member of the global village. (Singer).

In September 2000 there was an optimistic commitment by heads of 148 nations (including Australia) to eight “Millennium Development Goals” (MDG’s). The goals and their accompanying targets committed the world community to reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than \$1 per day by 2015 and to halve global hunger by that time. (Currently more than 1 billion people belong in these two categories). The world’s leaders also agreed that by 2015 the world would achieve universal primary education; would eliminate gender disparity; would reduce by two-thirds the mortality rate among children under five; would reduce by three-quarters, the maternal mortality rate; would halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS; would halt and reverse the spread of malaria and other diseases; would integrate principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes; would reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation and would develop an open trading and financial system that is rule-based, predictable and non-discriminatory. (Millennium Development Goals)

But the optimism of September 2000 has evaporated and been overtaken by a “war on terror”, a pre-emptive and divisive war in Iraq and growing international concern about climate change. The mood has changed and Australia’s response to this changing world has been largely determined by our unwavering and apparently uncritical commitment to the American alliance. (Langmore) The fortresses are up and we are digging in, not to build a better world but to concentrate on building a better Australia in a world of rapidly growing unhappiness and despair.

Adequate progress in meeting the MDG’s is not occurring because rich countries like ours are not making the necessary financial resources available. It is estimated that the rich countries of the world need to increase their financial

commitment to the MDG's from \$60 billion per year to \$120 billion per year. Success is believed to be feasible but not without a change of political will on the part of countries like Australia. An international conference on financing for development in March 2002 in Monterrey Mexico urged developed countries that have not yet done so to lift their giving to 0.7 percent of gross national product as official development assistance (ODA) to developing countries. Australia currently commits about 0.26 percent of its gross national product to ODA and ties much of it to expenditure on Australian goods and services which the experts agree is not the way to meet the MDG's. The Australian government has recently announced initiatives that will expand this figure perhaps to 0.33% over the next five years, but that is not enough for a country as rich as we are. The United States commits even less at 0.14 percent. Meanwhile a number of European countries are already well above the 0.7% target, 4 of them at 1.0% or more and Australia's performance as a donor is declining significantly by comparison with its OECD counterparts

The question we must all now ask is: "What is the ethical acceptability of pursuing our own security and prosperity regardless of the interests of the rest of the world's inhabitants?" "The core commitment of living ethically for individuals", say Singer and Gregg, "is that people should put themselves as individuals in the position of others affected by their actions and do to others as we would have them do to us". And they ask "Is it defensible for nations to be selfish to a degree that would be wrong if practised by an individual?"

Leaving ethics and morality aside, there are also very pragmatic reasons of national self interest and international security for us to work collaboratively with our neighbours to build a better world and to lessen the gap between the haves and the have nots. Understanding the way best to work on this project of survival with our fellow travellers on an increasingly damaged "spaceship earth" is a task that our nation has barely commenced. The government's own advisory committees have warned it that aid which is tied to our own self interest is in danger of not meeting the purpose of poverty reduction through sustainable development in the countries to which the aid is directed.

We need a larger view of the national interest than our current leaders from both sides of politics are articulating. We now belong to an inter-connected world. A secure and prosperous Australia is only likely if it is part of a secure and prosperous world.

Australia's recent policy towards asylum-seeking refugees is further evidence of our growing distance from world reality and the needs of the future. Whereas Armenia in 2000 took in 74.1 refugees per thousand inhabitants, Sweden 17.8, Denmark 13.3, Norway 10.7 Switzerland 8 and Canada 4.1, Australia took in

three per thousand inhabitants and was ranked 39th amongst the top 40 recipients of refugees. (Singer)

Shifting the Australian value frame from one of national self interest to one of solidarity with humans everywhere must be our target. The MDG's have recently been reviewed and agreed to be realistic and achievable. Our politicians need to hear from us that we want them to back them enthusiastically and with expanded resources.

A change in our national stance on inequity will not come cheaply. It will require substantial adjustments to the way we currently think about Australia and its borders. We must look beyond the simplistic view that we can build a fortress around our current good fortune and develop a more balanced understanding of what will enable our children to live in harmony with the other 8 or 9 billion people with whom they will have to share the planet.

Changing the national mindset on this topic could begin in the SEE-Change Movement. Australians are logical and naturally compassionate people who understand the concept of a "fair go". They need to become engaged in a shared understanding of both the imperative and the complexity of what global solidarity will involve.

Also, focussing on our home territory SEE-Change Centres should consider ways of developing genuine solidarity with our own grossly disadvantaged indigenous Australians and with those Australians who are yet to be born.

Peak Oil

The anticipated peaking of world oil production represents a global challenge of immense proportions. Without forward planning for this apparently imminent event, the social, economic and political costs will be enormous. A February 2005 report prepared by Robert Hirsch and a group of economist colleagues for the United States Department of the Environment makes sobering reading. (Hirsch)

Nobody knows with confidence when the peak of oil production will be reached. Most authorities believe it will be within 20 years. And many believe it will be much sooner. When it occurs and when it becomes clear that the suppliers can no longer increase their supplies to meet the ever-expanding world demand, the economic impact on the world will be profound.

