

Contribution to Conservative Party's
Quality of Life Policy Group

*Concerning the **root causes** of non-sustainable human activity*

by Roger Hicks (www.spaceship-earth.org)

When tackling big problems, we are often encouraged to "think outside the box", but when someone actually does so – as I have – and comes up with insights and ideas that don't fit nicely into any of the existing boxes, they tend to be ignored or ridiculed.

This is not surprising, in view of what is known about human cognition: i.e. that we don't experience reality itself, but an interpretation of it, produced by our brains, which is adapted to be more-or-less consistent with the view we already have of the world, and is strongly influenced by the prevailing consensus and our own vested interests.

The view we have of the economy and our way of life is no exception, and because we depend on them so much, we are not inclined to entertain any ideas that might seriously undermine it.

This is the cause of what can only be described as our *collective blindness* to the perilous impact that human activity (our economy and way of life) is having on our finite and vulnerable planet, and the threat it poses, if not to ourselves, certainly to our children and grandchildren.

Perhaps you already feel inclined to dismiss me as part of the *lunatic fringe*, whose disturbing, *out-of-the-box* view can be comfortably disregarded. However, that will not affect its validity, but simply reduce still further the amount of time we have left to avert disaster.

I don't expect my view of the world to be accepted just like that. With the weight of public and most expert opinion firmly against me (even with all the concern now about global warming and the environment), it would be extremely difficult (virtually impossible) for people to do so. From their present perspective it seems far more likely that I am the one who is mistaken. Perhaps I am, but I *implore* you, nevertheless, to give my ideas serious, unhurried, consideration, because even if they are just partially correct (and I'm pretty sure they are at least that), they are of vital importance.

In my view, global warming is just one major consequence of an underlying Problem (spelt with a big P) that we should have faced up to 30 years ago, when publications such as "The Limits to Growth" by Meadows et. al. first drew broad public attention

to the fact that an ever increasing population of technologically empowered, but essentially *insatiable* human beings is placing an *unsustainable* drain and strain on Earth's finite resources and carrying capacity. Instead, because of the implications for our economy and way of life (including millions of jobs and trillions of dollars of vested interests), we went into *collective denial*. Which, essentially, is where we still are - virtually everyone, although some more than others - struggling both to and not to face up to the situation as the effects of our increasing impact on the planet become ever more apparent and threatening.

At the moment, despite all the talk about the environment, sustainability and saving the planet, we have yet to face up to the sheer scale and magnitude of the Problem. The threat it poses is terrifying, which only adds to our reluctance to face up to it; but continuing to bury our heads in the sand will not make it go away. On the contrary, like an approaching tsunami, it will engulf and destroy us if we refuse to recognise the threat. Only by facing up to it do we have any chance of avoiding catastrophe, by finding ways to make our economy and way of life *sustainable* (for 7-9 billion! people) in our own (humane) way.

If we fail to do so (as seems we will at the moment, because of our failure to understand the *root cause*, magnitude and urgency of the Problem), a ruthless mother nature will do it for us. The climate change we are witnessing is her just "*warming up*" for the job. If it entails reducing human numbers by 100's or even 1000's of millions, that is what she will do. She is not squeamish. The poor will suffer first, of course, as always, but for once we really are ALL in the same boat, *Spaceship Earth*, rich and poor alike.

The *root cause* of the Problem, which we are not facing up to, is our *animal nature*, in which our economy and way of life (in fact, our entire socio-economic order) are deeply rooted. Unsurprisingly, in view of what Charles Darwin is supposed to have taught us about human origins.

That's it, in a nutshell. But the implications are profound and will take a while to sink in, because they undermine much that we are familiar with and dependent upon and as a consequence will be resisted. The need for change makes us anxious, especially when it is radical and far-reaching, and even more so when it impacts our way of life and how we make a living.

The actual Boxing Day tsunami in the Indian Ocean was entirely predictable – and was in fact predicted; but none had occurred within living memory, so the politicians had *other* priorities than to spend money on an early warning system. Now we know just what a terrible mistake that was.

In order to gain the objectivity necessary to overcome our blindness and better understand the situation, what I have found extremely useful, and spent much time developing, is what I refer to as a *bio-anthropological* perspective, which I have

already alluded to, but will now attempt to summarise.

Man's behaviour evolved over millions of years to serve the survival and advantage of individuals and their family groups in the *natural environment*; it has had little or no time to adapt to the much larger social units of civilisation, which only developed in the past few thousand years. It is no wonder that our efforts to solve global problems are so hopelessly inadequate.

