

# Chapter 8

## Finding the pathway

*Australians alone cannot save the planet for human habitation but we can play a significant role in working with other nations to do so. The culture shift which will be an essential part of the solution has commenced. It will not be the fault of our leaders if our children do not inherit a viable planet. It will be collectively ours. We need now to clear away the undergrowth and chart a new national pathway to hope. And we need to pave the pathway to sustainability and equity with broad electoral understanding and commitment, so that our politicians will follow it.*

### **Another world is possible.**

In a recent book entitled “Another world is possible.... If”, Susan George argues that unless humanity can summon the collective will to change direction very quickly, we face collapse this century of global civilization as we know it. Catastrophe will in George’s view, be the outcome for humanity if neo-liberal globalisation continues unchecked. She believes that the hope of the world lies with a resurgent and independent Europe and a mass movement of world citizenry. Her book is a manual for a non violent revolution, which she argues, can succeed.

George thinks that we, the people, are now in a strong position to insist on a re-casting of globalisation and economic growth to meet the needs of all global citizens and not just those of the currently rich, greedy and powerful elites who currently dominate all of the economic global policy making institutions. She argues that for perhaps the first time in history, the world can afford to provide access to a decent life for every person on the planet — enough food, clean water, adequate housing, basic education, health care and public services as set out in the Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. The revolution, she believes, must begin with a new worldwide program of taxation and redistribution. Such a program would need to be administered so that citizens would actively share in the responsibility for choosing priorities and overseeing programs for each country. Financial redistribution alone won’t do the job, but without it, hundreds of millions are doomed to the merest survival and worse.

The trouble with economic globalisation in its current form is that it depends upon manipulated consumerism and the wanton destruction of non renewable resources, paying zero, or near zero price for the damage it inflicts on the world's "commons". Further, it entrenches and rewards the already rich and is not seriously committed to sharing the world's limited resources with those at the bottom of the global heap. It is long on "the economy" and short on distributed human welfare. While a rising tide of affluence may, to some extent, "lift all boats", the way the system works at present, it is increasing the rich/poor divide and not doing enough to assist really poor countries to escape the poverty trap.

The comfortable re-election in late 2004 of Australian and American governments which are firmly committed to the current approach to managing the world is a challenge to those of us who believe that we must, as a global society begin to head off on new paths. The growing pace of climate change and destruction of ecosystems mean that we do not have much time to craft a viable future for the next generation.

Recently, I participated in a stimulating roundtable with a multidisciplinary group of 20 Australians including very distinguished ecologists, systems scientists, futurists, policy analysts and social scientists. The topic was "Pathways past the precipice; Turning points and tipping points en route to a sustainable future". The questions discussed were "How close are we to civilization collapse, what precipices does Australia face as a nation, how close are we to them and what can we do to avoid falling over them? The most important outcome was that the entire group agreed that our present path is leading us directly to either a precipice or, at the very least, a dangerously steep cliff. The group could not say how long before we reach the edge or falling off point, because of the complexity of interacting systems and the resilience that living systems have before becoming chaotic. There was unanimity however that there are much safer pathways and that we know enough to identify them.

While many Australians are worried about the path we are currently taking, many, I suspect, are also unaware how perilous it is or that there are alternative paths. If they had this necessary information, many would demand of their elected representatives that we reset the compass and take the safer path. At present neither of our major political parties has reset its policies to a safer path. The good news is that both parties watch the polls to see which paths Australians want to take. So we must tell them!

There are huge vested interests and passionate believers in the view that our current path is the only logical one. These people currently have control of government, the instruments of economic activity, much of the media and many of our institutions. They are not seeking a change of direction.

On the brighter side, there are large numbers of individuals and groups already discussing these issues and making changes in their lives that are based on the recognition of a need to discover a more sustainable path. We need a vehicle through which these people can support each other and others can join in the process of discovery, consideration and action.

Those groups in Australian society who are already embedded in the task of running things are not as free to view these matters as dispassionately as those of us who no longer depend on it for our livelihood and who have the luxury of looking back over the decades. That is why the push to radically reassess Australian values could come first from the growing group of Australians who are no longer paying mortgages, and making their way in the system. When Australia's grandparents are convinced that change is essential, they and their logical partners, the younger generation, will need to develop and navigate the new pathways.

### **The shift has commenced**

In their book "Affluenza", Australians Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss describe "downshifters" as people who have made a conscious decision to accept a lower income and a lower level of consumption in order to pursue other life goals. They are motivated by a desire for more balance in their lives, more personal fulfilment and more time with their families. I have already alluded to the 2002 a nationwide survey which showed that 23% of adults belong to this category. But it bears repeating. It highlights the fact that many Australians are already taking a new path and adopting values which conflict with convention. Why wouldn't they? There is a great deal more to living than driving expensive cars and owning big houses. And as I have said several times in this book already, the evidence shows that economic growth per se does not enhance communal life satisfaction.

