

GUEST EDITORIAL

FORECASTING THE FUTURE: CREDIT, DEBT AND PERFECT STORMS

A “perfect storm.” Such was the description that Don Elder, former CEO of Solid Energy, used to explain the catastrophic downfall of the State Owned Enterprise. Speaking before a recent Parliamentary Select Committee, Elder testified that the increased cost of extracting coal from deeper in the ground, combined with a drop in the coal price, was a “stunning (and seemingly unexpected) blow” to the SOE.

In many ways the Solid Energy debacle is something of a metaphor for our times. Like the State Owned Enterprise, all of us had been encouraged to increase our debt-levels and to borrow heavily in the hope of greater financial returns. And, like Solid Energy, our lives – and that of our current age – are underpinned and sustained by fossil fuels. But can we really live forever on borrowed credit and, for that matter, fossil fuels? For Solid Energy, the price of their lofty attempts to live “beyond their means,” has been a financial implosion and the very public humiliation of their senior staff.¹ But all of us, ultimately, are involved in an unsustainable economic paradigm built upon a system of credit and the extraction and consumption of limited natural resources. As Shakespeare graphically and vividly reminds us in the *Merchant of Venice*, sooner or later credit must be repaid. Philip Goodchild, drawing on this Shakespearean play, refers to the “price of credit” thus:

Contracted servitude is the condition of all borrowers, whether householders, corporations, governments or highly leveraged speculators. Whenever one spends money, one spends a portion of the substance, wealth, and life of those who have undertaken loans. Yet the value of money is also backed by profitability, including the drudge of labor in sweatshops and factories, the exclusion from the formal economy of those who are not employed profitably, the consumption of natural resources, and the erosion of ecosystems and societies. The value of money is still paid for in flesh and blood.²

¹ There is a strange irony in the fact that Solid Energy’s extensive borrowing was spent on such diverse schemes as a major “green” bio-diesel project (into which it pumped \$62.3 million) and simultaneously a plan to create a multi-billion dollar industry converting low-grade Southland lignite coal into diesel, fertiliser and burnable briquettes. Both projects have been abject and costly failures.

² Philip Goodchild, *Theology of Money*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 236.

As Goodchild indicates, it is increasingly obvious that one of the key consequences of our lives of consumption built upon cheap “fossil fuels” is ecological devastation. Within the current economic paradigm of global consumer capitalism, “economic growth,” has become the ultimate *telos* of human life and societies. Commenting on the hubris of this obsession with “unlimited growth” Wendell Berry provocatively states:

In keeping with our unrestrained consumptiveness, the commonly accepted basis of our economy is the supposed possibility of limitless growth, limitless wants, limitless wealth, limitless natural resources, limitless energy, and limitless debt. The idea of a limitless economy implies and requires a doctrine of general human limitlessness: all are entitled to pursue without limit whatever they conceive as desirable – a license that classifies the most exalted Christian capitalist with the lowliest pornographer.³

Ironically of course, Elder’s phrase “the perfect storm” has been used by others in attempting to describe the ecological catastrophe that stems from our unsustainable lifestyles erected on the pillars of credit and fossil-fuel. In June 2008, in a briefing to House Select Committee of the US Congress, US climate scientist James Hansen testified that in his opinion a “perfect storm” of climatological tipping points was assembled that could soon converge to create a global cataclysm.⁴ Hansen and thousands of the world’s top scientists are in agreement that we live in a time of “ecological crisis.”

So how should Christians live in such an age? In October 2012, a conference jointly organised by A Rocha Aotearoa New Zealand, Caritas and the University of Otago’s Centre for Theology and Public Issues, and hosted by St John’s Presbyterian Church in Wellington, sought to respond to this question. This edition of *Stimulus* contains a number of the papers that were presented at this “Lament, Hope, Action” conference. Jonathan Boston’s opening article outlines the frightening consequences of our profligate living. It has been over fifty years since Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* first brought

³ Wendell Berry, “Faustian Economics: Hell Hath No Limits,” *Harper’s Magazine* (May 2008), 36.

