

***Professor Ian Lowe***

**Summary remarks**

at the

**Fenner Conference on the  
Environment**

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***Australian Academy of Science***

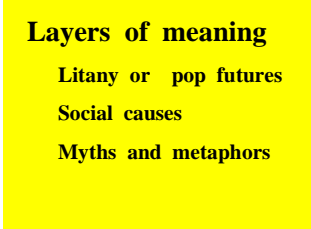
***Canberra***

# Population and environment: some integrating ideas

Ian Lowe

This is Professor Ian Lowe's summary remarks to the recent Fenner Conference

In untangling such a complex issue, I find it helpful to use the framework developed by Richard Slaughter and Sohail Inayatullah for analysing futures. In its simpler form, this recognises that the debate is being pursued at three distinct levels. Most political discourse [and, alarmingly, most media reporting and comment] is confined to the Litany level, superficial discussion of broad trends with no analysis of driving forces or cause-effect relationships.

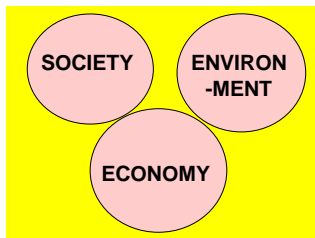


Most of the discussion at the Fenner Conference was at the second level, Social Causes, using the analytical techniques of particular disciplines to seek a deeper understanding of the causes or driving forces behind the observable trends. The main obstacles to moving forward are at the third level of myth or metaphor, the deeply-held values that underpin the approach taken. We know we are dealing at this level when we get responses like that given at the conference by one respected media figure. When challenged by Dr John Coulter, who pointed out that OECD figures completely refute the claim that rapid population growth is associated with increasing material prosperity, he replied "I haven't looked at the OECD literature, but I think a lot of people would dispute what you said". In other words, he has no factual basis for his claim, but will continue to make it in the face of the evidence because a lot of his equally uninformed mates would make the same specious claim. The same journalist's contention that the commercial media simply "follow

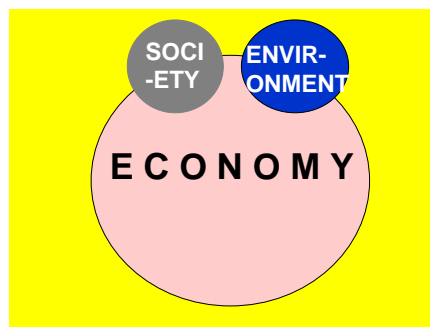
conventional wisdom" is another myth, since the newspaper which publishes his writings is very happy to challenge conventional wisdom when it conflicts with the paper's ideology. Conventional wisdom in Australia sees the US-Australia trade agreement as bad for this country, sees the mindless complicity with the US invasion of Iraq as a disaster and thinks we need to do much more to protect the environment, but you won't see those views reflected by the editorial opinion of The Australian.



There are at least four examples of underlying myth or metaphor being important in the debate about population and environment. One economist suggested to the conference that economy, society and environment are "the three legs of the stool", implying they are equally important. That metaphor would at least be an improvement on the one implicitly used by most decision-makers, the pig-headed model in which the economy is the main game, like the face of a pig, with society and environment

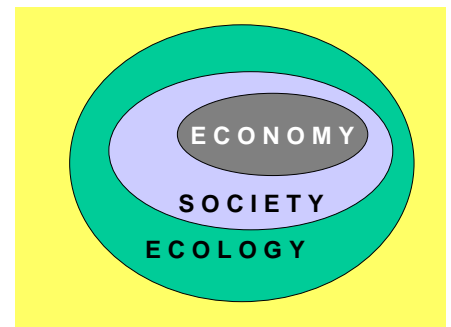


as smaller domains of importance, like the pig's ears. Those who accept this metaphor see it as logical to believe that economic progress is more important than social cohesion or environmental integrity, or even to extend the view to a belief that social and environmental problems will all be



solved if the economy is strong. The myth endures in the face of irrefutable evidence, such as the Australian Bureau of Statistics' report *Measuring Australia's Progress*.

Released in 2002, this report found that all of the economic indicators it surveyed had been positive since 1990, but the social indicators were mixed, half better and half worse, while all but one of the environmental indicators has got worse since 1990. The facts show that the illusion of economic progress is being achieved by the running down of our natural and social capital, but the myth of the prevailing importance of the economy endures. If you look at the Earth from space you can't see the economy. You can see the perilously thin layer of air



that supports life, and the physical features that separate different human societies, oceans and rivers and mountain ranges. If we use the view from space as our metaphor, we are led to a much more rational model. It shows human societies as living within the boundaries of natural ecological systems, on which we depend for breathable air, drinkable water, edible food, a sense of cultural identity, spiritual sustenance and so on. Within each society, the economy is an important sub-set, but only a sub-set. There are many things we expect

from society, such as security, a sense of identity, companionship and love, which are not part of the economy. That underlying metaphor leads to the ecologically rational conclusion that our social and economic planning needs to recognise the limits of the natural world and work within them. The pig-headed model ignores that reality.

