

“Mind a change?”

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It is tempting to think that we live at the crossroads of history, in uniquely important times, and that our choices, decisions and actions will have very long-term consequences – tempting because it gives our lives great historical importance. But it is also scary, because of the responsibilities which follow. So many may prefer to live in more normal times. After all, in China, the expression “May you live in interesting times!” is used as a curse.

But we don’t have the choice! We live in a time in which our decisions and non-decisions, our actions and non-actions will have consequences, positive or negative, more far-reaching both in a time and space than our ancestors could ever have imagined. Our individual responses to challenges like climate chaos, water, oil and food shortages will influence and may destroy lives and livelihoods all over the world. We also have the power to make decisions influencing the lives and livelihoods of thousands of future generations, even for geological time periods – making these morally relevant to us. Whether or not we master this challenge will depend on each one of us deciding every day to be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem in the choices we make as citizens, consumers, producers, parents etc. The German philosopher of hope Ernst Bloch said that the price of

human freedom is the risk that the great historical moment may encounter too small a human race – one which is not up to the challenge.

Unfortunately, our current decision-makers and opinion-leaders in politics, business and the media have shown themselves to be far too small for the challenges now facing us all! They have ignored and ridiculed the evidence of the coming crises for over 30 years. They have refused to adopt the many solutions offered. I know this because I founded the Right Livelihood Awards, often called the Alternative Nobel Prizes, which honour exemplary solutions to our most urgent problems. They have been presented in the Swedish parliament for over 20 years. So our so-called leaders cannot claim ignorance! But they have preferred to believe in their comfortable ideology, according to which markets, economic growth and technological fixes will magically take care of everything! But events have now caught up with them and the current global political and economic order is rapidly losing its credibility and the trust of the people. The media increasingly remind me of the Soviet press in the last years of communism: they don't know what to believe anymore!

According to the 'London Financial Times', even the recent past is today a foreign country. An article headed "Why business may face a crisis of legitimacy" concluded that the "implicit compact between business and politics is breaking down".

Other recent articles have recognized the reality of limits to growth and dismissed the key argument of the supporters of economic globalisation, namely that it is an unstoppable natural process: "Globalisation was made possible by political change. But what politics made, politics can take away"(FT, 8.4.08).

"USA Today" is the mass circulation paper of the US middle classes, often derided as McPaper. Last April it published a cartoon on the editorial page showing two fat lions walking away from a field covered with the remains of animals they had

devoured. One lion says to the other: “For the record, I still believe in unregulated markets!” When established belief systems are ridiculed like this, then there are openings for drastic change, if we are ready to grasp this window of opportunity.

My main concern is that we are not ready, and, like civil society in the former Soviet bloc after the fall of communism, will be outmanoeuvred by special interests. Civil society organisations are often too divided, too problem-fixated, too dependent on government grants and on maintaining their charitable status to be able to grasp political opportunities. Unlike the defenders of ‘business as usual’, civil society organisations rarely plan strategically for the long-term, rarely support careers and institutions.

They are often reluctant to get directly involved in politics. But if we want a different politics and different policies, we need to help create them. There is nothing wrong with moving back and forth between politics and civil society action. There is nothing wrong with creating one-issue parties, especially on the local or regional level. Nothing wakes politicians up faster than if you threaten to compete for votes – wherever that is feasible!

Remember that in ancient Greece, the politically engaged citizen was known as a *polites* – while the one who refused to get involved was known as an ‘*idiotes*’!

The World Future Council which I founded works primarily on “future-proof” best policies implementation. Many organisations do policy work, meaning developing recommendations. But very few, unfortunately, work directly with parliamentarians to help implement policy changes promoting global justice and climate security. Such work may not be very exciting or quick but it is crucial! As Martin Luther King said, laws do not move the heart, but they restrain the heartless.

We are often told that there is a conflict between human development and preserving a healthy planet but one is not possible without the other! Many poor

people still hope that the final outcome of globalisation will be good for them too. They want to believe that it means what the word implies: a distillation of the interests of all the globe's peoples. But that faith is now being shattered as its reality – the imposition of the interests of a greedy minority on everyone else – becomes clear.

For the poor global majority, the costs of “free” market rule are becoming unaffordable as exploding fuel and food costs, water shortages and environmental collapse rob them of any small gains they have made and throw them into greater debt.

