

Opportunities Beyond Carbon – the Best Crisis we ever had!

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August 2009

A key part of Al Gore's recent Melbourne speech that received little coverage did not once mention sea levels, ice caps or cyclones. He detailed many potential disasters but also spoke of climate change to be *'the greatest opportunity that we have ever confronted'*. This phrase has more power than the rest of the speech combined.

One of Australia's leading thinkers in sustainability, Dr Sam Wells from the University of Adelaide, speaks eloquently about how paradigm shifts only occur when people are moving towards – are envisioning - a better future rather than moving away from failed paradigm.

The hysterical nature of the climate debate to date has provided a wonderful case study in this theory. Those with much to lose, the emissions intensive industries and their unions have decried how disastrous it will be to put a price on carbon. Those that have seen a possible future with uncontrolled emissions have been screaming that we must do something quickly otherwise the world will be irreparably damaged. The see-saw of public opinion has wavered, with the recent financial woes favouring the status quo.

Despite all of the front page coverage, there has been remarkably little change to anything we do as a community and as a nation. The politics of the current situation is impossible. The only options appear to be to destroy industry and the economy or to destroy the environment. No wonder political action appears indecisive. Dr Wells suggests that, because we have been unable to see a better future to move towards, we are like *'fearful creatures caught in the headlights of oncoming disaster'*.

This is exasperated by two types of media coverage of climate change: the no-hope horror stories inciting paralysing terror; and the 'happy ever after thanks to science' approach offering an effortless solution.

The continual coverage of melting ice sheets, sea level rises, droughts, severe storms and crop failures is essential in providing a context for debate on climate change. However, the tone is often so cataclysmic, so intent on relishing predictions of

upcoming disasters (Dave Sag of Carbon Planet has coined this 'carbon porn'), that many people are left with a defeatist attitude. In this light, the problem appears too big and too far advanced. We have passed the tipping point rendering all action pointless.

Stories of wonderful 'silver bullet' inventions that will 'solve' the climate change problem are equally as damaging. Tales of genetically modified carbon-munching trees, or dumping iron filings into the ocean allow the listeners to relax and dismiss cautionary news. To those accepting such stories, the problem appears insignificant in the face of man's scientific innovation. No additional action is required.

There may however be a better way of approaching this 'diabolical' problem: a way that will enable the community to focus on a better future. By focussing on the Opportunities rather than the problems, we could reduce emissions and maybe fix up some other problems all whilst simply chasing those opportunities. The paradigm would be changed and the emissions reductions would then just be a fortunate side effect rather than the main game.

Representatives of all communities including governments, businesses, investor groups and industry networks should be asking themselves not simply 'How do we reduce emissions?' but rather 'What changes might we make in our community to provide the greatest opportunities to improve both our economic, physical and social environments?'

Pedestrian Orientated Developments, stormwater capture and distributed generation projects are examples of new, simple, local projects with multiple benefits for the communities that host them.

There are however opportunities available at all levels. Businesses that provide the clean technologies of the future will be build profits and the investors that back them will find their 'alpha' returns. General business can benefit through resource efficiency and reputation enhancement and thereby improve profits. The nations that lead the way in building the future will have untold influence in the future. Maybe Australia can become a solar nation and seek to export power to Asia. Or maybe Australia's nanotechnology expertise will design solutions for the world that will reduce resources and waste without reducing amenity.

With this approach, the opportunity for a Government is to have the courage to build a long term vision of how a carbon constrained economy will emerge. This could reframe the whole discussion over the transition to a lower carbon economy away from increased costs and job losses to one of green collar job creation, economic development and more sustainable communities.

The opportunities abound for those willing to grab them. In the process, those that are focussed just on the problems will find themselves left well behind. When climate orators, such as Al Gore, focus their speeches on these opportunities, the whole community will finally engage in the debate and those that doubt the science will be irrelevant. To quote Stewart Taggart from Desertec-Australia, climate change might then be seen as the *'best crisis we ever had'*.

John O'Brien edited the book 'Opportunities Beyond Carbon: Looking Forward to a Sustainable World' that is published by Melbourne University Press. John is the Managing Director of Australian CleanTech, a research and broking firm that provides advice to cleantech companies and financial institutions.