Changing Course vs Business-as-Usual

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Bushfires are commonplace in Australia and have been for many years. But they’ve recently reached new levels of intensity. They started early this year and became widespread long before the official ‘fire season’ was supposed to arrive. This time, however, the impacts and implications are no longer confined to the bush. Only last week, after long periods of darkened skies, dozens of smoke alarms in Sydney’s CBD were triggered. Dense smoke from multiple nearby fires set off the very devices intended to keep people safe. But, in this instance, office workers and others were turfed out of their air-conditioned high-rise buildings into far more dangerous levels of toxic smoke outside. Further afield farmers have been struggling with drought for several years. Many are desperate and close to giving up a way of life that had lasted for generations. At the same time, many smaller country towns have run, or are running, out of water. Some are fortunate enough to have supplies brought in via tankers, albeit at enormous cost. Others are simply being evacuated. The levels of suffering and dislocation from drought, fire and record-breaking temperatures are incalculable. Meanwhile the PM who thinks that the ‘firies’ (volunteer fire fighters) are doing just fine, takes his family overseas for a short, pre-Christmas, holiday. What is going on?

Intensely farmed land in better times (inland NSW)

From a foresight perspective this is a classic and yet deeply troubling example of ‘learning by social experience.’ In general, this tends to occur when critical ‘signals of change’ have been missed, mis-interpreted or merely denied. But this is not just about events per se. It has even more to do with worldviews, their associated values and the institutions and practices that became ‘normalised’ during the most abnormal period in human history. It’s now almost five decades since the first Limits to Growth (LtG) report was issued by the Club of Rome back in 1972. It’s common knowledge that the report was pilloried by establishment figures and economists who wanted none of what they insisted were ‘doom and gloom’ predictions. Leaving aside the fact that such descriptors were entirely false it’s worth considering a view of an
'alternative past.’ That is, one in which the core discipline that helped to order and direct human societies was not that of economics but ecology. The crucial difference between that vanished past and what actually occurred is that economics was about regulating human to human and social to social exchanges in a kind of vacuum whereas ecology considers the interactions between humanity and the wider world of life, energy and matter. We think of that now as ‘the environment’ and ecology has expanded to embrace a still wider perspective known as Earth System Science (ESS).

But what fires, drought and the deadly acceleration of global heating demonstrate is that economics in its broadest sense is still calling the shots. How otherwise to explain the constant putting-down of ESS in favour of business-as-usual? Two brief examples may be helpful here. One is the failure of the Madrid climate conference to get all parties to agree on radical and necessary action to rein in global heating. The other is the decision of the Saudi ruling class to float part of Aramco, the world’s largest oil company, on the open market. This represents another direct collision between the limited interests of hyper-affluence and the well-being of humanity: present and future income that guarantees near-future devastation. Foresight seems to play little or no part in these examples. Or, rather, it is overwhelmed by the power of embedded economic interests. Don’t Saudis have children too? You’d think they figure somewhere in these calculations. Works such as James Hanson’s Storms of My Grandchildren (2009) that address these issues directly and are backed up with formidable evidence just don’t cut through.

And that’s partly why ‘learning by experience’ occurs. Besides the need for dealing actively and sympathetically with the human, social and environmental damage, what matters most at this time is what will be learned from this experience and what will be ignored. Disaster can bring hope and recovery in its wake but only if a process of real and relevant learning has ensued. Will the current crisis pass and business-as-usual be re-established? It’s possible – that is until the
next one occurs that would likely be heavier, deeper and yet more damaging. Or is it possible to conceive that the age of rampant growth and expansion in this country is finally over? If so, then the present time may come to be known as that of ‘a great reversal.’ A time when worldviews, values and practices at all levels underwent a systemic change so that life could continue, albeit at a slower pace and within more limited bounds?

When people start suffering en masse; that is, when the costs of fighting monster blazes, carrying water over long distances or contemplating vast acreages of devastated landscape all come together, even the most hardened cynics are challenged to explain why. It is then that the pull of other ways of thinking and operating can arise. A host of more helpful innovations have been available been for a long time. Kate Raworth’s book Doughnut Economics (2017) has been widely praised for the way it re-connects human affairs with the way the planet actually works. Charles Massey’s Call of the Reed Warbler (2017) explores a new paradigm for sustainable agriculture. The New Economic Network Australia (NENA) puts many of different aspects of applied sustainability together through an active network of pioneers and practitioners. All these are helpful but they won’t get far without audacious action on a meaningful scale. A good example of this is Green M.P. Michael Berkman’s recent announcement of a plan to raise $1 billion from fossil fuel companies to fund:

- 1,400 new paid firefighters
- An extra $75 million for the volunteer Rural Fire service
- A permanent aerial firefighting fleet, and
- 200 new indigenous rangers to help manage country (Berkman, 2019).

One thing is certain: if the most useful and appropriate lessons are not derived from painful social learning experiences they will certainly recur. If there is a key idea from Futures Studies and Applied Foresight it is that you don’t have to experience the full impact of disaster and devastation if you take them, and alternatives to them, seriously. Or as Bertrand de Jouvenel put it over 60 years ago, “the proof of improvidence” lies in “falling into the empire of necessity.”

Which is not a great place to be on a rapidly heating planet.

References

New Economic Network Australia.

Brisbane,
January 2020.