I became aware of the manipulated cost-benefit analysis used to promote ‘development’ mega-projects, when I researched the history of large dams in India in the year we gave the Right Livelihood Award to Medha Patkar and the movement to stop the Narmada dam. I had assumed that (as we have often been told) those who had been forced to give up their land for large dams, had been resettled elsewhere on similar land. There would then still be the huge cultural and spiritual cost of relocation. But the reality was even worse. Only in one single case since India's independence had those evacuated been resettled on equivalent land. All the others – a huge humanity of the dispossessed – had been tricked and cheated, living in camps, on much poorer land – or just dispersed.

This is unfortunately all too often the case with such mega-projects: the human and other costs are much larger than claimed, while the gains have almost invariably been exaggerated, if not invented.

The loss of traditional non-market skills and wealth is ignored when the GDP contributions of those forced into the market are counted as signs of growth and progress. The huge de-skilling involved in this process is covered up by inventing a

new category of semi-skilled for those able to operate a machine, while traditional skills are devalued.

We have been through a drastic re-structuring not only of our economies but of our whole societies in recent decades: “Economics is the method but the object is to change the soul” said Margaret Thatcher. ‘Market fundamentalism’ in every corner of our globe has changed many of the rules of our daily lives. But for what?

A recent review of income and wealth gaps concludes that “the new numbers show global inequality to be significantly greater than even the most pessimistic authors thought” (Yale Centre For The Study of Globalization, 11.1.08). There is also increasing evidence of a correlation between the spread of selfish capitalism in wealthier countries and the increased prevalence of emotional distress, depression and mental illness. And of course this model is not replicable without literally costing the earth.

The Stern Report on climate change describes this as the greatest market failure ever. The belief that economic laws can overcome natural laws is not just wrong; it is mad. But our decision-makers base their policies on economic cost-benefit-analyses grounded in this madness. As a result, what they call wealth creation is literally wealth destruction on an unprecedented scale.

The reason why the situation is now so desperately serious is that the healing mechanisms of our earth can no longer cope with the speed of this natural wealth destruction.

E. F. Schumacher, the author of *Small is Beautiful*, thought that the rational goal for markets should be the ‘creation of maximum well-being with the minimum of consumption’. This was not just because he sympathized with Buddhist notions of sufficiency or agreed with Erich Fromm that compulsive consumption cripples the

individual. He foresaw that the economic growth model would self-destruct, as environmental limits would halt and reverse rising living standards.

At some stage – now reached – the competitive win-win growth economy is automatically replaced by a ‘spaceship’ economy requiring co-operation within limits set by natural laws. We have no sane alternative but to accept this reality, for every delay will make the necessary reforms harder, and eventually no longer possible.

We need to reframe our reality by creating a new understanding of what is possible and acceptable. This has been done in the past: we no longer accept slavery or the divine right of kings. Today anyone supporting such systems would be regarded not just as wrong but as mad or criminal.

We need to adapt our economics to fit not only the environmental but also the human imperative. Otherwise we will be handing over an increasingly sick planet to increasingly sick children: “In the West, by 1950’s standards, the average child of today is in need of professional psychological help.” (Oliver James, ‘The Selfish Capitalist’) – Not surprising, when economic determinism indoctrinates us to see ourselves first and foremost in exchange value terms. How can we become more saleable?

But we are so much more, and our world is so much richer than those imprisoned by economic fundamentalism are able to understand!

If you re-connect yourself with this larger meaningful living world, you will approach it with extreme care, respectful of your unique place in it. But those who believe that they are the pinnacle of evolution in an ultimately meaningless universe also, assume that they know better than “trial and error”, so nothing will stop them if it promises to make money! If by chance they destroy a species, they believe that they or their successors can always clone it back...

These extremists currently threaten humanity with more harm than any group of religious fundamentalists!

We all have at least one common value: our deeply felt obligation to hand over a better world to our children. This is a political and moral issue. Natural laws come before economic laws because they determine the framework conditions of our existence. You can negotiate with creditors and enemies – but not with melting glaciers.

Climate chaos is not only a huge threat but will also make many other threats more difficult to cope with. We have not even begun to be serious about the costs, the effort and the scale of change that will be required both in our thinking and actions! Even the tallest building collapses if its foundation is allowed to disintegrate. A stable climate has been part of the foundation of our societies. Today the freedom, security and rights of all future generations are threatened. But solutions are everywhere. We can decide today to create an earth community built on sharing (e.g. of best technologies), reciprocity and co-operation. We can transform our production and consumption systems, based on the circular loop “cradle-to-cradle” models developed in Germany by Prof. Michael Braungart.

