

The ecological driving change in industry and

‘Our society has to re-think not only how we produce and consume but also how we live, learn and relate with others.’

By Drew Hutton

WRITERS on the environment are fond of using the concept of ‘risk society’, first promoted by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck, to define modern industrial societies. These societies have let the technological genie out of the bottle, giving us a productive capacity 100 times greater than that of pre-industrial society but giving us also the ‘risks’ of thermonuclear war, intractable toxic materials, and the massive destruction of habitat and climate change.

We have welcomed the advantages of electricity, aircraft travel, the eradication of diseases and so on, recognising that there are often down sides to these. However, more and more people are becoming aware that some of these risks have taken on the character of near-certain catastrophes, and that it is no longer a question of balancing advantage and risk but of averting disaster.

I am an historian by trade and life-long political activist and am less interested in identifying the factors underlying current social behaviour than those underlying social change. Therefore, rather than talking about ecological risk, which promotes discussion about aversion strategies, I like to use the term ‘ecological imperative’ which can be used to analyse those environmental factors driving social change.

The ecological imperative will be the primary driver of events in the 21st century. The Cold War, Osama bin Laden and other sources of global conflict will rapidly become irrelevant in the face of the realisation of what human activity is doing to the planet. Most of the indicators of the environmental health of the planet, such as air quality, freshwater quality, the maintenance of habitat such as tropical rainforests, wetlands, and coral reefs, are worsening. This process has been accelerating over the last 50 years and the situation shows little sign of improvement.

This ecological crisis has been brought about by the nature of human activity on the planet. The systems of production, developed by human societies in this period, are impacting on natural systems in such a way as to present those societies, now or within the next few decades, with a challenge — even, sometimes, to their continued existence. The ecological imperative then, is defined as the challenge of global ecological crises and the ability or otherwise of our social

institutions to deal effectively with these. Climate change, biodiversity loss and irresponsible resource management are presenting a challenge not only to our industrial and technological systems but also to the practice of politics itself.

Transitional strategies for a sustainable society

We need to develop clear, transitional strategies for the coming decades that will facilitate a non-violent path to a low-carbon, oil-independent and efficient resource use economy. Christine Milne’s paper *Re-Energising Australia*, written for the Australian Greens, attempts to chart such a strategic direction. Incorporating the most dynamic elements of traditional social democracy and of market mechanisms, and imbuing both with the ecological consciousness developed over the last five decades by the environment movement, Christine identifies three main pillars of energy policy. These are:

1. Introducing a target of reducing Australia’s greenhouse emissions to 30 per cent below 1990 levels by 2020 and to 80 per cent below by 2050 and establishing a rolling national five-year greenhouse emission budget with annual public progress reports.
2. Ratifying the Kyoto Protocol and negotiating a post-2012 global emission reduction treaty which commits Australia to serious legally binding reduction targets.
3. Forging, promoting and signing a global oil depletion protocol under which oil-importing nations would reduce oil imports each year by the rate at which the world’s oil resources are being depleted (currently about 2.6 per cent per annum), while oil-exporting nations should reduce their annual oil exports by the rate at which their particular national reserves are being run down.

She then goes on to identify many initiatives to re-energise not only the current carbon-intensive energy sector but also those institutions that reinforce our current dependence on a 20th century industrial model — including the education sector. In the energy sector these initiatives include:

1. Introducing a cap-and-trade emissions trading scheme for stationary energy emissions and some industrial processes

imperative: vocational education and training

and replacing fuel excise with a carbon tax on transport emissions in order to make the market pay a price for the environmental cost of carbon.

2. Establishing a Sun Fund, a major public investment in research, development and capacity building for energy efficiency and renewable energy.

3. Phasing out all subsidies to oil, coal and nuclear industries and replacing them with incentives for renewable energy and energy efficiency.

4. Banning all new coal-fired power stations.

In the manufacturing sector Milne argues for:

1. Introducing financial incentives for Australian production of electric cars.

2. Conducting a national assessment to identify low environmental impact, import replacing industries and using taxation, subsidy and trade measures to expand these to create competitive advantage in environmental management and renewable energy technologies.

