

Dr Goeff Mosley

presentation to the Workers Education Association, Sydney on 25th March 2017

Many thanks Janine for inviting me here to speak to the WEA group this morning. What I want to do is to take you on a conservation journey – mine – extending over some 60 years to see if there are any lessons to be learned.

Of course, everything we experience at any one time has been greatly affected by what has gone before. I began my conservation activities in the early 1950s but what happened then was influenced by two enormously significant previous events – the Great Depression of the 1930s and the Second World War of the 1940s. These were times when there was slower population growth and greater levels of national and family self-sufficiency. During the war we were told to “Dig for Victory” but that of course was not all we were digging for, we needed the food from our gardens to survive. Community gardens were everywhere. There were of course many economies, including food and petrol rationing and a simpler way of living all round.

I believe the self-sufficiency lesson is the most important one we can learn from this period. In April 1933 the economist John Maynard Keynes recommended just that in a speech he made in Dublin that was published in *The Yale Review* of the Summer of 1933. Talking about the importance of economic disentanglement from the all-pervasive free trade system he said:

Ideas, knowledge, art, hospitality travel, – these are the things which should of their nature be international. But let goods be homespun whenever it is reasonably and conveniently possible and, above all, let finance be primarily national.

With regard to how much time should be taken to make this transformation Keynes said that those who sought to remove their country from these entanglements “should be very slow and wary. It should not be a matter of tearing up roots but of slowly training a plant to grow in a different direction”. Today, do we really have that sort of time?

The irony is that for Britain the events that followed made a slow transformation out of the question. With the German Atlantic blockade and thousand of ships sunk Britain was forced to make a rapid transition from supplying 30% of its own food to

70%. This was done by a variety of methods including such things as requiring each farm to devote a set proportion of the land to grain production.

What is perhaps not so widely realised though is that the War created a resolve to do things better in the way of national planning. 'Post War Reconstruction' as it was generally called, wasn't just about picking up the pieces caused by the War, and, looking back, the amazing thing is that in Britain and in Australia the planning for this began in earnest in 1942 – in the middle of the War. Keynes said at the time that the war provided an opportunity to think constructively about how to organise the peace. In Australia one of the leading figures in the Australian Department of Post War Reconstruction was prominent conservationist Nugget Coombs who was later President of the Australian Conservation Foundation.

I mention this because it is relevant to how I came to be involved with conservation. I was extremely fortunate to be born in the Peak District in the southern Pennines of England. The Peak made me into what I have been ever since - a geographer and a conservationist. The geography interest came from understanding the relationship in the region between the rocks, the vegetation and the land use. The conservation from the fact that in 1951 the Peak District became Britain's first national park, protecting the landscapes of the privately owned land through planning and providing for visitors through 'positive action'. The 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act under which the Peak Park was established with 12 others later on, was one of the beneficiaries of Post War Reconstruction. Work on something that had begun in the 1920s, led by the Council for the Preservation of Rural England, had been very much speeded up. Would this sort of innovation happen in the world of today?

Half of the population of England and Wales lived within 60 miles of the Peak Park's boundaries and, there was considerable pressure on the area for the development of its mineral resources. Clearly also, surrounded by cities, there was a potential for the development of dormitory suburbs for commuters and for ribbon development.

In 1951 this kind of development was stopped in its tracks. Fast forward to the present day and national parks and 'areas of outstanding natural beauty' cover nearly a quarter of England and Wales. And they are secure. In 66 years there have been no boundary changes to the Peak District National Park, the population in it is less than it was when it was founded, and it receives about 10 million visitors a year. Studying this approach for my Master of Arts degree was an obvious choice which helped make me into a lifelong advocate for the use of this method for the protection of rural areas, something I am still involved with in Victoria. In New

