

SUBMISSION TO THE LEADERS OF ALL PARLIAMENTARY PARTIES IN NEW ZEALAND

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Introduction

The experiment of our civilisation - an experiment worth continuing but one which has become very precarious - is now moving at an unprecedented speed on a scale never before experienced on Earth. As Richard Heinberg puts it:

Since the early 1900s, the world's population has multiplied by four and its economy - a rough measure of the human load on nature - by more than forty. We have reached a stage where we must bring the experiment under control, and guard against present and potential dangers. It's entirely up to us. If we fail - if we blow up or degrade the biosphere so it can no longer sustain us - nature will merely shrug and conclude that letting apes run the laboratory was fun for a while but in the end a bad idea. (1)

We are rapidly tipping the balance between rational and reckless behaviour, between need and greed, and are approaching the cliff with ever-increasing speed, as did many past civilisations. If we want to prevent the collapse of *our* civilisation and live on a more pleasant and saner Earth, we and we alone must do it.

Rachel Carson's extraordinarily perceptive and prophetic words of 1962 are even more applicable today:

We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been travelling is deceptively easy, a smooth super-highway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The fork in the road - the one 'less traveled by' - offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth. (2)

Carson was referring to Frost's 1916 poem, *The Road Not Taken*, in which he says:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I -
I took the one less traveled by,
And it has made all the difference. (3)

In the same year that Carson published *Silent Spring*, another distinguished author, Barbara Ward, produced *The Rich Nations and the Poor Nations* in which she wrote: "The gap between the rich and the poor has become inevitably the most tragic and urgent problem of our day." Ward commented on the "gaps in power, the gaps in wealth, the gaps in ideology which hold the nations apart [and which] also make up the abyss into which mankind can fall to annihilation." (4) These conditions continue to worsen.

Four years later, in her book *Spaceship Earth*, Ward not only pointed out that “our physical unity has gone far ahead of our moral unity” but emphasised another fundamental issue, that of a ‘common interest’ of humanity:

The most rational way of seeing the whole human race today is to see it as the ship’s crew of a single space ship on which all of us, with a remarkable combination of security and vulnerability, are making our pilgrimage through infinity. Our planet is not much more than the capsule within which we have to live as human beings if we are to survive the vast space voyage upon which we have engaged for hundreds of millennia, but without yet noticing our condition. The space voyage is totally precarious. We are a ship’s company on a small ship. Rational behaviour is the condition of survival. (5)

In the light of the evidence, those who push *our* buttons and pull *our* levers stand accused of behaving irrationally and without genuine understanding of our civilisation’s increasingly desperate situation.

We have failed to fully analysis the black box information of the wrecks of our past experiments. Had we done so, and had the conclusions been absorbed and suitably acted upon, we would not find ourselves in our present position. Is *our* civilisation incapable of learning from *our* past?

Fools’ Paradise

I wish to bring to your attention the two most important issues of our time. In examining these, as we move inexorably toward a post-industrial world, it is essential that we ponder the legacy we leave our children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. Many eminent people have already commented on our predicament. As David Quinn put it in 2000:

If we continue... to consume the world until there’s no more to consume, then there’s going to come a day, sure as hell, when our children or their children or their children’s children are going to look back on us - on you and me - and say to themselves, ‘My God, what kind of monsters were these people?’ (6)

These two most vital issues of our time are:

- An all-powerful dysfunctional global economic system dominated by greed, corruption, usury, debt and profit before the genuine welfare of people, and built on confidence in perpetual growth - an impossibility on a finite Earth - to which above all other considerations the world’s power brokers are committed, has resulted in enormous destruction through the wholesale promotion of consumption (the throw-away mentality), militarism and vast waste and has promoted a strong desire for the same destructive life-style in the developing world which it has already degraded and exploited.
- Earth’s varied and complex natural ecosystems, on which all life depends and on an understanding of which the whole human economy should be based, are treated as both limitless and for the most part free. We continue to live on Nature’s capital instead of on the interest – obviously an unsustainable situation.

These two creeping deaths - “the ideology of the cancer cell”(7) - have brought about

- climate change which is here and now, and which, by our persistent negligence, we continue to worsen, and
- the fast-approaching energy crisis the effects of which will be devastating demographically.

To amplify these two points.

In spite of the sceptics, most of whom have only one oar in the water, there is ample evidence from the most reputable international climatologists to show beyond any reasonable doubt that we have upset Nature’s balances to the point where the changes could be catastrophic. It is to such impending disasters that the Precautionary Principle (prudent foresight) should be applied - something we seem not to have yet comprehended. Unfortunately, once any potentially dangerous juggernaut starts rolling it is extremely difficult to stop.