Man is not a *fallen angel*, but an animal, Earth's *Greatest* (aspiring) *Ape*, who greatly and dangerously overestimates his powers of understanding and reason; like a child, and misled, perhaps, by his scientific name: *Homo sapiens*, indeed! The failure to acknowledge, or even remotely recognise, the extent of our own blindness and irrationality (particularly amongst those in positions of power and authority, but also amongst scientists) is the biggest underlying threat to human survival (and the principal reason for my opposition to the large-scale use of nuclear energy).

The other important thing I have recognised from outside the box is that the *natural environment* has effectively been replaced by an artificial "*socio-economic environment*" (where we ALL have, and depend on, our niches) as the focus of our behavioural programming, which free-market capitalism has developed and been honed to take full (and thus such effective) advantage of. This explains why we persist in giving priority to the economy (the household of man in the *socio-economic environment*) rather than to ecology (the household of our planet in the natural environment), when it is obvious (were we not in a state of *collective denial*, and afraid of biting the hand that feeds us) that for medium and long-term human survival it has to be the other way around.

The truth - which far from fitting into any boxes, threatens to rupture or sweep many of them away (thus, the massive resistance to facing up to it) - is that our growth-dependent economy and the grossly materialistic way of life it engenders are both rooted in our primitive, animal nature and *fundamentally* unsustainable. Such a *bio-anthropological* approach to sustainability urgently needs to be taken up and further developed, so that it can be presented, first to the academic and scientific communities, and then to the general public, in preparation for the radical changes needed - not just to our economy and way of life, but also to many of the values, attitudes and (material) aspirations - rooted in our animal nature - which underlie them.

In view of our absolute dependency on, and vested interests in, the existing socio-economic order, achieving the rapid and radical (i.e. revolutionary) changes necessary for us to achieve *Sustainability* seem utterly unrealistic, with everyone naturally inclined (by millions of years of behavioural programming) to preserve their own niche and advantages (social status, source of income etc.) in the existing *socio-economic environment*. The solution is not to try changing the *existing* order, but to

create an *Alternative*, which, as it grows, we can transfer our activities, dependencies and vested interests to - everyone when they are ready and at their own pace, bit by bit, rather than in a panic-stricken hurry, but keeping in mind that we don't have a lot of time; just a couple of decades, perhaps, which for the task in hand is very short indeed (what a pity we didn't start in earnest 30 years ago!).

By “we” I mean those of us who have come out of denial (to some extent at least) and recognised what is at stake, for our children and coming generations. Surely, there can be no greater motivation than that. As we set to work creating a sustainable – and while we are about it, more just and humane – socio-economic order, others, seeing our example, will find it easier to come out of denial as well, and, in their own way, join us. There will be no need for coercion, which would be counterproductive anyway. This is where genuine *democracy* comes into its own: people being free to pursue their own *enlightened* self-interest. And what greater self-interest can there be than saving the planet for our children and future generations?

We have allowed ourselves to be deceived and dominated for far too long by our own animal nature and a socio-economic order that is rooted in and dependent on it (expending much of our brain power in rationalising and justifying it), giving absolute priority to MONEY as *the most versatile form of power*. We have to create an *alternative* socio-economic order that is rooted in our more *enlightened* human nature.

If this all sounds rather idealistic it is because at the moment that is what it is: just an idea – for saving the world. Although, the rudimentary beginnings of such an *Alternative* are already in existence: organic farming, fair trade, recycling, renewable resources, cooperative (rather than exploitative and competitive) economics, etc. What they lack, however, is the framework of a clear and distinct ideological alternative to the existing socio-economic order. This is what we need to develop and quickly start putting into practice, *democratically*, and not just allowing for, but actively promoting *diversity*.

Diversity is what gives the natural world beauty and stability. For the past 400 years or so, ever increasing globalisation, and the absolute priority given (by our animal nature) to economics, have been reducing diversity in all its forms, biological and human (not least, in the name of “*multi-culturalism*”). We need to give priority, not to economics, but to *Sustainability*, and to retaining and cultivating human, social, economic and biological diversity. What good are cars and cheap flights to us if there is nowhere left worth travelling to? And if only that were the worst of it!

I know how strong the inclination must be to dismiss what I am saying and banish me to the *lunatic fringe*. But please don't. Not until you – or a working group – have given serious and unhurried consideration to these ideas. You've nothing to lose, but (if I'm right) a whole world to gain.