Hirsch set out to examine the range of mitigation activities which would be required to avoid chaos and economic disaster in a world that is utterly dependent upon oil not only as transportation fuel but as feedstock in a wide range of industries.

He concluded that if mitigation is aggressively commenced 20 years before the peak occurs, the impact on global society might be kept within reasonable limits. If we wait until oil peaks before embarking on a massive cooperative global effort to put mitigation strategies in place, the impact on society is likely to be disastrous.

That means that mitigation should be commencing now. What does mitigation involve? While greater end-use efficiency is achievable and essential, it will be neither sufficient nor timely enough to solve the problem by us all driving Prius cars or getting rid of our diesel 4WD vehicles. Production of large amounts of substitute liquid fuels will be essential to maintain even heavily modified western economies.

A number of commercial or near commercial substitute fuel production technologies are currently available for deployment, so the production of vast amounts of substitute liquid fuels is feasible with existing technology. But the scale of the substitution, which will include, bio-fuels, gas and hydrogen fuel cells, is huge.

This problem also intersects with the CO₂ emission problem. In Australia, we need actively to plan our preferred mitigation strategies. Government leadership is important but that leadership must be informed by an educated electorate which understands the seriousness of the problem and the relative costs and benefits various strategic approaches to the declining availability of oil.

This is vital business for all Australians and we need to signal to our politicians that we are ready to share the problem with them. For most Australians now, the car is a way of life. SEE-Change Centres could play a valuable role in helping individuals, communities and governments to make essential adjustments in car use, public transport efficiency and fuel substitution.

Nuclear Peace

The expanding need for “clean energy” has reactivated the global debate about the safety and desirability of increasing world dependency on nuclear fission as a source of growing energy needs. Unsurprisingly, this debate is deeply influenced by the concern that nuclear technology when widely dispersed is in danger of being used to make nuclear weapons. And the more widely dispersed nuclear weapons are, the greater the likelihood that they will be used.

In Australia the nuclear debate is coloured by the fact that we have some of the world's largest supplies of uranium and also that our vast uninhabited land areas are seen by some as a potentially safe disposal area for high-grade nuclear waste.

The risk of a nuclear winter, brought about by nuclear war which appeared to diminish after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, is back with us, heightened by the poverty gap, religious clashes, a belligerent and hypocritical United States, which continues to develop its own nuclear weapons arsenal, a deeply troubled and tense Middle East and sabre rattling on the Korean Peninsula.

What can a minor power like Australia do constructively about this problem? The answer is "quite a lot". We are one of the major global suppliers of uranium ore. In 1995 Australia established the Canberra Commission which produced the most comprehensive and coherent argument yet for the elimination of nuclear weapons. The commission's report elevated the elimination debate from the corridors of think tanks and non-government organizations to the highest level of international dialogue. This promising initiative should be reactivated.

Many believe (Duncan, Langmore) that we can play a valuable role in global policymaking of this kind if only we choose to do so. This is a very complex problem which requires an activated electorate to encourage our political leaders to move back to the high ground of international dialogue. We have, as a nation in the past, played a key role in the development and early activities of the United Nations. Recently, we have allowed the American alliance to dominate our international policy stance.

Furthermore, the debate in Australia on nuclear energy requires a broadly educated electorate that can unmask vested interests which will want to insist on simplistic solutions to our energy future. Because the spectre of a nuclear conflagration is back, Australians need to reengage in debate about the place of nuclear fission in our children's future.

This issue needs to be discussed over the dinner table and back fence and SEE-Change Centres could catalyse informed discussions about the options that will face us. We should not leave it to the vested interests and their lobbyists. Our parliamentarians need to hear from their communities that they are engaged on this topic and want to know that their representatives are also.

Hope not fear

The six issues discussed in this chapter are serious problems which demand collaborative global action. All require urgent policy debate and action at both the national and international levels. Positive action to change them will also change our lives, and as members of a democratic society, we need to be actively engaged in helping our government to play its part in the global collaborative response.

Fear is a powerful political weapon and it has been used to great effect by leaders of both political parties in the recent past. Most of us are uncomfortable with change and the unknown. And when fear is introduced into that equation there is a tendency for us to shut down and switch off, subconsciously hoping that by ignoring the problem it will go away or that someone else will deal with it.

The problems discussed here will not go away. They are our problems and they are a cause for concern and concerted action, not a cause for fear. A constructive and collaborative response could avoid problems for our children. The worst outcome would be for us to be paralysed by fear.

As individual citizens of a tiny nation each of us can play a role in ensuring that Australia embarks on a process of renewal and refurbishment and is up with the leaders on a path of hope.