

Tackling climate change

Today is Earth Day. KENNEDY GRAHAM examines what it means for mankind.

Today is Earth Day, the 38th the United Nations has observed since 1971. Working in New York in the early 1990s, I would look in on the ceremony performed by the Secretary-General on the March equinox. He would ring the Japanese Peace Bell on the UN lawn, giving thanks for the beauty and bounty of the planet, lamenting the continuous diminishment of its resources, and urging the international community to combat climate change.

We then hived off to Earth Summit in '92, to adopt the Framework Convention against climate change. The Brundtland Report was the latest bible on global redemption, defining sustainable development which would leave the planet in reasonable condition for our children.

At Rio, Al Gore, vice-presidential aspirant, would speak his Parable of the Frog. Freddy lacks the sensory capacity for any threshold of action. Placed in water that is being steadily heated to a boil, he will not trigger any internal alarm to jump out. That was the metaphorical warning for humanity.

The 41st President of the United States arrived off the plane, announcing that the US lifestyle was not up for negotiation — a different kind of warning. China agreed, at least for her own part. The West should, it said, think of greenhouse gas emissions not only in absolute terms where it may be eclipsed by China within decades, but in per capita terms if democracy were to mean anything at the global level.

Back in the jungle, US Congresswoman Claudine Schneider had, seven years earlier, introduced her US Global Warming Prevention Act 1985. An indifferent US congress had no time to give it other than jeering consideration, preoccupied as it was with losing the war-of-the-decade in Central America.

Around that time the Gaia theory of global homeostasis was gaining currency. Earth has its own

biospherical feedback loop, runs the theory, in which reactions will occur in natural response to any exogenous perturbation, oblivious to the nature of the cause.

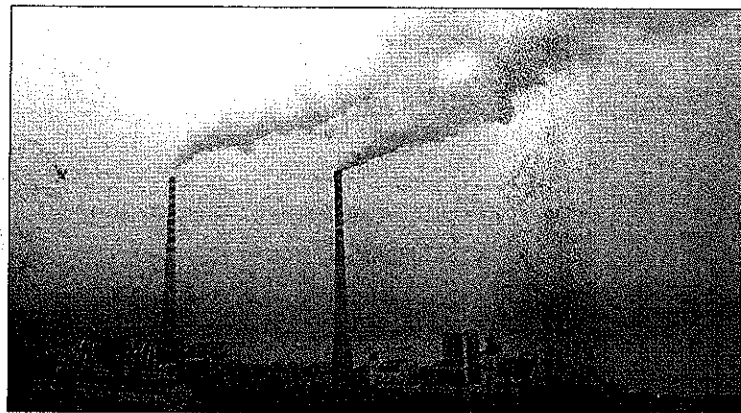
Any anthropogenic burp such as human-induced greenhouse gas emissions will thus heat the planet, the planet's biosphere will respond, and humans will prove cosmically dispensable. No space, in Gaia theory, for divine providential guidance. Gaia, after all, was the Greek goddess of Earth.

Progenitor of the theory, British scientist Dr James Lovelock, remains, 20 years on, pessimistic over the human future. He is sceptical of the human capacity to turn our socio-economic direction around in time to avert human disaster. The global population, he thinks, will plummet from 9 billion in mid-century to 0.5b by the end.

Forecasting the decline of the human race is not every politician's recipe for success. But if we do live in such dramatic times as Gore and Lovelock would have us believe, then normal electoral judgments and traditional political leadership are counter-productive.

Gore, in post-presidential-trauma phase of life, has become the first global politician, using his political capital and modern technology to sell a global message about a global problem direct to the global community. Yet his message was dependent on the commercial vagaries of box office entertainment. And the inconvenient truth of his personal home power bill did nothing for the credibility of his message.

NZ comprises one-twentieth of 1% of the global population. Our 77m tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions rank us 11th highest per capita in the world. We are way off our Kyoto target, building up a financial liability post-2012 of some \$1.8b. We have been slow to introduce our fledgling emissions trading scheme. We are a minor follower in this unprecedented global drama.



Polluting the planet: the fate of the Earth rests with 11 countries.

The aspiration of the Prime Minister last year for NZ to become the first carbon-neutral country was made without even a full comprehension of what that means, let alone how it might be achieved.

The fate of the Earth will be largely decided by the 11 countries with over 100 million each, collectively comprising 61% of humanity. China and India alone account for 35%, two countries determined to emulate Western lifestyles, come what may.

For climate change is not the cause of our problem — it is the symptom. The underlying cause is our way of life — our profligate consumption patterns and our unsustainable production methods in our manic pursuit of material "pleasure".

In NZ, our ecological footprint is 6 hectares per person. The bio-productive land globally available to each human is currently 1.8 — falling as the population grows by 74m a year. Our per capita footprint is 9th largest in a world of 192 countries.

Who currently sits on 1.8ha per capita or thereabouts? Jamaica and Mauritius, Cuba and Azerbaijan. Could we live like them? Maybe with enough reggae — maybe not. Are we obliged to do so? Not if we find alternatives, within several decades, to our dependence on oil which has already peaked, and dirty coal which

hasn't. But no technological fix will rescue us from this one.

Meanwhile, we argue. The standoff over post-Kyoto greenhouse gas cuts turns on an altercation between those who refuse to look to the past and those who refuse to look to the future. The West maintains a studied silence over our 300-year historical role in inflating our material wealth through exploiting the South — which infuriates the South, then, and now

The South, in its determination to emulate the West, fulminates over the past, and through its sheer numbers places the future at risk — which frightens the West.

The tragedy of the commons will become the tragedy of the individual on some future Earth Day.

If our national leadership is to mean anything, it is surely to show some intellectual honesty and political courage in conveying tough news. We must reason from the global level to the national level to the individual level. None of us is exempt from individual liability and responsibility. We can begin by acknowledging that.

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