A second metaphor underpinning the debate is the notion of the individual as a consumer. This is an extraordinary metonym, with the part standing for the whole. In this case seeing the individual as **stomach**. We do not use resources, we **consume** them. This metaphor elevates greed from a pardonable human weakness to having almost the status of a virtue. Destroying resources is no longer an indulgence but an economic duty. Consume, be silent, die, comforted in the knowledge that you are helping the economy to grow. As was recently observed, the ancient seven deadly sins – pride, lust, gluttony, sloth, anger, envy and avarice – have become the seven marketing imperatives of the modern world, used, as Clive Hamilton put it, to persuade people to buy things they don't want, with money they don't have, to impress people they don't like. The pressure on natural resources and the environment is the product of a growing population, each on average consuming more each year than the year before.

Another myth underlying this approach is that of infinite resources. Economists and their acolytes proudly state that they were right and the Club of Rome were wrong, that the idea of limited resources has been dispelled by the miracle of economic incentives. While it is true that increasing price does make marginal oil fields profitable and so increases the resource base, no amount of willingness to pay will conjure oil from rocks that contain none, or bring back an extinct species, or restore fields destroyed by salinity within a human lifetime. This is a particularly dangerous myth, as it leads decision-makers to ignore the imminent peak in world oil production and behave as if cheap petroleum was

a permanent benefaction from the geological deities, rather than an evanescent phenomenon which future generations will only read about in history books.

The final metaphor we should recognise is in the title of the Fenner conference, population and environment. The word environment gives an image of our surroundings, a backdrop against which we play our parts in the human drama. But the natural world is not simply our surroundings. We are an integral part of the natural systems. Just like gum trees or goannas or galahs, we rely on the natural systems to provide our needs and process our wastes. The metaphor of our "environment" lets us think we are immune from the natural laws which govern the interactions of species, a dangerous illusion that blinds us to the reality that no species can expand its population indefinitely in a closed system. The human population will be brought into balance with natural flows, if not by considered social action: by starvation, disease and fighting among ourselves. We should be aiming for a more civilised future for our descendants by striving to stabilise the population at a level that can be sustainably supplied with the needs of a dignified life.

That discussion makes abundantly clear that we need a trans-disciplinary approach, recognising that the problem of bringing human needs into balance with the capacity of natural systems requires the skills and knowledge of all the disciplines represented at the Fenner conference, as well as several others such as psychology and engineering. There is a clear need for institutional reform to facilitate the style of trans-disciplinary inquiry that is needed. There may be understandable scepticism about the notion of an intellectual innovation coming from Queensland, and the very idea of a Queensland Academy may seem to those in southern States to border on being an oxymoron. Despite those understandable concerns, we now have in that State, re-badged by its Premier as the Smart State rather than the Sunshine State, a Queensland

Academy of the Arts and Sciences, with the avowed purpose of bringing together the talents from all areas of endeavour to address our complex problems. It is a useful model to consider. The goal must be to achieve a transition from the present trajectory of development, which is clearly unsustainable, to a new society that is in balance with the natural world. The present ecological footprint exceeds the sustainable yield from natural systems; we have to get back into balance.

**Setting a target in terms of the overall ecological footprint would convey a crucial message: since the sustainable yield of the biosphere is finite, more people means less per person. Those who are arguing for continuing population growth would be seen to be effectively calling for reduced material welfare per person.**

There is no easy path forward. Politicians like to treat us like naïve children and tell us bed-time stories: trust us, you can pay less tax and have more services, you can increase the population and have more per person. In the real world, there is no magic pudding which keeps replenishing. There are difficult trade-offs to be negotiated – between rich and poor, between urban and rural, between men and women, between this and future generations. These difficult choices will only be politically sustainable if the whole community is involved in the process. That is the pre-eminent challenge to our institutions. We have to devise structures of governance and community involvement that will allow us to make difficult decisions, taking into account the needs of those who cannot express their preference in today's market or this year's election: all other species and all future generations. It is no exaggeration to say that the future of our civilisation depends on our ability to achieve that goal. On the optimistic assumption that we succeed, I hope that future generations will look back and see the 2004 Fenner conference on population and environment as a crucial step along the bumpy path to a sustainable future.#