

**Response to Tim Flannery's Now or Never. A Sustainable Future for Australia?
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Somewhere I have a copy of a book called "The Way Out: Radical Alternatives for Australia". Its main theme is that the commune movement of the 1960s provided an escape route from our descent into the desperate territory outlined by Tim Flannery. It's not a view that I hold but it's one of a large group of offerings that, over the years, have tracked the growth of trends that threaten to foreclose the human and non-human future and have suggested very many solutions.

I think back to the establishment of the Commission for the Future. Its eventual decline was not merely a result of poor design and variable leadership but also a consequence of the unremitting hostility it faced, especially from those who were entranced by what were once called "market based solutions". I think of the series of Ecologically Sustainable Development forums held some years ago and the determination of the Keating government to bury the ESD process and its products for all time. I think of the climate scientists from CSIRO who were leaned upon and forced to water down their policy recommendations. And I think of the university where I spent several years working with a post-grad research and teaching Institute on advanced foresight work - only to see it downgraded later to near-insignificance within a faculty devoted to other ends. There's a blindness here, an unconscious editing of progressive work that amounts to a kind of unthinking cultural vandalism. As societies become every more hard-pressed such responses will prove increasingly misguided.

So when Flannery repeats Lovelock's view that "humans lack the foresight, wisdom and political will" to avert catastrophe, there is plenty of evidence to back it up. You don't have to look very far to see that, on the whole, we seem to "need" some sort of tangible and immediate crisis to occur before we'll act to avoid it. There's some sense in this because the "opportunity cost" of early action can be prohibitive especially if - as with the putative "Millennium Bug" - the feared event fails to materialise. So it's important to ensure that the proposed actions are, in fact, necessary. What's much more difficult to understand is the way that we've allowed the global system to overshoot key environmental limits without triggering the necessary actions and adjustments; without, that is, fundamentally changing our relationship with the wider biotic world. The signals have been there but they've been almost universally "tuned out".

Now a chorus of voices from Australia and overseas is telling us that time is short and we need to change course very quickly indeed if we are to avoid climate disaster. Yet set against the above are other voices whose fundamental interests cause them to dispute and deny any view that would place new limits upon their activities. They include business and financial types who've grown used to the abstracted and secondary world of stocks, shares, money flows and market niches - a realm currently preoccupied with its own traumas. They include those who see the world through the filters of physics, chemistry and the hard sciences, and who seek solutions through a range of technical innovations

and fixes. They include many others who for various reasons find themselves so removed from natural processes that the latter remain distant abstractions of no relevance to daily life. And they include a tiny minority who have gained some sort of perverse prominence by continuing to claim that things are not really *that* bad.

Seen in this context, Flannery's essay covers familiar ground. What may, perhaps, be new to some are the latest findings about global warming that lead us to wonder if we're not already looking at the end-game of civilisation as we know it. Frankly, I would say that we are. If that is correct, then HOW we respond from here on in is critical. Quite possibly the most scarce resource we have in tackling this monumental task is *clarity*. The issues are complex, the evidence widely distributed and / or contested and many of the most significant drivers of "unsustainability" are all-but invisible to science and to the naked eye.

The strengths of Flannery's effort are two-fold and they lie in two quite distinct domains. The first is his detailed knowledge of the physical world and especially what he calls Earth's "three great organs" – land, air and sea. The second is his passionate advocacy of values such as: taking responsibility and respecting the rights of other species and future generations. Yet the bulk of the text concentrates on the former, which is par for the course for scientists who are grounded in the observable phenomena of the material world. Flannery is in less familiar territory when he invokes the interior worlds of individual people, organisations and cultures with terms like: foresight, wisdom, political energy, will, leadership etc.

