

Transforming for Human Survival
Talk at Morialta Uniting Church Saturday 8 October 2016 Bob Douglas

1. Thank you for the invitation to share with you today what I see to be the most urgent challenge facing our species; namely transforming the human world in ways that will give our progeny a fighting chance of surviving the coming difficult decades.

2. We live in uniquely challenging times. An existential threat is one that threatens the continuing existence of life on earth. I am going to mention ten of them here and they are interconnected. In the right combination they could result in the extinction of all life on the planet during the lifetimes of our children or theirs. I am sure you are aware of most of them.

- They include the progressive collapse of the ecosystems on which our lives depend,
- the growing depletion of the planet's resources;
- the proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction;
- the currently uncontrolled pace of human induced global warming,
- the extensive poisoning of our environment by man-made toxins, chemicals and pollution,
- the marginal security of the food system on which the growing human population depends;
- the still growing human population and the expansion of cities everywhere;
- the prospect of pandemic disease spreading like wildfire through huge centres of overcrowding and poverty;
- the clever technologies that we are devising that we only dimly understand and which we are uncertain how to control, and
- finally the extent to which we delude ourselves that somehow by continuing to grow our numbers and economic demands on the planet, we will stumble on a mechanism for surviving the limits to growth.

3. Let me elaborate briefly on the threat of ecosystem collapse by referring to the concept of the human ecological footprint.

- The ecological footprint is a well developed and validated measure of the demand that humans are making on nature's ecosystems. It estimates how much biologically active land and water an individual or a human population uses to support its way of life.
- The footprint accounting system also measures the bio-capacity of the planet, which is how much biologically productive area, nature has available across the world.
- Globally, humans are using existing supplies of biologically active land and water at a rate 50% greater than the planet can replenish. At the rate the ecological footprint of the global population is growing, by 2050 we would need two planets worth of biologically active land and water to sustain our current population. But there is only one planet available.

4. An ever-growing human population with an ever-growing appetite for resources continues to exploit an ever-declining supply of biologically active land and water.

- For the current population of the world of 7 billion people there are around 1.8 global hectares of biologically active land and water available per person and if we

stayed at that usage and the population of humans did not expand, we could be sustainable.

- But we are using these resources at the rate of 2.7 global hectares per person, the human population is growing and the distribution of resources is deeply unfair.
- The 15% of the world's population who live in rich countries like ours currently use the resources of 6.4 global hectares per person of biologically active land and water.
- The 48% who live in middle income areas have an average footprint of 1.9 global hectares per person and
- The 37% living in poor countries have an average footprint of 0.8 global hectares per person.
- Australia's ecological footprint is one of the highest in the world at 8.2 global hectares per person for the 0.36 of the global population.

5. The good news about footprints is this:

- Nearly half of our footprint relates to greenhouse gas emissions and very substantial reductions are possible if we pay serious attention to climate change.
- Another substantial component of our footprint relates to the kinds of foods we eat and the way we manage waste.
- Footprint shrinkage is both feasible and essential. The starting point must be however, a recognition by everyone that shrinkage in the human ecological footprint is imperative and urgent. This is a problem, which the whole of humanity shares and in which Australia is among the worst offenders.

6. So what has been the human response? As yet, despite the efforts of millions of thoughtful people around the world who worry about these issues

- There are ideas and proposals, but not yet a coherent global response to these warnings.
- Most people and most governments are either in outright denial, trivialisation or ignorance of the treacherous situation, which we have created for ourselves as a species.
- And yet transformative change in the way we live, think, plan and behave is the only logical response to these perilous circumstances.
- Without it, human tenure of the planet will end and our children and theirs face a very uncertain and even doubtful future.
- I think the transformative change needs to begin with ordinary people like us. It simply will not begin among our political leaders unless they feel a relentless pressure from their constituents, that the time for a radical change in direction is NOW.

The other good news is that despite the powerful existential threats out there, it is probably not yet too late to act, if we act decisively. But the window for effective remedial action is closing very fast. Nothing I am saying today is particularly new or fresh.

