

Confronting The Future

Australia and the world: the next hundred years

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Foreword

Charles Birch has written this book to explain in simple, non-technical language the consequences of man's blind, unplanned progress in an age of explosive growth and technological development. Wherever he directs the focus of his writing – world population growth, world resources, the environment, social institutions or human relationships – the danger signals flash. One may disagree with some points of view, one may question some facts and figures and one may argue against some of his propositions, **but the overall picture is that of mankind in peril.**

Charles Birch is a member of the Australian Club of Rome Council and of the international Club of Rome. The Australian Council wishes to encourage discussion of the matters raised by Charles Birch, but the book is a statement of his own views. **The Council, however, commends the book to the general public in the hope that their reading and discussion of it will produce an increased awareness of the dangerous problems which world population growth and the life style of man in an industrialized society are producing, and in the hope that it will help stimulate other works in this important field.**

Australian Club of Rome Council

Preface

Confronting the Future is an exceptionally valuable contribution to our understanding of what the Club of Rome has called the Predicament of Mankind.

We are all facing many different clusters of interlinked problems but we tend to focus on those which are nearest to our experience or which we think we know better. We even believe that we are able to grasp the nature and possible consequences of some of them; but as soon as we view them as they really are, immersed in an inextricable tangle with all others, we realize how ill-equipped we are to deal with them.

To overcome the sense of frustration and helplessness which ensues, we must first of all understand the speed and scale of events characterizing modern society, the new orders of complexity and the critical interdependencies among all problems and possible solutions.

The reader of Confronting the Future is initiated by Charles Birch in a persuasive way to a global vision of the human condition that then leads him to discover the attitudes and policies that are necessary to guide our course in the future. This process of becoming conscious of the realities we are ourselves busy creating and of learning how to live with them is essential if we are to turn today's despair into hope. Only then can we prepare intelligently a common future for mankind.

16 Possible World

The proper object of economic activity is to have enough bread, not infinite bread, not a world turned into bread, not even vast store houses full of bread. The infinite hunger of man, his moral and spiritual hunger, is not to be satisfied, is indeed exacerbated, by the current demonic madness of producing more and more things for more and more people. Afflicted with an infinite itch, modern man is scratching in the wrong place, and his frenetic clawing is drawing blood from the life-sustaining circulatory systems of his spaceship, the biosphere.

- 14 This is a book about the world at the crossroads; a world which will either seek to perpetuate the values of the past, drift, or seek a totally new orientation to the future. Much of this book is about Australia at the crossroads of possible worlds of the future. That needs an explanation. Australia is in many ways remote from the world, huge in space, small in population. **For many people in the world it is that lucky country that has never had a war within its boundaries, has never had any major national disaster, whose inhabitants spend their time basking in the sun and eating steaks.** For other reasons, which I explain towards the end of Chapter 1, **I believe that Australia could be a mirror to the world. It is not that now; but things are changing. The possibility of change is perhaps greater in Australia than anywhere else.** Furthermore, it is impossible for Australia, and for that matter other countries, to survive and flourish except as
- 15 they find their future in a global perspective. This I try to establish in Chapter 2. **What is lacking in human affairs is a global vision.**

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It is just possible that the clues for living in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are not going to come from the great nations that have ruled the earth in our time, but from the outposts and frontiers of the new world which have the advantage of still being in search of their identity and their role in the world. I do not want to write just for Australians. **I believe that Australia might be seen by the rest of the world as a possible image of the future, even a beacon of hope for those who suffer because they are poor and for those who suffer because they are rich.**

The future now

The future has arrived with extraordinary suddenness. **For two-thirds of the world, the poor countries,** it bears a frightening resemblance to the present. For the remaining rich third of the world it has a face that is frighteningly different from the present.

For the millions in the poor two-thirds of the world, their future is the present. They live in India, Asia, Africa and South America. **There is no star on their horizon; nothing to indicate relief from poverty, hunger, un-**

16 **employment and misery.** In a curtain-raising article written by Barbara Ward prior to the World Food Conference in Rome in 1974, she concluded: 'It is not entirely easy to dismiss the dark prophecy made a few years ago by Lord Snow – that megadeaths in starving lands, watched on affluent peoples' television screens, could mark the end of any moral community for man.'