She also argues that, to overcome the decade-long drought in research on renewable energy, we should restore public good research objectives in all publicly funded research, including Cooperative Research Centres (CRCs), re-establish the Renewable Energy R&D Corporation, re-establish and expand the Renewable Energy CRC, and establish an Energy Efficiency CRC.

Vocational Education and Training

As part of a comprehensive response to the challenges of climate change and 'peak oil' (the point in time when the maximum rate of global petroleum production is reached, and after which the rate of production enters its terminal decline) we need to lay the educational and skills basis for the social transformation that is required for the 21st century and TAFE has a big part to play in this.

We should begin by introducing appropriate remuneration and professional development for TAFE teachers and increasing per-student funding to at least 1996 levels, appropriately indexed. We should provide immediate one-off payments to address the adverse impacts of funding cuts since 1996. We should then phase out public funding of privately provided VET where TAFE could provide the same educational training and outcomes, and

incorporate the Australian Technical Colleges into state-funded TAFE systems. This would be accompanied by the abolition of all fees and charges for educational services and the provision of a means-tested living allowance to all full time students. The over-casualisation of teachers in the TAFE system should also be addressed in order to enhance the professionalism and expertise in the system. There should be a benchmark of 80 per cent of teaching by permanent staff throughout the public and private VET providers. Finally, governments should promote the availability of a wide range of apprenticeships, especially in rural and regional Australia.

The end result of all this, however, must be the increased ability of the education sector to provide the range of learning outcomes necessary for a high skill-based, resource-efficient, globally-oriented economy and a humane society.

Last Christmas my son gave me a copy of the grim and gritty American crime drama, *The Wire*, set in the city of Baltimore. I was particularly taken by a term used in the series by the Baltimore Police — "duking the stats". This meant that police on the beat would employ policing methods that would make their superiors, including their political masters, look good but would not require complex and difficult work. So, police would be told to arrest as many kids as possible for selling drugs on the street. To do this, resources were pulled from programs like the wire-tapping which was identifying the hierarchy of the crime syndicates and from the diversion programs in schools that were identifying potential problem children and steering them in positive directions rather than into crime.

I was impressed by how similar this was to what is done to identify supposedly worthy outcomes in our education systems. Rather than working within a framework of what constitutes a good society and of the knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to work toward that goal, we narrow down the outcomes we want from the education system so that they are more easily measurable and designed to advantage certain individuals or elite groups. In the TAFE sector this means mandating performance outcomes that move TAFE from fulfilling its broad educational responsibilities to a focus on those areas that are largely skill-based (defining skills as those that relate most closely to the more immediate needs of industry) and promote a private rather than a public view of education. As your Federal TAFE Secretary, Pat Forward, recently wrote:

The essentially reductionist approach forced by narrow instrumentalist training in a resource-poor environment will condemn a generation of working people to a very barren working life. In a punitive industrial relations climate, the bargaining power of workers is further reduced when their access to the broader educational knowledge which underpins and is an essential part of their trade or vocation is denied by their training system.

Within this context workers will not have the education necessary in a rapidly changing, challenging environment. "Duking the stats" was an integral part of the management of education systems headed by such people as Julie Bishop and Andrew Robb, members of an intellectually lazy, ideologically driven, short-term focused Howard government. It should not be part of the make-up of institutions attempting to respond to the challenges of climate change and 'peak oil'. It remains to be seen how well the Rudd government responds to both these general challenges and the sorts of necessary, associated institutional changes, but we would be naïve to think it would do much more than provide some breathing space from the assaults of the Howard government and give transformative voices in the community more opportunities to be heard.

Our society has to re-think not only how we produce and consume but also how we live, learn and relate with others. As well as the lower-order skills, students need to be able to problem solve, think holistically as well as analytically, consider networks and processes not just outcomes, and consider how to reach objectives by doing things differently not merely by doing more of the same. We need to develop new models or re-develop old models of interaction, from neighbourhoods to the international, that are infused with cooperative, humane and ecological values. The TAFE system has a significant part to play in this historic project. — **Speech delivered to AEU National TAFE Council AGM, 15 January.**

Drew Hutton was a founding member of the Australian Greens and spokesperson for the Queensland Greens since its formation

