

SUBMISSION TO SENATE COMMITTEE ON COVID 19 RESPONSES\

This submission touches both

- a. the Australian Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic (other than purely health issues); and
- b. related matters.

I am a retired judge gravely concerned for the futures of my children and grandchildren and their peers.

In the necessary urgency of consideration of the short-term health and social support aspects of the pandemic (which the government seems to have handled about as well as might have been realistically expected in our actual and immediate circumstances), there appears to be a lack of sufficiently clear and thoroughgoing attention to even greater longer-term problems confronting our country and appropriate responses to them. This is evident even in the language used by governmental and other influential people: it is obvious that there will be no economic “snap back” nor even an economic “recovery” or “road back” to what existed before – some businesses will never restart, many will alter and unemployment will linger.

Nor should there be a mere effort to revert to what was. We were on a road to disasters of several kinds. The current crisis, following on drought, mega-fires, floods, and exposure of water mismanagement, brings home how unprepared, despite ample warnings, our political (and I mean all parties) and administrative classes and most citizens (myself included) have, in general, actually been, and how most of us have put entirely foreseeable potential catastrophes of various kinds into the too-hard or the not-now baskets.

The present situation, in which our people have overwhelmingly accepted scientific and governmental assessments and leadership, and fundamentally altered their ways of living, bears out the cliché that crises also present opportunities. If well led, people will accept change to try to ensure that we have no repetition of our present and recent calamities. In the light of the immensity of the interlinked threats, including more pandemics, that face us, we should not, as the saying goes, “waste [this] good crisis”. Our reconstruction should not sacrifice real or felt short-term imperatives for actual longer-term ones.

As it happens, my concerns have largely been adequately crystallised and expressed (leaving aside the odd bit of politically uber-correct cant) in the recent “Surviving and Thriving in the 21st Century” report of an expert panel of the Commission for the Human Future, headed by the distinguished and independent-minded John Hewson and Ian Chubb.

Of especial present relevance is the following, from that report:

All-hazard risk assessment

One of the reasons that catastrophic threats continually catch governments and societies unprepared, leading to worse impacts, is the poor level of understanding of risk. For example, many governments prepare for war – but ignore or underestimate the clear and present danger they face from climate change, pandemic disease or food scarcity.

... governments worldwide need to adopt an all-hazard risk assessment approach. This serves as a foundation for understanding the broad scope of catastrophic risks, the scale of their likely impacts and as a basis for developing policies to prevent or limit them in advance.

Some countries, such as the UK, USA and New Zealand already have all-hazard risk assessment processes, however these are often weighted to perceived national security issues rather than overall human security, leading to the neglect of risks far larger and potentially more disastrous than the historical disputes between nations

... not only should all countries adopt the practice of all-hazard risk assessment and preparation but ... it should specifically include the ten global catastrophic or existential risks mentioned in this report. This recognises that in the face of such universal risks, no nation can consider itself safe, no matter how well armed or prepared it deems itself.

Human safety, in the final analysis, depends on universal co-operation to understand and reduce risks, around the planet – and nations individually are powerless to achieve this unless they work together in harmony.

The “ten global catastrophic or existential risks” referred to are:

- Decline of key natural resources and an emerging global resource crisis
- Collapse of ecosystems that support life, and the mass extinction of species
- Human population growth and demand, beyond the Earth’s carrying capacity
- Global warming, sea level rise and changes in the Earth’s climate affecting all human activity
- Universal pollution by chemicals of the Earth system and all life •
- Rising food [and, I would add, water] insecurity and failing nutritional quality
- Nuclear arms and other weapons of mass destruction
- Pandemics of new and untreatable diseases

- Advent of powerful, uncontrollable new technologies
- National and global failure to understand and act preventively on these risks.

The inter-relatedness of these risks seems obvious to me, but I can essay an explanation if any Committee Member would wish.

The report commented:

These mounting catastrophic risks originate chiefly with the overgrowth in human numbers and, especially, resource demands – which are now breaching the capacity of the Earth to sustain us. They are interconnected and must all be solved together – not one at a time – and with solutions that make no threat worse.

This means that many existing systems which we take for granted – our economic system, our food system, our energy system, our production and waste systems, our governance systems, our community life and our relationship with the Earth's natural systems – must all undergo searching examination and reform.

Given systemic failure of governance around the world to anticipate and deal with these great risks, a decline in public trust and a disdain for truth in politics and some media, there is a need for sweeping political reform, including new ways to confront corruption by vested interests and the influence they exert over government.

The world needs more effective democracy, not less. This involves greater agency for all people in their own governance, wider participation and a stronger role in determining their own future with a view to unifying humanity to deal with the common threats we all face.

The world needs to move away from conventional definitions of 'national security' and towards new concepts of global natural security and human security that embrace the safety and wellbeing of all Earth's citizens and the natural world that supports them.

To survive and thrive we also need to develop a more eco-centric vision of our future rather than an anthropocentric or econo-centric one, one that fosters a natural world that is capable of sustaining not only humans, but all the other species, habitats and ecosystems which support life on the Planet.

A core feature of catastrophic risk is the significant amount of (often deliberate and well-funded) misinformation that contradicts the factual consensus on what is to be done. It is of the highest importance that we increase public understanding of the evidence for catastrophic risk and decrease the volume of misinformation and public deceit released by special interests and their followers.

Yet, however grim the threats we face, our message is one of hope. We can turn things around and reduce all these threats if we act together, as humans on the Earth, if we are willing to change our behaviours and adapt to new circumstances and new opportunities.

And we can discover fresh opportunities, more satisfying ways of life and fulfilment from overcoming our risks. For this it is essential that humanity develops a shared understanding of the nature and causes of the risks, that we devise integrated solutions – and that we take early action to defuse them. The longer the delay, the greater the penalty, both economic and in human lives.

Important to this goal is the development of a new science - the science of human survival and wellbeing – and the integration of ‘surviving and thriving’ into educational systems worldwide, so we raise a generation of young people who know how to do both, despite the troubled world they have inherited.

It is essential that all human belief systems, political, religious, monetary and in terms of the narratives we tell ourselves, commit to a shared goal of surviving and thriving. We must recruit the best and brightest young people to build and lead this process.

This demands the inclusion of far more voices outside the current centres of power: women, youth, First Peoples, minorities, the poor and physically isolated ...

This represents the views of experts who are politically middle of the road.

The Committee should endorse their approach.

The following are, in my suggestion, specific ways that the Committee could help to anticipate and alleviate the looming threats:

1. Recommend the statutory establishment of an independent and expert Commission of All-Hazards Risk Assessment and Abatement, tasked to
 - a. assess major risks of all kinds facing Australia including international ones,
 - b. solicit and act as a clearing house for ideas from all quarters for the avoidance, minimisation and mitigation of such risks
 - c. oversee education of the population at large as to such risks and possible responses
 - d. make annual recommendations to government in relation to such hazards.
2. Recommend that the government establish a separate Department of Post-Crisis Reconstruction under a senior Minister to advise on an integrated national reconstruction having regard to economic, environmental, social and technical considerations. This would guarantee a focus on longer- as well as short-term concerns.
3. Recommend that the Commonwealth endow in each state and territory academic centres of excellence in the science of human survival and wellbeing.

4. Recommend the appointment in DFAT of an ambassador for global human and natural security and that Australia take a bold and independent international role as to such matters.

Rod Madgwick