

# Confronting the Future: Australia and the World: the Next Hundred Years

Charles Birch (Melbourne, Penguin, 1976, Revised 1993)

## 1. Possible World (Overview)

1. Beyond the limits
2. The future now
3. Tunnel of darkness – the ecologically unsustainable society
4. Quality of life – up or down?
5. The economy in nature
6. Light at the end of the tunnel – the ecologically sustainable society
7. The politics of change
8. Who will begin the transition?

## 2. Living in a Lifeboat (Ethics and development)

1. Lifeboat ethics
2. One lifeboat only
3. Changing the world
4. Australia's role in global development
5. What should we do?
  1. *Most important ednl task is to bring a global awareness of the interdependence of all countries.*
  2. *Reduce econ growth in consumer goods in rich countries and increase it in poor.*
  3. *Transfer of labour-intensive inds from rich to poor.*
  4. *Rationalisation of resources, e.g. cartels with developing countries for minerals.*
  5. *Organic global growth; exporting commodities to where need is greatest.*
  6. *Aid abroad to remove poverty, support cooperatives etc, encourage self-reliance.*
  7. *Aid for indigenous tech in Pacific region.*

## 3. Nuisance or Nemesis? (Environment #1)

1. The problem
2. Assaults on life-support systems
3. Three Australian scenarios
4. The atmosphere
5. Wallowing in waste
6. Is pollution control the answer?
7. The ultimate nemesis
8. Ecological ethics
9. Epilogue
10. What should we do?
  1. *Treat causes of environ deterioration, not just symptoms. Growth is no longer progress for developed world. It is retrogress.*
  2. *The only safe objective is to reduce the rate of environ deterioration to zero.*
  3. *Plan the transition from oil power to non-polluting energy sources without recourse to nuclear power until proved safe.*
  4. *Discontinue persistent insecticides for integrated management/control.*
  5. *To maintain water quality: national policy on use of rivers and oceans; national program for sewerage all areas; alts to present methods for disposal of industrial water; curbing of growth of manufacturing inds; and rationalisation of use of water*

*in Murray-Darling basin.*

6. *Atmosphere: ban further use of CFCs; begin transition from coal and petrol to natural gas and then solar; improve public transport using light rail instead of cars; reduce city parking; more stringent controls on car exhausts.*
7. *All learn some ecology, develop a new rapport with other living organisms, not as servants but as having own intrinsic value.*

#### **4. Avalanche (Population)**

1. World population
2. The carrying capacity of the earth
3. The demographic transition
4. Population momentum
5. Australia at the crossroads
6. What should we do?
  1. *Establish transition to stable human population with zero growth.*
  2. *Aust to do same and use its skills & resources to raise quality of life elsewhere.*
  3. *Act now to stabilise Aust pop to 20 – 25 million before overshooting limits.*
  4. *Allow some immigration on compassionate grounds.*
  5. *Every child a wanted child; all medically acceptable means of birth control to be made freely available. Based on changing social values more than anything else.*
  6. *Austs live on an island of affluence in a sea of ... poverty. So, work to spread genuine development beyond these shores.*
  7. *Work for a sustainable population through orgs such as Aust for Ecol Sust Pop.*

#### **5. By Bread Alone (Food)**

1. Ecological unsustainability of modern agriculture
2. Food for the world
3. Constraints on food production
4. Long term and short term strategies
5. How many people could Australia feed?
6. Food for the well fed or hungry?
7. What should we do?
  1. *Recognise inadequacy of markets for fair distribution of food.*
  2. *Only long term solution is to grow more food where needed and curb population.*
  3. *Establish a world food bank.*
  4. *Prime need is for more plant foods, not meat.*
  5. *Reduce % of land used for animal feed stock and eliminate feed lots.*
  6. *Increase seed crops rich in oil and protein.*
  7. *Dilemma of distribution may be resolved on a moral basis, not polit or econ one.*

