

Tim Flannery in QE

By Don Aitkin

I opened Tim Flannery's *Quarterly Essay* with a sense of hope: as someone interested in the whole concept of sustainability, both intellectually and in practical terms, I am happy to read anything that adds to my store of knowledge. Alas, and despite its title, this is not at all an essay about a sustainable future for Australia. It is a fundamentalist sermon on anthropogenic global warming. Its tones are those of the evangelist, its imagery is apocalyptic, and its message is Old Testament: 'Repent, for the Day of Judgment is at hand!'

This is not the place to consider the arguments and evidence about the extent to which we human beings might be affecting the climate of the planet. I have written about it in *The Australian Quarterly* (Jan/Feb 2008), and my agnostic position remains as it was: I am unpersuaded that we are having any appreciable effect. In my view any reader of *Quarterly Essay*, almost by definition, is able and literate enough to form his or her own opinion on this issue. A warning: it is not something you can do in ten minutes. Those interested should go to the websites and work through the papers of Working Group 1 in the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. They should also summon up the report of the Nongovernmental International Panel on Climate Change, the NIPCC, which argues that nature, not human activity, determines our climate. Scientists wrote all these papers. You may be left wondering which path to go down, but at least you will be able to spot what is wrong with Tim Flannery's essay, its statistics, and its appeals to the authority of the IPCC, James Lovelock and those with whom he agrees.

I am philosophically an enquirer. When someone tells me that something is the case, and it is something that interests me, I want to know why he or she thinks so, and what the arguments and evidence are. I commend this approach, for I understand that it is what science is about. It is certainly what my own disciplines, history and political science, are about, and you could argue that this approach underlies the best thinking of our whole civilisation. It is inherently sceptical about claims to truth. For Thomas Huxley, Darwin's contemporary, scepticism was the highest intellectual duty, and he also commented that science commits suicide when it adopts a creed. I like Huxley's aphorisms, and note appreciatively that he invented the word 'agnostic'. I recommend him to Tim Flannery.

My interest is in how to improve the sustainability of our way of life, which I value and enjoy. I recognise that it is threatened, and that in some respects we may have passed the point at which we can have everything we want without thinking of the morrow. The reasons are straightforward. There are very many human beings, and they would all like to live in the style enjoyed by most Australians and most of the citizens of other developed countries. Once upon a time we might have just shrugged, and noted that we were either cleverer or luckier than them. Today we know that our standard of living is in principle possible for everyone, and there can be no good reason for denying others a

similar lifestyle. What has been achieved in the last twenty years by China and India, and earlier by Singapore, Taiwan, Malaysia, South Korea and Thailand, makes it clear that any society can do it if achieving a very much higher standard of living is genuinely the number one priority. Human knowledge is quickly available to those who seek it, and it is knowledge, not resources, that forms the basis of a high standard of living.

The catch is threefold: people, energy and water. Houses that have a bathroom for every occupant, or for most of them, a swimming pool, computers everywhere, two cars in the garage, a pair of return overseas air tickets in the study and all the other accoutrements of contemporary comfortable Australia require very much larger amounts of water and energy than was the case for our parents, let alone our grandparents. Potable water and portable energy are not abundant. As more people want them, their availability will decline and their price will go up. This simple market truth, already obvious to us, will be even more apparent if the world's population does in fact pass the projected 9 billion for 2050. What should we do about it? It seems to me that we will need to manage our water supplies much more efficiently than we have done in the past, find alternatives for oil and gas, and do our best to keep the world's population, and our own, within manageable limits.

This inter-related set of problems will remain central in working towards a sustainable future whether or not we reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Indeed, what Australia does in reducing greenhouse gas emissions will have no effect on their importance at all, or indeed on what happens in the rest of the world, since our contribution to these emissions globally is minuscule. Tim Flannery does get into the energy wing of the problem, and I would agree that we should explore geothermal energy as well as solar energy. By that I mean that we should fund more and more research in these areas, as we did in the 1980s in the solar energy domain. But about water and people he is silent.

Let me then point out what we might do. We seem to be in the third great drought in the last century or so. On the evidence they come every fifty years to southeastern Australia, and we might have some more dry years before we get a return of the 1950s floods that I remember well. Droughts are familiar, not strange, but today we have more than four times as many people living in Australia as we had in 1900, and we have dammed most of the rivers, extracted much of the water for irrigation, and squabble about whose fault it all is. To grow rice or cotton on irrigated land in inland Australia seems to me almost a profligate use of water, since both products are easily obtainable overseas. If I'm wrong it would be useful to have some good data that reassure me. As for urban water, we could be, and many are, moving to less water-intensive gardening and household use; recycling water will become steadily more sensible. We do learn, and are demonstrating it.

People? I see no good reason for increasing baby bonuses or encouraging people to have more children, let alone for building up our society through large-scale immigration. In the long run, we have to live with a static population, though it will require a change of culture, and a re-assessment of the importance of 'economic growth'. The drivers for that change, in education particularly, are with us now. In foreign aid I would like to see us abandon the Harradine deal, where Australia stopped supplying information on birth

control to countries that manifestly need it, and also insist that education aid funding go equally to girls and boys. Will all this make Australia or the world sustainable quickly? No, but it seems to me the right way to go, and I'm not worried about fabled 'tipping points' or the number of years we have left to do anything.

Essays like this one do no service to science. The causes of contemporary climate change are unclear, as are the trends. Tim Flannery asserts that 'the warming trend is real and accelerating', but a bald statement like that is meaningless. What trend? Global average temperature fell from 1940 to 1975, rose from 1975 to 1998, but has not passed the 1998 level in the last ten years. What does that imply? Your guess is as good as anyone's. Climate science hardly exists as a discipline, and practitioners come from all over science; Tim Flannery himself has a first degree in English and a doctorate in Zoology. It would be much more accurate for him to say that there is a good deal of uncertainty in the whole domain, but that he has his hunches. Talking down to us from the pulpit and invoking the wrath of the goddess Gaia if we don't mend our ways smacks of the bible-thumpers of my youth. I didn't need them then, and don't want them now.

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[This response was not accepted.]