7. The scientific consensus has been mounting for decades.

- Many of you will recall the 1968 publication by Paul and Anne Ehrlich of their book "the population bomb"

- And the publication in 1973 by the club of Rome of a book entitled “The limits to growth”. Both of these prophetic statements were laughed out of court and largely ignored by leaders and especially the economists of the day.
- Another world leading book was published in 1993 and written by my close friend and lately deceased colleague, Tony McMichael, a proud product of Adelaide, Tony wrote a prescient account, entitled “Planetary overload”. 23 years ago where he wrote "It is just now becoming conceivable that within several generations the human species may face threats to its survival because of its disruption of Earth's life supporting ecosystems". Since Tony wrote those words, human actions have resulted in the crossing of a number of critical system boundaries on which continuing human life on the planet depends. Global understanding of these matters has improved while planetary overload has steadily worsened. We are going backwards heading into an eco-catastrophe and as a species, have succumbed to the psychological defence of denial. At Tony's retirement festschrift nearly five years ago I said. “A change in the human mind set and in governance of the human economy will be needed to rescue us. We must now invest renewed efforts into the education of our young on the issue of eco-centrism and sustainability. Tony McMichael's professional life has been devoted to the scientific study of the relationship between the planetary overload, which he had described and the prospects for human health and survival.
- I am sure I do not need to remind you of the massive collaborative global effort that has been invested in the science of climate change during the past 30 years and the ways in which the science has been ignored, distorted and debased by those who do not wish to face up to its implications.

8. Let me say a little about the 2015 papal encyclical *Laudato si*.

9. This is a milestone, which has received quite inadequate attention from Catholics, Christians, and non-Christians alike.

- It is a remarkably readable document of six chapters and 246 paragraphs.
- It challenges humans everywhere to rethink the way we live and relate to the planet and also-
- to all creatures and to all other humans.
- In the opening chapter the pontiff discusses the science, culture, ethics and consequences of the changes in the environment that humans have brought about, climate change, water and resource depletion, loss of biodiversity, global inequality and the decline in quality-of-life and breakdown of society in many parts of the world. He says that humans are responding inadequately to these challenges and that we need only to take a look at the facts to see how our home is falling into serious disrepair and that what we are doing is utterly unsustainable. He says we have stopped thinking about the goals of human activity.
- Chapter 2 deals with a theological view of creation, with which many in the modern world will not necessarily find agreement and I certainly have some problems with lots of it. But I don't think this in any way invalidates the central arguments of the letter.
- Chapter 3 is about the human origins of the ecological crisis in which the Pope talks about anthropocentrism and the technology that has brought us to a crossroads. He says that while technology has remedied many problems, in the wrong hands and in many settings it constitutes a major threat to our species and to the planet. Francis says we have come to accept the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which is so

attractive to economists and financiers. But he says it is based on a lie that there is an infinite supply of resources. This, he adds, leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit. The Pope articulates an urgent need for us to move forward in a bold revolution. And he concludes the chapter with the telling words "a technology severed from ethics will not easily be able to limit its own power".

- Chapter 4 is about the interconnections between culture, the economy and the environment. He argues that the effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action here and now and that we need to recognise our responsibility to those who follow us and who will have to endure the dire consequences the way we currently live.
- In chapter 5, Francis proposes a drastic reconsideration of our notions of progress and the need to rethink the current economic approach. He says that the gravity of the ecological crisis demands that we all look to the common good embarking on a path of dialogue, which demands patience and discipline and generosity always keeping our feet firmly planted in the reality of what is happening to the planet. The Pope says that we must regain the conviction that we need one another; and that we have a shared responsibility for others in the world. Francis says we need a conversation that includes everyone; that there is an intimate relationship between how we treat the planet and the poor and that change must be begin with us, the people.
- In his closing chapter 6 the Pope says "many things have to change course but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin of our mutual belonging and of a future to be shared with everyone. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge, he says, stands before us and it requires that we set out on the long path of renewal. He adds that we must regain the conviction that we need one another; that we have a shared responsibility for others and the world and that being good and decent are worth it. Of course, I have only given you a tiny taste of the flavor of this important document, which I think is a vital call to all of the human species, that we are ignoring at our peril.

9. I would like also to say something about a new book by Julian Cribb that has only just been published last week and which I had the privilege of reading before its release.