#### **6. The Power to See it Through (Energy)**

1. World supply and use of fossil fuel
2. Alternative sources of energy
3. Global scenario for the future
4. Australian supply and use of energy
5. Energy options for Australia
6. What should we do?
  1. *Curb energy consumption, intensify search for gas and oil, develop solar energy.*
  2. *Aim for zero energy growth in 21<sup>st</sup> century; rail, public transport, smaller and more*

*efficient cars, metals and glass recycled.*

3. *Nuclear power rejected until proven safer than at present.*
4. *Research into solar, methanol and other fluid fuels.*
5. *National energy budget for decades to set priorities for production and consumption.*

## **7. Riches of the Earth (Minerals, forests, water)**

1. Minerals other than fossil fuels
2. Forests
3. Water
4. What should we do?
  1. *Minerals: answer Q: develop for what purpose? National policy for resource use based on moral grounds, i.e. improving lot of the poor. Influence marketing and price of minerals to benefit devt of poor. High grade reserves should not be exhausted in expectation of substitutes. Conserve essential resources and research alternatives. Environ impact studies needed before new mines are developed.*
  2. *Timber: need for national forest policy; select areas immune from logging; reduce demand for forest products; clear-felling and wood-chipping scaled back in favour of small scale projects. Resource security legislation should be opposed because it destroys security of national parks.*
  3. *Water: need to be much more resourceful by e.g.: recycling, planting natives, reducing Euro lawns etc. Reduce amounts lost in irrigation by placing in pipes and growing less water intensive crops. National policy on water resources, quality and conservation.*

## **8. Not by Bread Alone (Environment #2)**

1. Disappearing heritage
2. Saving what remains
3. National action
4. What should we do?
  1. *Develop a 'mentality of caring' for the national estate.*
  2. *Make a complete inventory of the array of plant and animal communities in Aust. Preserve habitats.*
  3. *Develop eco-tourism.*
  4. *Establish large regions as national parks esp: Eastern coastline, arid centre, marine national parks. Gt Barrier Reef, Cape York, Alpine region of Vic Alps, sclerophyl forests of SW Aust*
  5. *Every concerned citizen should join the ACF.*

## **9. Make Life Work (Work)**

1. Under-stimulation
2. Technology with a human face
3. Industrial democracy or worker participation?
4. Redundancy and the development of human resources
5. Jobs in an ecologically sustainable society
6. Economic inequality
7. Unions in Australia
8. What should we do?
  1. *Continuing edn for re-skilling.*
  2. *New rels between workers and management, e.g., 'cellular' organisations.*

3. *Worker participation.*
4. *Managers as trustees for the wider community.*
5. *Recurrent training for flexibility.*
6. *Legislate for a maximum wage (because luxury for one sector means poverty for others).*
7. *Modernise unions to narrow traditional division between workers and management. Wider responsibility (of unions) to promote policies to increase standard of living in developing countries.*

## **10. Redeem the City (Cities)**

1. Renewing the old
2. New cities and growth centres
3. Moving people around
4. What to do with sewage?
5. Life and death in the city
6. What should we do?
  1. *Curb growth of cities; create growth centres. Avoid coastal megalopolis at all costs.*
  2. *Fewer high rise office blocks (for future) in favour of: schools, hospitals, low-income housing for present.*
  3. *In place of cars, develop a standardised urban train.*
  4. *Re-cycle sewage.*
  5. *Many measures for a healthier environment incl: fewer cars, less alcohol, more exercise, abolition of cig advertising, moderation in eating, reduced stress, community health care and preventative medicine, compulsory health insurance. All based on 'a change in the goals of society from continued econ growth to sustained growth and emphasis on qualitative aspects of life.'*