In the affluent world the future has already arrived. **The promises of industrialization, economic growth and a civilization directed to material improvement is turning an age of abundance into an age of scarcity, inflation, unemployment, with the threat of war and loss of any meaning of life. A way of life that served mankind up to the twentieth century now promises to destroy him and his earth.** The social ideologies that gave vitality to movements for economic growth, political liberty and social justice in the nineteenth century have gone sour. They threaten the demise of the political and economic structures they created. The classical patterns of capitalism and socialism no longer exist. Their place has been taken by unstable mixtures of private and public enterprises **which are so taken up with day today problems of survival that the big issues of the future that have already arrived are all but ignored.**

17 Population growth, environment deterioration which includes resource depletion, nuclear weapons and the failure of existing economic and political systems are four members of the Pandoran quartet. World population growth, which adds a thousand million people to the world in a mere fifteen years, raises the spectre of massive starvation and a scramble for resources. Nuclear capability, no longer confined to the big powers, introduces the possibility of nuclear blackmail to force developed nations to transfer some of their wealth to the have-nots. Environmental deterioration (resource depletion and pollution) brought about by economic growth and population growth sets limits to industrialization and agriculture. Most of the poor people of the world want to have a share in the fruits of the scientific-technological revolution like their rich neighbours. But if all the people of the world were to consume resources at the rate say of the Americans, the total known reserves of petroleum would be used up in six years and the annual consumption of timber, copper, sulphur, iron and water would exceed available known reserves of these resources. It seems Gandhi was correct when he said, 'Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not for every man's greed.' So great is the modern world's escalating industrialization that is anticipated to occur will exceed the total amount of industrialization in the world since the beginning of mankind to the end of the Second World War.

The significance of this sort of arithmetic is that the known reserves of many minerals essential for existing types of technology and the known reserves of most fossil **fuels will be exhausted at present rates of use within the next few hundred years.** Some, such as natural gas, mercury and copper will be exhausted quite soon. There are all sorts of uncertainties about resource constraints, nevertheless there is a wide consensus that we are now at a crossroads. We cannot continue much longer on the road we are travelling without total disaster for posterity.

Tunnel of darkness

18 One of America's most thoughtful historians and economists has recently produced a powerful and pessimistic prognosis. 'Is there hope for mankind?' asks Robert Heilbroner in his book *An Inquiry into the Human Prospect*.

We are entering an era in which rapid population growth, the presence of oblitative weapons, and dwindling resources will bring international tensions to dangerous levels for an extended period . . . In all likelihood we must brace ourselves for the consequences . . . the risk of 'wars of redistribution' or of 'preemptive seizure', the use of social tensions in the industrialized nations over the division of an ever more slow-growing or ever diminishing product, and the prospect of a far more coercive increase of national power as the means by which we will attempt to bring these disruptive processes under control. . . The outlook for man, I believe, is painful, difficult perhaps desperate, and the hope that can be held out for his future prospect seems to be very slim indeed . . . the answer to whether we can conceive the future other than as a continuation of the darkness, cruelty, and disorder of the past seems to me to be no; and to the question of whether worse impends, yes.

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There is an agony in Heilbroner's writing which shows how desperately he would like to be proven wrong. The sapping force behind the problems Heilbroner lists is a crisis in the spirit of man recognizable as a loss of nerve and a sense of hopelessness about the present and a malaise and fear about the future.

19 Reflecting on his world, millenia ago, Ecclesiastes made a similar comment: 'Oh, what a weary task God has given mankind to labour at! I have seen everything that is done here under the sun, and what a vanity it is, what chasing of the wind! . . . Vanity of vanities. All is vanity. For all his toil, his toil under the sun, what does man gain by it?' A thoroughly depressing assessment. But it is one many are making today. **Everything goes round in circles and gets nowhere. Man's striving is just a beating of the wind. There is no ultimate meaning to it all. There is nothing I can do that will change it. It will not help the Indians if I eat less. It will not reduce air pollution if I deny myself the use of a motor car. If some maniacal politician presses the nuclear war button, nothing I can do will stop it. What is the value of anything I can do compared with the incredible changes that are needed in the world?**

This mood I can share. But I cannot live with it. Pessimism and hopelessness about man serves only to maintain the status quo. It has the deadening effect we all experience in our moments of depression. **No change can come from it. To brood over the past and to fear the future is to miss the present. It alone provides an arena for action. The present is pregnant with possibility.** But we have to give it direction and meaning. We do not have to begin with injustices perpetuated far from where we live and work. We can begin with injustices at home. It takes only on place, one instant, one single act, to become part of mankind. Life depends upon events around us. Yse but, life depends as much upon our response to events as to the events themselves. It is what a man brings to the crisis, not the crisis itself, that determines the prospect.