⁴ Hansen’s appearance before the *House Select Committee on Energy Independence & Global Warming* came exactly twenty years after an earlier appearance before the US Congress where Hansen first alerted the public to the fact that climate change was taking place.

to the world's attention the impact of industrial pesticides and herbicides on ecosystems. And yet, while farming has to some extent responded to such concerns, as Boston notes, habitat destruction and climate change mean our grandchildren will live in a world with far less bird-song. That we stand on the precipice of another mass extinction event largely brought about by our own sins of omission – in failing to tend and care for God's good earth – and our sins of commission – our wilful and wanton destruction and recklessness, should bring us to our knees. Lament is the only appropriate response.

Peter Cullinane probes further by reflecting upon the causes of our existing ecological crisis. Essentially, our dominant economic paradigm and political inaction, he argues, have their roots in a "moral crisis." Echoing Boston, Bishop Cullinane points us towards "repentance" – a turn away from our lives of limitless consumption – but he also begins to trace ways in which Christians can connect and work alongside

others to reshape prevailing mindsets and bring about political and societal change. The evidence of genuine "repentance" is, arguably, most clearly demonstrated in the context

of our immediate daily lives. Forming partnerships with others concerned for the "common good" and who want to actively care for fragile and threatened ecosystems starts at the flax-roots level in the communities and neighbourhoods in which we are all embedded. Such a philosophy/missiology is illustrated in the articles of Chris Naylor and Kristel van Houte who offer autobiographical accounts of their participation in A Rocha projects in Lebanon and Whaingaroa/Raglan respectively. Their stories movingly portray how practical caring for the earth in partnership with others leads to personal, community, and ecological transformation.

Both Chris and Kristel are honest about the hard slog and doubts that accompany such "ecological mission." So, how does one maintain an active spirituality of "earth-keeping" in our age of crisis? While many involved in ecological action are rediscovering the richness of the contemplative tradition, Lynne Baab also discovers a rich ecological spirituality within the more "main-stream" evangelical disciplines of Sabbath-keeping, Bible-reading and fasting. Her article reflects on how these disciplines may sustain us for the long-haul of the journey ahead.

All the contributors are aware that hope is critical to living in a time of crisis. Stephen Pattemore, in the final paper from the conference, and Nicola

Hoggard-Creegan in her regular column, offer reflections on the nature and function of Christian hope in an ambiguous world of great beauty and pain. The fact that our grandchildren will inherit a world with considerably less bio-diversity is undeniable and yet as Christians, we also cling to an ultimate hope – the assurance that in Christ *all things* are being reconciled. Genuine eschatological hope should lead us to tears, but also to an awe-filled, loving, healing and compassionate engagement with the world of nature.

If James Hansen and thousands of the world's top atmospheric and climate scientists are correct, then the world my children and potential grandchildren will inherit will be a stormy one.⁵ Writing this editorial, I am finishing reading John Naish's *Enough* – a manifesto calling for "simpler living."⁶ Naish's thesis is not new. Since the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* in 1972, numerous authors have advocated for "simpler living"/"theologies of enough"

and an accompanying understanding of a steady-state economy.⁷ I, at least, am convinced that to navigate the voyage ahead of us will indeed require a jettisoning of much of our overabundance of "stuff"

that threatens to sink the boat. As well as lightening the ecological load on the planet, we should also remember that such de-cluttering will create the space for Christ to enter our communities and accompany us on our turbulent journey. Likewise, with fewer distractions we will be more attentive to glimpse and recognise his calming and guiding presence in the midst of the tempest (Mark 6:45–52; John 6:16–21).

ANDREW SHEPHERD works as a freelance teacher, researcher and writer in areas of theology, missiology, ethics and environmental studies. He is involved in different capacities with various organisations, including the Centre for Theology and Public Issues at the University of Otago, Servants to Asia's Urban Poor, and A Rocha Aotearoa New Zealand. He lives in the small community of Makarora in Western Otago. He chaired the "Lament, Hope, Action" conference held at St John's Presbyterian Church, Wellington in October 2012.

5 James Hansen, *Storms of my Grandchildren: The Truth about the Coming Climate Catastrophe and our Last Chance to Save Humanity*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009).

6 John Naish *Enough*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008).

7 For instance, the work of E. F. Schumacher and Herman Daly.

GENUINE ESCHATOLOGICAL HOPE SHOULD LEAD US TO TEARS, BUT ALSO TO AN AWE-FILLED, LOVING, HEALING AND COMPASSIONATE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE WORLD OF NATURE