10. Those who like me were given it for review have been unequivocal and unanimous in their praise of it. Here are a few comments

- Paul Ehrlich writes about it "Absolutely everyone with an interest in humanity should read this clear, authoritative, scary book. Robyn Williams, from the ABC says "This is the guide for our times; the overlapping hazards we prefer not to think about, but must. Here is a magisterial summary that spares no comfort zones but does show what we need to do and at last how to do it. Former Gov General, Michael Jeffery says "an overpopulated, resource depleted and environmentally wounded planet needs our urgent help. Julian Cribb provides timely and thoughtful answers." Prof David Lindenmeyer says "only rarely does someone write a "must read" book. This is one of them, "and environmentalist Ian Lowe says of it "it is comprehensive, accurate and measured in its assessment. It is an essential guidebook to help thoughtful people act responsibly.
- Cribb takes the 10 great existential challenges and identifies the ways we can approach each of them. He says the greatest challenge lies not in the physical threats we face but in our own minds. Our belief in non-material things like money, politics, religion and the human narrative often diverts and undermines our efforts to work together for survival. Like with Pope Francis, he says that this **MUST** change.

- Ignoring existential threats, he says, does not banish them. Inevitably, it only renders humanity less prepared. There is no other way to resolve a complex problem than to face it, to understand it thoroughly and then to take resolute and agreed species-wide action to prevent it.
- The solution for example to eco-collapse, where dozens of species are going extinct every day due to human activity, is not as hard as some imagine. Cribb says it is to move half of the world's food production into cities and recycle nutrients and water and then “re-wild” about half the land mass under the wise management of indigenous people and farmers. It is to gradually replace mining with mineral recycling and cease releasing toxins. It is to replace fossil fuels with renewables. But discussion about policies like these is currently missing in our social and political discourse.
- On the issue of resource scarcity, Cribb points out that over a lifetime each of us uses 100,000 tonnes of fresh water, 750 tonnes of soil, 720 tonnes of metals, 5 billion energy units and emits 300 tonnes of greenhouse gas. No wonder resources are becoming scarce and landscapes worldwide being ruined to obtain them. The self-evident solution is to re-use everything and then re-use it again. Thanks to technology, the circular economy is already feasible and becoming profitable. Yet resistance by political and vested interests continues to block it.
- Cribb believes that our species is now in desperate straits but that there are two extremely hopeful developments. The first is our emerging ability to think as a species, by sharing knowledge, values and solutions through the Internet. This is reshaping for all time and for the better, our ability to cooperate around the planet. The second is the emergence of women as leaders in all walks of society. Women, as a rule do not start wars, dig coal, ravage landscapes, plunder the oceans, and betray other species, nor knowingly poison their offspring. They think about the children, grandchildren and their future needs. He believes that feminine thought by males as well as females is a key to our future survival.

12. So, if we accept the validity of the analysis presented by both the Pope and by Julian Cribb and if we agree that we must insist to our governments that we engage in system-wide transformative change in our culture, behaviour and actions, how will we go about it?

- A central revolution in our thinking must be to challenge the concept of anthropocentrism, which assumes that the world was created for humans to exploit. This notion underpins our culture, and economy and the general basis of our civilization.
- We must shift to eco-centrism, which is the recognition that human survival depends absolutely on an ecological balance between humans and complex planetary eco systems.
- And we must heed the injunction of the pontiff about the gross injustice of current inequity of access to resources across the human race and also the need to share those resources with other species.
- So where do we begin?

13. I want to speak briefly about Kitchen Table Conversations: a process that I know to be effective, that is being used increasingly around Australia to engage people in an enjoyable way, to rethink their preconceptions and relate in new ways to other people.

- They have been developed as an integral component of the discipline of community organizing, which is having a resurgence in the United States and more recently here in Australia.
- Kitchen table conversations are semi-structured meetings of 6 to 10 people who spend a couple hours talking and listening respectfully to each other, and sharing the things, which matter to them. They may be held in private homes, cafes, clubs or classrooms and the participants can include friends, neighbors, family, workmates, people from community networks or members of congregations or school class groups.
- There are a few simple ground rules, which are outlined before the conversation begins, and which the “host” who convenes the meeting, is responsible for outlining at the beginning of the conversation and stepping in when they are being flouted. These ground rules are: that everyone has an opportunity to contribute; that the group agrees to listen to each other and not interrupt; that nobody dominates the conversation to the exclusion of other contributors and that the group is respectful of ideas expressed by others, no matter how outlandish the ideas being promoted may seem to be.
- To make these groups happen you need a host to take responsibility for inviting people a set of “starter questions and a scribe who prepares a short report of the discussion and key points raised in it. This is then circulated to all members of the group who have an opportunity to comment on the summary.
- 2 years ago we organized for 24 groups across Canberra who met on two occasions to consider five starter questions. The questions were: "What is important to you? What are your concerns? What are your hopes for the future? What changes are needed? How can we make change happen?. This experience was evaluated in a number of ways and support for the initiative was very strong. It was agreed that this approach opens new doors for communication with friends, neighbors, and acquaintances. It helps people feel that this is their world and that their views matter. It is an enjoyable social activity, which raises topics that may not be part of everyday social conversation. We have concluded from this experience that the kitchen table conversation approach is applicable to many settings – in schools, churches and public interest groups and that it could be a building block for transformative thinking in the community.
- I think these conversations are building blocks for transformative thinking
- A direct spin-off from this experience in Canberra has been the development of a new body with both individual and organisational members, called The Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy, which has now been operating for about a year and is playing an active role in the current ACT Legislative Assembly elections. I am suggesting that we spend some time this morning engaged in kitchen table conversations about some of the things I am speaking about.

