

Curb consumption to save our race

BOB BROWN, Mercury News, Hobart
May 20, 2020

THE COVID-19 pandemic is an outcome of our mega-herd homo sapiens demanding too much from Earth's finite ecosystem.

Nature culls unsustainable populations, regardless of the species. For homo sapiens this cull is a warning: business as usual will see much worse to come.

As our human herd heads toward 11 billion at the end of this century, with far more effort to increase it than to curb it, the COVID-19 death toll should have set alarm bells ringing. Instead, in downtown America, lethally armed men and women are waving swastikas and the Stars and Stripes and demanding that the pandemic lockdown, which others need to avoid death, be lifted. The most powerful official on the planet, President Trump, is egging them on. Their shared disdain for the science at elbow is as myopic as it is prevalent.

The question of our species' survival on this tiny planet looms large: can our commonsense assert itself over instinctive selfishness?

Can the in-built quest for more stuff be overridden by an intelligent curb on consumption to save our life on Earth?

Trump's petulant behaviour is not the main problem. It is a subset of the religion of materialism, based on the god of relentless growth, which has overtaken all but the most remote, indigenous societies and belief systems on the globe. As they come to grips with the COVID-19 pandemic, the world's 200 governments are planning a return to relentless growth relying on population increase.

However, you cannot have endless growth in a finite system. It will break down.

Just two of the red lights flashing at us all are the accelerations of extinctions of our fellow species and of global heating.

A post-pandemic recourse to conventional growth economics will worsen, not fix, both. H. Sapiens is on the brink of a maelstrom of its own making.

One can cavil with exact figures, but we are already way beyond Earth's capacity to replace the living resources our herd is consuming.

We wake up each day to fewer forests, fisheries, glaciers and species; less arable land, coral, oxygen and room; and more mouths to feed, backs to clothe, shelters to erect and transport lanes obliterating former food-producing fields and forests.

An ancillary fact which schoolchildren raise on their placards is that "THERE IS NO PLANET B". This finite Earth is all we have.

On the face of it, we are a hopeless case. H. Sapiens has taken dominion over the Earth and all its creatures save itself.

In Australia's 2019 elections, 90 per cent voted for candidates advocating mining and burning more coal, gas and oil, continued deforestation, cruelty to refugees and depleted foreign aid.

The radical restructuring of global society to rescue our future requires the H. Sapiens herd, until now largely comatose, to wake up, engage in self-sacrifice and reinstate the Golden Rule which was held as the guide for human welfare until the advent of market economics.

The billion richest people on Earth must pull our belts in and share, the billion poorest must be uplifted from abject poverty. Our fellow creatures must be guaranteed living room. Economic strategy must aim at population growth reversing, not exploding. The sprawl of human society into Earth's remnant wild lands and oceans, including its tropical forests and the Arctic and Antarctic, must stop.

There is not yet a democracy or dictatorship on Earth which isn't for more stuff for everyone, now. The adjective "sustainable" has been hijacked to adorn the word "growth" rather than the word "planet".

There are primitive moves to measure happiness ahead of money, but that is what they are: primitive, tentative and not taken seriously by the world's power elite or, as yet, much of the world's populace.

Saving ourselves from ourselves is a tall order. It will require strong moral leadership. Government must rein capitalism in. The de facto, unelected, governance by the plutocracy currently running the planet must be replaced by agreed global governance of all, by all and for all, including those coming after us.

Those Americans brandishing long-guns against pandemic restrictions indicate that there will be no road to re-establishing global security without violence. The passive and compassionate among us had better get ready for some brutal confrontations with aggressive materialism.

Life on Earth will not go on unless that violent, well-armed greed impulse is suppressed.

For this to happen, those of us motivated to rescue the planet have to get the majority on side.

In 1937, Britain's prime minister, Neville Chamberlain arrived back in London brandishing his "peace in our time" pact with Hitler. The church bells were ringing and a million people danced in the streets. This is a salient story for everyone now grappling with the scientific projections of disastrous global heating in a fractured society with spreading nuclear armaments and robotic death machines.

Better to confront it early than engage in make-believe or denial while bad gets worse.

Some scientists predict that, full steam ahead, our end-of-century population will be closer to one billion. The late great Stephen Hawking postulated that we are on the brink of self-elimination.

We have to install leaders who will take on the prevailing mass materialist myopia, and the sooner the better. Those leaders will need policies including intergenerational equity, global community and the priority of human destiny if H. Sapiens' blighted future on this wonderful little planet is to be rescued.

President Clinton said: "It's the economy, stupid!" Well, no, it's the environment, stupid!

Yet, for now, President Trump has abolished environmental regulations in the US to stimulate business and growth. Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison is following suit, promising to cut green tape as a priority.

Both advocate tying up environmental campaigners while aiding logging, mining and habitat destruction. Post-pandemic planning is aimed to stimulate our most destructive corporations rather than curb their planetary recklessness.

A poignant event leading into this trajectory was last week's Queensland Supreme Court ruling banning Aboriginal leader Adrian Burragubba and his son Coedy from their ancestral lands, handed over by the Queensland Labor government to Indian billionaire Gautam Adani to profit from exploiting one of the world's largest coal deposits.

A thousand kilometres south of the Adani mine, in Tasmania, are some of the most carbon-dense forests on Earth. Liberal Premier Peter Gutwein, backed by Prime Minister Morrison, is increasing the logging of those forests, killing their wildlife and injecting megatonnes of their formerly-banked greenhouse gases into Earth's already overloaded atmosphere.

Thinking on all of this, one can implode, explode ... or take action.

In the post-pandemic months, as intelligent Australian citizens continue to protest the Adani mine, I am going back to join them.

Or, with companions, I'll be in the Tasmanian forests obstructing their needless destruction. We'll welcome all the company we can get standing up for Earth's life-giving biosphere. What else would you do?

Dr Bob Brown is a former leader of the Australian Greens.