## **11. Learn to Live (Education)**

1. Education for change
2. Searching for integrity
3. So much to learn
4. Crucible of leadership
5. Science and destiny
6. What should we do?
  1. *Edn for life rather than job. Purpose: to produce a new sort of human being who can face change with confidence and who has a global concern for all of humanity.*
  2. *Equality of ednl opportunity achievable via continuing edn of parents. Schools become nuclei of community centres.*
  3. *Universities face up to the issues of ecol sust soc and problems of living on a finite planet.*
  4. *Frame a science policy for an ecol sust future. Major problem: how to break the old linkages between science, technology and social goals and forge new ones without sacrificing the dynamism of science itself.*
  5. *The major objective of edn at all levels must now be to equip humanity with those qualities and objectives that will enable us to steer a course to an ecol sust future. This should become an explicit goal of educational institutions.*

## 12. The Eye of a Needle (Summing up, strategies)

1. The good news of damnation
2. Prescription
3. Is the battle already lost?
4. The problem of consensus
5. The problem of the cargo cult
6. The problem of human nature
7. The problem of government
8. The case for hope

The present world crisis in population, resources and environmental deterioration is unprecedented in urgency, complexity and scale. The Earth can no longer accommodate the sort of world we are building on its surface. We can neither squeeze into it nor out of it what is needed to sustain an intensely industrialised urban society. We cannot do this for the existing five billion people sharing the Earth now, of whom two-thirds are in the poor world, and of these over a billion are in absolute poverty. If we cannot squeeze into the Earth the present five billion people, how are we going to do it with double the number in a few decades hence? We have not much time to find our way to an adjustment of our appetites and numbers commensurate with the dimensions of the Earth.

A way of life which has brought affluence to a third of humanity ... now threatens the demise of all. The skies are darkening, the heavens have a hole in them, the seas are being poisoned, lakes and rivers dry up, forests and fields disappear as we draw the last drops of life blood from the veins of the Earth. Too many people, demanding too much, destroy the source of their life in trying to get what they want...

Rich countries and poor countries confront each other in a gigantic struggle over the body of Earth. Neither can win. It is a zero sum game. We have embarked on a final Gadarene plunge to annihilation. The growth-oriented avaricious world ... has as much chance of reaching the promised land of well-being for all humanity as the proverbial camel of getting through the eye of a needle.

Such is the good news of damnation. We never seem to see the handwriting on the wall until our backs are up against it....

### **Prescription**

There must be a better way. The prescription is drastic. We must attack causes and not merely symptoms of the disorder. The disorder is too many people demanding too much. The prescription is fewer people demanding less; instead of increased growth, decreased growth. For a viable future, rich countries must give up some of their aspirations if they themselves and the poor countries are to survive. The rich must live more simply so that the poor may simply live. The poor have to give up something too. It is their aspiration to become as the rich now are. For there is no possibility of the Earth sustaining a world of rich countries. What has to be given up by all, rich and poor alike, is the unremitting attempt to harness most of human effort and ingenuity to the task of amassing more and more wealth over and above what is necessary to sustain a decent life for all.

Economic growth is good; that is, provided it serves the basic needs of human beings for a decent life. Economic growth is bad when it becomes an end in itself, serving primarily to satisfy human greed and to make the rich become richer. That destroys both the Earth and the soul of humanity...

There is a phase of growth in the life of every organism. This is followed by a phase of no further growth in which resources are used for maintenance and the development of maturity. This rule of

life is disobeyed in cancerous growth in which parts of the body continue to grow at the expense of the organism as a whole. The organism dies from overgrowth. The global society through all its history has been in a growth phase. Further growth is now cancerous. We have reached the stage in which growth of the body as a whole must cease so that resources may be used for maintenance and maturity in the developed countries and necessary growth in the developing countries...

The ecologically sustainable society calls for sacrifices. It offers in return more than mere survival. Instead of a world that now is gaining more and more of what is trivial at the cost of more and more of what is innately valuable, the ecologically sustainable society reverses the direction of flow. Instead of things being in the saddle and riding humanity, humanity is in the saddle putting things in their place. In one sense there is nothing new in this advocacy. What is new for our generation is the discovery it has to make for itself of what we are for, in terms that are relevant for the age.

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