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Caring for Future Generations – Can the fall of civilisation be avoided?

Dr Richard A Slaughter

The human growth economy is founded on assumptions that no longer hold. It has exceeded global limits from the 1980s onward. In simple terms it is consuming natural capital at an increasing rate and reducing the capacity of the earth to support life.

It needs to be replaced by a steady state economy based on different assumptions, values and views of reality. Since human beings have many ways of avoiding, discounting or denying reality, this presents us with a huge challenge.

It presents future generations with an even larger challenge – it threatens their very existence.

It is one thing to stand in the present and be concerned about the future. It is quite another to put oneself in the place of future generations who currently have no voice and no representation at all.

If they had voices what might they say to us? Please adopt a long-term perspective. Please invest in future-relevant research and develop future-relevant education.

There are grounds for caring about future generations. To not care diminishes us. We share responsibility for dangers to the wellbeing of future generations. The global commons have been compromised by human activity and restorative actions are necessary and urgent.

However, we simply don't bring future generations into our thinking or make a space for them in our decision-making forums or councils. This is despite long-standing proposals for social innovations such as a council for future generations, an ombudsman for future generations, or even the generation of sovereign funds for their use.

Our oversights are not the result of deliberate selfishness or blindness. They arise, in large part, from a shared worldview that renders them out of court, literally un-thinkable.

The dominance of instrumental reason, the means-to-an-end worldview, in western society is a dangerous dynamic.

The utilitarian view that nature is primarily a resource for human use is similarly defective, as is the lack of understanding of appropriate limits.

Oversights in relation to future generations are also the result of the primacy accorded to science, technology and marketing.

We face a global emergency, and there are steps we can take in the right direction, actions we can take, things we can do.

Firstly, we can take the current global emergency seriously. We can seek and establish clarity around worldviews and values, and understand the practical consequences of different modes, stages and levels of human and cultural operations.

Bring forward thinking and capability into the heart of educational theory and practice. Create and staff Institutions of Foresight tasked with creating and sustaining viable forward views. Situate these near government but not necessarily within it.

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Don't wait for disaster to strike. Look very seriously indeed at a variety of 'descent pathways' for society and economy.

Engage with the systemicity of the global context and begin to consciously intervene in destructive feedback loops such as fossil fuel subsidies, universal marketing and mass merchandising, commercial TV, unquestioned population and economic growth, and mega-projects such as tall towers and road tunnels.

The most likely business-as-usual, do-nothing future is a Dystopian, overshoot-and-collapse, nightmare. To understand this is not to be 'negative'.

Imagine taking a group of young people out into the bush. You know there are dangers, so how do you prepare? Our situation is not dissimilar. Understanding 'overshoot-and-collapse' provides the best possible chance to avoid or moderate it.

We should be re-directing significant social resources away from indulgence, consumption and waste to disciplined enquiry and action, to strategies of response. Activities that encourage affluent consumption could be considered crimes against humanity and future generations.

A wise culture trumps the growth economy because it opens out the future for humanity and its world instead of closing both of them down. It also encourages us to explore the higher reaches of human and cultural evolution where most – if not all – of the solutions to the present global emergency actually lie.

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