The substance of the piece deals almost exclusively with external factors: CO₂, climate change, ocean acidification, coal, solar cities, trees and a range of technical fixes. At various points he *evokes* the human and cultural interiors as if, at some level, he intuits their significance, but otherwise pays them little attention. Given limited space one cannot cover everything. Still, they appear here only as poorly articulated background factors. I want to suggest, however, that if we are serious about making substantial shifts toward sustainable futures then we will have to balance our knowledge of external factors with that dealing with the interiors. In other words, *we'll want to pay as much attention to values, worldviews and other developmental drivers as we do to CO₂, coal and trees*. These interior dynamics are at least as significant and, in some respects, more so. This is certainly the view put forward in 2006 by Barrett-Brown where I noted the following comments:

It is not only unproductive but also potentially dangerous to merely focus upon the external world.

And again:

For individuals there is no behaviour without the interior motivation that drives it; for collectives there is no system without the interior culture that drives it.¹

The implications are clear. While the scientific effort to gain the kind of clarity into global systems that can guide policy is essential, there's an equal need for much greater clarity about the interior forces that drive human beings and cultures. It is not too far-fetched to suggest that the ever-growing threat of 'overshoot and collapse' within the global system is driven as much by inadequate values and poorly functioning social systems as it is by the more familiar litany of external threats.

When Flannery deplors the actions of the coal industry and those continuing to log native forests he seems unaware of the underlying clash of worldviews, interests, values and assumptions that operate in these situations. He does not see clearly enough that coal execs and Indonesian timber cutters have very different outlooks from each other and from him. Their interests differ, as do their values and worldviews. They do not live in the same world and they do not speak the same language. So it actually makes little sense to castigate them, and others, out of what can be termed a "world-centric" worldview as though that were the only available option. Clearly there are others. It follows that if we wish to communicate with people different from ourselves then we'd better understand much, much more richly than we seem to, just exactly "where they're coming from". The Australian film "*The Burning Season*" provides a fine example of this in the way that it pays close attention to the life conditions, values and dilemmas of indigenous farmers to our north who are driven to burn the forest through poverty and lack of choices. In this instance solutions began to emerge only after their real situation was understood and addressed.

A more considered balance between visible external factors and invisible interior ones gives access to a wider "playing field" and also permits other kinds of solutions to emerge – solutions that have not yet figured very largely in science-based approaches to global dilemmas. Take, for example, Lovelock's view noted above that human beings lack foresight, wisdom and political energy. It's a view that is often repeated by scientists as eminent as E.O. Wilson and other observers. But, in the case of foresight this limitation can be resolved.

We know that all normally equipped individuals possess foresight because without it everyday life would be impossible. Strangely, this capacity seems to decline as we move from individuals to groups, and thence to institutions, societies and the global system. And yet, what we learned at the Australian Foresight Institute was that this human ability can be nurtured, developed and put to work at the social level. In other words, the deliberate use of a currently under-regarded and under-utilised human capacity can be translated into a social principle of considerable power and influence. It's not, to quote the current PM, a "silver bullet". But if the implementation of social foresight were to

¹ Barrett C Brown, Theory and Practice of Integral Sustainable Development, Parts 1 & 2, *AQAL*, Vol 1 No 2, 2006, pp 366-477, Integral Institute, Boulder, CO.

become a genuine priority it would provide a greatly improved and more broadly shared understanding of the world we're heading towards. It would not only buy us valuable time, it would also provide motivation to participate in the necessary changes and opportunities to act in new and innovative ways. Progressive governments, local authorities and city councils would have access to sources of grass roots support that are currently unavailable anywhere and "re-localisation" – itself a solution in progress - would take on tangible new meaning.

Near the end of the piece Flannery gets to the question at the very heart of this discussion – what kind of society do we want to live in? This question needs to be considered more widely and seriously than ever before. Central to it is a willingness to probe our interior worlds and understand the well-studied processes that operate there. When it becomes clear that certain values do indeed lead directly to the abyss it will be easier to substitute others. When we recognise that certain worldviews cannot support the world-centric values that Flannery advocates, we may invest greater efforts in promoting more inclusive ones.

The basic point is this. If we accept that the global environment is heading for disaster then we need to marshal *all* the resources at our disposal, both interior and exterior. Sustainable futures cannot be achieved merely by being good environmentalists. We certainly need to draw on the hard sciences and systems theory but they need to be complemented by a much deeper understanding of how human beings and societies work.

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