Australia's strong economic growth in recent years has come at substantial cost. Social and community infrastructure have been neglected. Family and community life have been sacrificed on the altar of economic growth. Educational infrastructure has been degraded and the economic model which we serve, while it has delivered us considerable wealth is also playing a significant role in facilitating environmental destruction. Downshifters are leading the way in a re-evaluation of the important things of life.

## **Australians could be at the leading edge of the global value change**

Although I have been discussing the situation in Australia, most of the issues are global. That is particularly true of our economic system. Australians cannot single-handedly change the shape or direction of globalization. Nor can our efforts alone make a significant impact on greenhouse gases and climate change. We are part of a thoroughly interdependent global society of 6.5 billion people and there are only 20 million of us. But even with one of the lowest population densities in the world, our environment is being significantly degraded by human activity and we lead the world in our per capita emission of greenhouse gases. We must play our part in restoring sustainability to the large part of the planet for which we have a stewardship role.

Australians are deeply privileged socially, historically, economically and culturally. Despite our small population we excel in sport, science, the arts and the humanities. And in the past, Australians played a key leadership role in the development of the United Nations.

In an unhealthy partnership with our American allies, Australia has become something of an international pariah and deservedly so. In the new global order we are now seen by many in the Third World as wanting to insulate ourselves by building a fortress around our own good fortune. Naturally, Australians want to preserve what they have and it is understandable that as an island state we have been anxious at the possibility of losing the gains we have made as a nation.

But in the interests of the next generation, we must constructively address the linked challenges of 6.5 billion people, a warming planet, environmental destruction and a dysfunctional economic system. These are not someone else's problem; they are ours. Once Australians understand that and turn our minds to it, we can be at the leading edge of transforming the world for our descendents. And we have the reassurance of knowing that values changes are taking place everywhere as more and more people confront the new realities.

If you partly or fully agree with my diagnosis, it is probable that you are asking "So what? What can I do about it and how do I begin to change things?"

Build on your strengths. Some of us are good at organizing, others at writing, talking, playing sport, music, parenting or grand-parenting. Many of us belong to sporting clubs, churches, parent groups, Rotary, Lions, Probus, University of the Third Age and so on.

We need to be talking within our peer groups not only about the bad news but also the hopeful possibilities for the future. The trouble is that the media emphasise the bad news with little mention of the possibility for change. We need to examine the values that are uppermost in society and ask whether they are outdated. If we care about a future for our kids, we need to ask whether the values that we pass on to them are compatible with a viable human world. And we need to ask whether there are ways in which we can involve our friends in futures thinking.

If you feel really adventurous, you could join with a few friends to develop plans for a SEE-Change Centre in your community.

### **Involve your children and grandchildren, your parents and your grandparents**

If you are a grandparent or a parent, talk to your children and grandchildren in an appropriate way about these issues. If you are a child or a grandchild involve your parents and grandparents in the issues and ideas discussed here. This is something which affects us all.

Some of us are freer than others to take action. The forces joined to maintain the status quo are formidable. We can expect that they will fight a very strong and effective rear guard action. Expect to be laughed out of court, described as a utopian, unrealistic, a bleeding heart and much worse. But stay with the evidence. The evidence is accumulating that we are at a crossroads which could lead us either to a new and hopeful future or over ugly precipices. We can all help to steer our society along the hopeful path.

The current commitment to the neo-liberal economic view of the world is enormous. It permeates all levels of Australian society and many still believe that we can spend and consume our way out of trouble. It is that view of the world to which we are constantly exposed through television advertising, controlled media reporting, and the declarations of our political leaders on both sides of politics.

It will be easier for those who are no longer in the workforce and who do not depend on maintenance of the status quo for their livelihood to take action first. The action that is most important is a transformation in the five value domains which are framing our current Australian view of the world. When the values frame changes, we will see problems in an entirely different light and will structure our institutions and the economy in a more appropriate way.

It will be over to the grandchild generation to build the next version of Australian society. I have no doubt of their ability to do better than we have done in making it fairer, better integrated with the rest of the world and more in harmony with our environment. The alternative is not a pretty one

**Keep your local parliamentarians informed**

I have argued that Australian democracy is under threat. Both of our major political parties have been captured by neo-liberalism and have lost their way. Politics is the art of the possible and politicians have a tough job in the modern world. Visionary leaders arise rarely and when they do they are often unappreciated and ultimately suppressed.

I firmly believe in the essential goodness of all humans. We need to find mechanisms for promoting that goodness rather than promoting a climate of selfishness, fear and suspicion. Politicians on both sides of politics need to hear from us that we are now alert and alarmed at the directions they are taking us and that we insist on going in positive new directions.

Once we are organized and vocal, they will hear the message.