

BODHI in a Rapidly Changing World

Talk to BODHI Symposium, Saturday 22 June, 2019

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Why I am here to tell you all a supporter of BODHI?

First, it is an initiative by Colin Butler and his late wife Susan, both of whom I have deeply admired; It is focussed on poor people; It is premised on Buddhist principles; It is a way of reaching out beyond Australia and it is doing good in a complex and dangerous world. They all are pretty good reasons for directing some of my charitable contributions in BODHI's direction. I should add that I also share with Colin, a deep concern about the changes taking place in our planet and the impact that they will have on poor people in developing countries, and I have the greatest respect for his capacity to marry his big picture thinking and research with his local knowledge and understanding of the pressures that will come on literally billions of people around the world in coming decades.

What comes next?

The first 30 years have been impressive. But what comes next?

Ten mega-threats pose a huge threat to the ongoing survival of humans on the planet. Pre-eminent among these threats are climate change, but it is only one of 10 interacting threats that we are not properly confronting across the world. The others are: human population growth, insecurity of food supplies, the destruction of ecosystems, the depletion of resources on which civilisation depends, the threat of nuclear war, uncontrolled technology and artificial intelligence, global poisoning, pandemic diseases and above all the self-delusion that we can somehow escaped the consequences of human actions. Despite the imminence of these threats humans everywhere are living largely in ignorance of them. Of course the collapse of civilisation and early human extinction are not great topics for dinnertime conversation. And most of us would prefer to ignore this issue. We have seen some serious efforts to put climate change on the political agenda, but in Australia at this point we are still having a fruitless debate about whether or not climate change is real.

On our present course, humanity is hugely vulnerable. But I also want to add that I believe we **can** change direction and that there are ways in which these mega threats can be addressed but that the time window for addressing them is desperately short. Thankfully, in recent weeks there has been some development overseas of a community extinction rebellion. I think that we need to extend that rebellion widely. The disturbing factor is that no government anywhere in the world yet appears to be taking the threat to the survival of our species seriously.

Julian Cribb is a Canberra-based science writer who was formerly a communicator for the CSIRO and a newspaper editor. He has spent much of his time in recent years distilling the science and writing books about the threats that face humans everywhere. He makes the point that because the threats are intersecting, dealing with them one at a time will not be adequate. We need to develop

a strategy that minimises all of these threats at the same time. This collective challenge is the most urgent and serious challenge that has faced humans in our whole history. Cribb argues that we have the capacity to rescue ourselves and he points to the changing role of women and the capacity of the Internet for us to communicate and think as a species as positive evidence that the task of crafting a workable survival strategy is not beyond us. Julian has radical things to say about the way our current economic model works and he believes that we must urgently develop an index of human survivability to replace our mad and irrational dependence on growth in gross domestic product as a measure of our progress. Activity is developing in a number of academic centres around the world, but a human survival strategy is not yet seriously on the political radar anywhere. I want to put to you that Australia is ideally placed to lead the way in this vital task and that there are strong reasons for Australian citizens to insist to politicians on all sides of the political spectrum that we demand a human survival strategy at the front of our political agenda, immediately.

Colin is at the cutting edge of thinking about planetary change and its impact on the health of Nations. We are not yet as a human species preparing ourselves for the profound changes that are taking place to the planet and the issues which impact on our survival.

The changes that are taking place make it certain that without transformative change in the way we relate to the planet and its ecosystems and resources, humans will, like so many other species around us, be on the extinction list. Will we tackle this challenge as a species or will we deal with these threats to our survival as nations and small groups of people in mortal competition with each other? I would like to hope that at this late stage in the day, we can learn to work together as a threatened species and draw in the resources for our survival both from the technologically advanced countries and those like the places where Bodhi works, where people are struggling and on the edge of economic and community development. What will foreign aid look like in this evolving world? Will it change from emphasis on education, health care, food production and family planning? I doubt it.

But, as rich countries like ours knuckle down to the dramatic changes, that will inevitably come in our current affluent lifestyle, my hope will be that we continue to see our developing country cousins as continuing to need special efforts and support such as those that BODHI has been offering for 30 years.

The cuts in Australian Foreign Aid in recent years have been both unnecessary and miserly. As a nation the percentage of government development assistance to developing countries has dropped to about 0.27% of our gross domestic product, compared with the internationally recommended 0.7% which is the figure met, and exceeded in a number of European countries. We are both a very low taxing and a very low giving nation, despite the fact that we are one of the richest nations in the world. We cannot expect private charitable groups like BHODHI to go on doing our nation's heavy lifting in this field. It is in our national interest that we engage as generous partners in assisting other countries to give their citizens a "fair go."

I would like to see ANU, and, perhaps this very centre, develop a Foundation Chair and discipline in "Human Survivability".