14. But before we get to practicing the kitchen table approach, I have a couple of other issues that I would like to mention briefly. The first is an activity which has influenced my own thinking in recent years, and that relates to our theme today.

- This was a group of about 100 activists from across Australia who came together in two national conferences in 2010 and 2011.
- We prepared a Manifesto about Transforming Australia and I have provided you with a copy of that document, which articulates some elements of a vision for a Transformed Australia

- Where the well-being of all humans and the health of the planet is synonymous;
- Where we accept that nature is our provider and we are its stewards.
- The manifesto points out that business as usual will lead us to disaster and that we must change the focus from competition to caring and cooperation.

15. I have also distributed another document entitled “The Charter for Compassion”. Theologian and former nun, Karen Armstrong used her 2008 prize for the best TED talk in that year to bring together representatives of many religions

- The group prepared a charter, which drew from the best of Christianity, Islam, Bhuddhism, Judaism, Hinduism and Confucianism.
- The words of the Charter are reproduced in full on the hand out. The first paragraph of the Charter states that: “The principle of compassion lies at the heart all religious ethical and spiritual traditions, calling us ALWAYS TO TREAT ALL OTHERS AS WE WISH TO BE TREATED OURSELVES.
- An international movement has developed that is now beginning to impact on thinking in many parts of the world.
- In the NGO Australia21 with which I am closely engaged a group of our Directors are working to build linkages both in Australian and internationally to promote the application of mindfulness empathy and compassion to the development and implementation of all public policy

Karen Armstrong, asked recently for her definition of a compassionate city, replied. “A compassionate city is an uncomfortable city. A city that is uncomfortable when anyone is homeless or hungry. Uncomfortable if every child isn't given rich opportunities to grow and thrive. Uncomfortable, when as a community we don't treat our neighbors as we would wish to be treated.”

16. So, what can churches do to help promote transformative change of the kind we now need?

- Social activism by Christians has a long and proud history. Many of us are convinced that our human species is hurtling down a road towards an impossible and impenetrable brick wall
- Logic and survival demand that we take a new direction.
- Away from our current preoccupation with the lives of our own privileged group of humans – away from selfish anthropocentrism- to a new understanding of our utter dependence on the natural world the health of the planet – “eco-centrism” and the health of the whole human race as well as other bio-diverse species I think Francis is right that we must embark on transformative change in our understanding of who we are as a species and how we can best promote a viable future for our descendants.
- I think we can start the momentum by use of Kitchen Table Conversations.

17. So let me summarise briefly what I have been saying.

- Our species is on a catastrophic trajectory in collision with the limits to our planet and Australia is in the vanguard of that dangerous trajectory.

- The warnings are clear and consistent, that nothing short of transformative change in the way we organise the human world and especially our relationship with the environment, with our fellow human beings and with other species will be enough to rescue our children and theirs from a deeply unpleasant future.
- That transformation will not come from our political leaders unless there is a huge groundswell demanding it from their constituents.
- It is very late in the day but not yet too late. The solutions to the crisis are being increasingly well articulated by people like the Pope and Julian Cribb.
- The development of the Internet and the growing role of women in our political system are assets on which we can build.
- Faith groups and NGOs are one vehicle through which concerned individuals can begin the essential Revolution.

18. Here are two questions that I suggest might be used today using the Kitchen Table format and ground rules.

- How do you feel about the issues raised in this talk?
- How can individuals and church congregations usefully respond to the Pope's Challenge?