We can push for enforceable basic human rights to water and food. We can expand and protect biodiversity and cultural diversity everywhere by challenging the monocultures of the mind of current decision-makers.

We can implement the basic human right to water, which the constitution of Uruguay now affirms, based on the work of Right Livelihood Award recipient Maude Barlow. We can legislate for the basic human right to food, as several Brazilian cities have done.

We will need to ration scarce resources, including energy, fairly and globally for the foreseeable future. Already, Australia is evacuating cities due to lack of water.

Nuclear power and oil from far sands are not realistic energy alternatives because of the massive amounts of water their extraction requires.

Last month, the Royal United Services Institute, a leading UK defence think tank, warned that the effects of climate change, unless countered with much greater urgency, could overwhelm governments and “cause global conflicts as large as the two world wars, lasting for centuries”. (The Daily Telegraph, 3.5.08)

Aware of these dangers, the World Future Council decided to prioritize best policy implementation to reduce climate chaos. This requires a massive expansion of renewable energy capacity. The German “Rewarding Renewables” Feed-In Tariffs policy, which the World Future Council is promoting worldwide with publications, films, parliamentary hearings and a special policy implementation website (PACT), has already spread to over 40 countries and regions. It is the quickest and most effective way of spreading the solar (energy) revolution, which turns consumers into producers and reduces corporate power over energy supplies. It is non-threatening (except to energy monopolists) and meets people where they are. It is a powerful symbol of co-operation and sharing, linked with the sun’s powerful religious and life-giving traditions. It is easily replicable and can be upscaled quickly on a global level, in combination with Solar Home System technologies where there is no grid.

Without a massive increase in renewables, proposals for rapidly reducing fossil fuel use – which is an ecological imperative – will cause mass starvation or require massive and steadily increasing compensation payments as growing demand competes for ever scarcer energy supplies. The belief that solar energy must first become price-competitive represents economic fundamentalism gone mad! What is missing in these perverted cost-benefit equations is not just the growing cost of climate chaos, wars for oil etc. – while solar wars are unimaginable! Also missing is the enormous daily natural wealth destruction caused by not utilizing solar and

other renewable energies to the maximum extent technologically and humanely possible! Money is not the issue here, for, as the British economist John Maynard Keynes said, whatever a society can do, it can finance!

We should try to calculate the value of this huge daily loss – for the sun and wind of today all over the world cannot be used tomorrow! Compared with this waste, the higher extraction costs of renewables and the costs of leaving coal and oil in the ground become insignificant. To this calculation we need to add the growing certainty that the peak of global oil supplies is imminent. The latest ‘peak oil’ convert is the International Energy Agency whole chief economist recently announced this “new conclusion”, urging that “we should leave oil before oil leaves us.”

The total potential of renewables, especially solar energy, is almost unlimited. We need a global emergency project to increase current capacities many hundred fold. Just as Churchill and Roosevelt turned around the UK and US economies and societies within months to fight fascism, this can be done very quickly if the leadership is there, for leadership defines reality. Maybe some of you will be those leaders! Just don’t let the economic ideologues tell you it is too expensive! Remember that whatever a society can do, it can finance!

The World Future Council’s work on Crimes Against Future Life will provide the stick to go with the best policies’ carrot. New hierarchies of risk and danger require new moral and legal responses. Climate change, water and food shortages are not, as often in the past, random events beyond our control. There are victims and perpetrators, whether active or passive. Moral pressure (‘naming and shaming’) will be useful, but the WFC – with the help of pro-bono international legal advice – is looking at how activities foreclosing the future, and damaging the rights of future generations, can be covered by new or existing legislation and courts. Without

legally enforceable rights and responsibilities, we face chaos, as US President John F. Kennedy already foresaw in 1961 when he called on humanity “to join together to create...a new world of law.”

Let us do our best to help build this new world – now more urgent than ever – for ourselves as well as for all generations living now and in the future”! As the US anti-slavery campaigner William Channing said: ‘There are times in history when to dare is the highest wisdom!’

I will close with another quote from a brave young girl, hiding from her future murderers in wartime Amsterdam. “How wonderful it is”, wrote Anne Frank in her diary, “that no-one has to wait a single moment before one can begin to improve the world!”