20 **Out of frustration comes hope. The end can be the beginning.** That too I know as an experience that time and again has buoyed me up. 'We are all in the gutter', said Oscar Wilde, 'but some of us are looking at the stars.'

To change the metaphor, we are now in a dark tunnel. The darkness in which we are travelling continues into the future distance in total darkness. But there is a crossroad in the tunnel. And at the end of that tunnel there is a light. What is the point of continuing on in darkness when there is some prospect of light if we change our direction? Is there hope for mankind? None, if we continue in our present direction; some, if we change to a totally different course. But first let us examine some of the elements of our malaise.

The quality of life – up or down?

The pursuit of material things in the affluent Western world has not brought the promised paradise on earth. Instead it throws into the clearest, coldest light the spiritual, ethical and philosophical hunger of mankind. It is this hunger which remains unsatisfied in the affluent society.

Increase in goods does not bring with it an increased sense of life as worth living. The individual who pollutes the air with his factory and the kid who slashes the seats of the railway carriage both represent the same thing. **They do not care about each other or their nation or the world. Affluence does not seem to increase our care for things worth caring for.** Further, we find that, as we become increasingly able to afford the 'good life' it becomes increasingly impossible to buy. It evades our grasp. **Our quality of life falls.** From where I write I

21 look out onto a part of Sydney Harbour where there is moored a luxurious motor yacht. Written in large letters on its stern is the name Freedom. I wonder from time to time if its owner really did buy freedom. Or did he buy escape?

Freedom is part of the quality of life. So is any quality that contributes to a person's own feeling that his life is worth living. Quality of life is measured by a person's feelings that his potentialities for creative work and relationships with others are being realized. If a society has an increasing number of suicides, of people opting out on drugs and alcohol, of stress-induced illness, then these are all measures of a fall in the quality of life.

In his study of the universal needs of human beings, Professor Stephen Boyden of the Australian National University has drawn up a list of optimal health needs which were satisfied in a primitive primeval society but none of which could be regarded as characteristic of the conditions of life of a typical member of a modern Western community. Here is his list:

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- **Opportunities and incentives for personal creative behaviour, usually with clear goal-direction, involving especially the exercise of learned manual skills, but including story-telling, music making and so on.**
- **A considerable degree of emotional involvement in the main activities of the day.**
- **An immediate sense of purpose associated with the main activities of the day.**
- **A full awareness of one's role and usefulness in the community.**
- **General opportunities for self-expression and self-fulfilment.**

Boyden's thesis is that deviation from these requirements is likely to result in psychological and/or physiological maladjustment. Since disorders following our failure to fulfil these requirements are unlikely to take the form of painful or lethal disease, they are permitted to persist and accumulate in the population.

We can think about quality of life in another way. If we draw a graph with quality of life on the vertical axis and material standard of living (GNP per capita) on the horizontal axis, **the quality of life will be seen to rise with increases in standard of living. That is true to the point where man's basic needs are provided for, including his needs for education, travel, and enjoyment of friendships. But after a certain peak value, quality of life falls with further increase in the material standard of living.** The fall is due to many causes which need more study than we have given them. Some are external. 'An attitude of life', says economist E.F.Schmacher, 'which seeks fulfilment in the single-minded pursuit of wealth – in short materialism – does not fit into this world, because it contains within itself no limiting principle, while the environment in which it is placed is strictly limited.' Other causes are 'internal'; acquisition of money and things become status symbols, man eats too much, he does not walk and his human relationships are suspect because of his acquisitiveness. Indeed the relationship between standard of living and quality of life is similar to that between the quantity of food a person eats and his health. We have basic requirements in calories and all the other nutritive necessities but overfeeding produces ill-health and is a part of the cause of many of modern man's ailments. Most of the diseases from which man in the developed world dies are diseases of civilization which have given him too much of too many things which in these qualities become disvalues in his life. Bigger is not better.

23 Once subsistence levels are passed, man's more enduring satisfactions are to be found in friendship, trust and love and are augmented by his perception of nature, and of beauty, art and music. It is hardly plausible to believe that a sustainable attempt to amass even larger quantities of goods can add very much to his happiness.