Read any newspaper and one’s attention will inevitably be drawn to statements by politicians or economists or business executives - sometimes by all three - that our future well-being depends on more economic growth of certain percentages. Herman Daly, until recently senior economist with the environmental department of the World Bank, reported on this pathological syndrome in 1991:

It’s really been only in the last 200 years that growth has been a part of our lives [since the start of the Industrial Revolution]. Prior to that, on an annual basis, growth was negligible. The idea that we must either grow or die is just not supported by history and I think that the contrary is much more likely: if we continue to grow, then surely we will die. (8)

Prior to this Alexandr Solzhenitsyn commented

that a dozen maggots can’t go on and on gnawing the same apple *forever*; that if the Earth is a *finite* object, then its expanses and resources are finite also, and the *endless, infinite* progress dinned into our heads by the dreamers of the Enlightenment cannot be accomplished on it... A civilization greedy for ‘perpetual progress’ has now choked and is on its last legs... Society must cease to look upon ‘progress’ as something desirable. ‘Eternal progress’ is a nonsensical myth. What must be implemented is not a ‘steadily expanding economy’ but a *zero growth economy*, a stable economy. *Economic growth is not only unnecessary but ruinous.*

Solzhenitsyn went on to point out that:

When everything is staked on ‘progress’, as it is now, it is *impossible* to find a *joint* optimum solution to all five of the problems referred to above. [*Population, natural resources, agricultural production, industry and environmental pollution.*] Unless mankind renounces the notion of economic progress, the biosphere will become unfit for life even *during our lifetime*. And if mankind is to be saved, technology has to be adapted to a stable

economy in the next twenty to thirty years, and to do that, the process must be started *now, immediately*. (9)

That was written thirty-one years ago to the Soviet leaders. Officialdom was not listening, didn't want to listen and may have been as incapable of listening as it appears to be today.

Look around you, Members of Parliament, and inevitably you will be forced to acknowledge that this statement is one of fact, for not only is the mania of growth leading to energy shortages but also to the decline of many other resources, one of which is humanity's vital water supply.

To mitigate the effects of peak oil the International Energy Agency already has a set of contingency plans to limit demand for oil in member nations. An advance briefing to the report is titled *Saving Oil in a Hurry: Measures for Rapid Demand Restraint in Transport*. (10) The report itself proposes drastic measures which could be used to cut back fuel consumption.

Remember – **there is no combination of alternative energy systems anywhere on the horizon which is going to substitute for our present energy demands.**

Conclusion

It is worth recalling a few words from the Nuremberg War Crimes tribunal of 1950: "Individuals have international duties which transcend the national obligations of obedience... Therefore individual citizens have the duty to violate domestic laws to prevent crimes against peace and humanity from occurring."

A recent case of such behaviour took place in 2000 when the 600,000 citizens of Cochabamba took back their right to water which had been privatised by the US engineering giant, Bechtel, which was then forced to flee Bolivia. (11)

In this day and age of approaching global disaster we need above all else "the globalisation of responsibility" (12) which starts locally. Are you – the Members of our Parliament – fully aware of our situation? Are you informing your people of this and preparing them for what is to come? If not, you stand condemned of being politically, economically, socially, morally and spiritually irresponsible.

I close by quoting historian Ronald Wright. We ignore his warning at our joint peril.

We are now at a stage when the Easter Islanders could have still halted the senseless cutting and carving, could have gathered the last tree's seeds to plant out of reach of the rats. We have the tools and the means to share resources, clean up pollution, dispense basic health care and birth control, set economic limits in line with natural ones. If we don't do these things now, while we prosper, we will never be able to do them when times get hard. Our fate will twist out of our hands. And this new century will not grow very old before we enter an age of chaos and collapse that will dwarf all the dark ages in our past. Now is our last chance to get the future right. (13)

Reference notes

- 1 Richard Heinberg. *The Party's Over: Oil, War, and the End of Industrial Societies*, 2004.
- 2 Rachel Carson. *Silent Spring*, 1962.
- 3 Robert Frost. *The Road Not Taken*, 1976.
- 4 Barbara Ward. *The Rich and the Poor Nations*, 1962.
- 5 Barbara Ward. *Spaceship Earth*, 1966.
- 6 Richard Heinberg. op. cit. 1.
- 7 Edward Abbey. *The Fool's Progress*, 1988.
- 8 Anita Gordon & David Suzuki. *It's a Matter of Survival*, 1991.
- 9 Alexandr Solzhenitsyn. *Letter to Soviet Leaders*, 1974.
- 10 International Energy Agency. 25 March 2005.
- 11 Anita Roddick. *Troubled Water*, 2004.
- 12 *The Ecologist* Vol 34 No 10 Dec04/Jan05
- 13 Ronald Wright. *A Short History of Progress*, Canadian Broadcasting Corp. Massey Series lectures, 2004.