Much of the developed world appears to be too far to the right-hand side of our graph. An increase in standard of living (as measured by production of material goods) will not prevent quality of life from deteriorating further. Yet this is precisely what most rich societies are tending towards now.

Much of the poor world lives on the left side of our curve. They have a long way to go in increasing their standard of living before their basic physical needs are met. That is the gross injustice of the world. The rich consume resources at a rate that is harmful to the quality of their lives while the poor cannot get enough to satisfy basic physical needs. Many times I have participated in international meetings on inequities of distribution in the modern world. Oft times the discussion about all sorts of needs would become academic and theoretical. **At that point an Indian or other third world delegate would raise his voice and simply say that for most of his people what they needed was enough food for the day and a roof over their heads. Give us that and we shall be satisfied for we have as yet been unable to satisfy those barest of needs.**

24 **If our objective is that quality of life for all should rise and that it should be sustained, then the material standard of living of one section of the world needs to fall and that of the poor should rise.** In his book Rethink, G. Rattray Taylor suggests that the Utopian citizen will be more sophisticated than we are and will know more concretely what really gives him satisfaction and what provides only a temporary lift. **He will know what he can readily do without. He will also assess his demands against the true social costs and decide whether or not to go ahead, instead of merely asking whether he has enough to pay for it.**

Light at the end of the tunnel – the sustainable society

The basic proposition of this book is that a fundamental transformation needs to take place in western culture and in those developing countries which are embracing the same values. **From a society whose direction is primarily oriented to material growth we have to move to one which is more in conformity with the carrying capacity of the earth and in which a high quality of life for all peoples in all countries can be attained and then sustained indefinitely.** The sustainable society is dependent upon an ecologically ordered world.

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The world as it is now is not sustainable indefinitely. It is an ecologically disordered world. **When the facts of the world are put together the result looks like an awful accident. No one could have designed the world that way. It is undesigned.** The sweeping and unprecedented technological transformation of the world came about by an accidental revolution, a revolution in science and technology that was never planned. All our most pressing political, social and economic problems have their origin in science and technology. Because the technological revolution was accidental Michael Harrington has called our century ‘the accidental century’. ‘Either’, says Harrington, **‘Western man is going to choose a new society – or a new society will choose, and abolish him.’** **Left to itself the present world society will not automatically transform itself into a sustainable society. This**

25 **can only be achieved by concreted action, deliberately chosen and aimed at specific goals.**

I am sufficiently aware of the ‘political realities’ to appreciate that many of the proposals for the sustainable society will be considered impracticable.

To be aware of ‘political realities’ is to be aware of obstacles in the way without necessarily knowing with any degree of certainty how they can be removed. For example, the power of multinational corporations is a ‘political reality’ of the world today. Many of them are on a par economically with large nation-states. Of the top one hundred entries in a list of nation-states (according to gross annual sales), fifty-nine are nation-states and forty-one are multinational corporations. Multinational corporations currently do about US\$500 billion worth of business in foreign territories. This represents about one-sixth of the gross world product. I.T.T., Ford Motor Company, I.B.M., Nestles, Leverhulme, and dozens of other corporations move about the globe in a never ending search for new markets and profits.

Does it make sense when a multinational corporation enters a developing country and spends more on advertising its expensively packaged goods than the country spends on education, in order to give the rich

26 **in the poor countries the privilege of buying the same goods as the rich can buy overseas?** When people need wheat, soybeans and rice the F.M.C. Corporation opens tomato paste plants in Brazil, Chile, Honduras, Iran and Turkey and citrus juice plants in Venezuela, Dominica, Morocco, Egypt and Algeria. **It pays to tickle the palates of the rich elites rather than to fill the bellies of the poor. The multinational corporations to be sure add to global productivity, but the benefits of such productivity are unevenly distributed.**

Another ‘political reality’ is that land tenure reform in developing countries is enormously difficult to institute because such reforms impinge on the privileged position of powerful interest groups which are unlikely to accept them without fighting back. Yet without wide ranging reform of land tenure it is impossible to enable the poverty stricken peasantry who attempts to scratch a subsistence from inadequate plots of land to improve their hapless lot. In India, where it is alleged that the landowners represent no more than three or four per cent of the farming population, it is naïve to fail to see how unjust and uneconomic land tenure systems render futile so many other efforts. The huge reforms needed must be carried out by the developing countries themselves. The main responsibility of the developed countries is to cease strengthening the powerful vested interests that have been delaying or stopping those reforms in developing countries.