South Wales The National Trust, formed in 1945 was an advocate of this kind of protection for such areas as the Illawarra Escarpment, the Hawkesbury River and the Gardens of Stone. However, the main concept borrowed from Britain at this time was the Sydney Green Belt established under the County of Cumberland Plan of 1948 and the County of Cumberland Planning Scheme of 1951. Regrettably it was a failure, overwhelmed by Sydney's expansion, although some remnants remain

My next experience was as an Education Officer in the Royal Air Force. This was the time of the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis and the first of several scares concerning global oil supply. For the first time, as a result of the work of M. King Hubbert, the concept of 'peak oil' was on the current affairs menu. Has anything changed, when will the next oil crisis occur? One of my jobs in the RAF was to monitor radiation levels in the event of a Soviet Union nuclear attack on Britain. Has this threat really gone away?

Finishing my National Service I moved first to Canada and then New Zealand where I experienced at first hand two other kinds of national park system that had begun to be established in the 19th century on public land. Arriving in Australia in 1960 I decided to study the land use and conservation needs of outdoor recreation in Tasmania for a PhD. A keen bush walker from an early age, in 1961 I helped to found the Canberra Bush Walking Club.

All of this experience and particularly my 3 years of research for a PhD in Tasmania laid the foundation for me to make a contribution to the development in Australia of systems of protected areas involving a variety of protection aims including wilderness areas and protected landscapes/seascapes and for the zoning of individual parks. Located for further research in this field first at the University in Newcastle in 1964 then at ANU in Canberra from 1966 to 1969 I was well placed to make a contribution to several ground breaking developments including the NSW national parks and wildlife legislation of 1967, the development of a pioneering zoning plan that included provision for wilderness areas for Kosciusko National Park, and the introduction of a national heritage protection scheme – 'The Register of the National Estate'.

Also, my 1964 research in the Lands Department in Sydney made me aware of the pivotal role an area south of Sydney had played in the evolution of a whole new type of protected public land – the national park. The land was available and at first those involved with establishing what is now Royal National Park thought of it as another addition to Sydney's urban park system. But it was very different to these other areas, comprising 18,000 acres of mainly natural country. Also the number of

native-born people was increasing and there was growing appreciation of our wildlife. With the help of such people as Myles Dunphy, a local resident, this new approach to conservation was then spread out across the State, including the Snowy Mountains and the Blue Mountains. Obviously, the story of how these changes happened from their birthplace at Royal is very worthy of a world-wide audience.

In 1967 I became a member of the staff of the fledgling Australian Conservation Foundation. Not surprisingly this body quickly became involved with wildlife conservation and national parks advocacy. The State run national parks were seen as the best method of securing an area against destruction but the events at the Lake Pedder National Park in the early 1970s was the catalyst for an approach also involving the federal Government. This led to the protection of the Great Barrier Reef in 1975 and to the stopping of sand mining at Fraser Island and Cooloola a few years later. From the early 1980s we had the first Australian World Heritage Areas including the Great Barrier Reef, Kakadu and the Western Tasmania Wilderness National Parks and in 1983 this gave the federal Government the power to stop the damming of the lower Gordon and Franklin Rivers.

In 1966 I my personal understanding of what was needed in conservation was broadened when at ANU I gave what I believe was the first year long Australian University course in the conservation of natural resources. In 1968 I became the full time Assistant Director of the ACF and we moved into what, looking back, was the most hopeful period in Australian conservation history. In 1973 I became the ACF's CEO and served in that role until 1986.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s environmentalism began to shape up as a major political force. The Club of Rome was formed in 1968. Paul Ehrlich's 1968 'The Population Bomb' and Donella Meadows' 1972 'The Limits to Growth' books attracted a wide readership and the developing conservation movement produced a new perspective by criticising the inherently dysfunctional nature of economic growth. Sir Garfield Barwick, President of the Australian Conservation Foundation from 1965 to 1971, called economic growth "a false and unsatisfying god". In a speech to engineers titled 'Economic Growth and the Environment' (published by the ACF in 1971), Barwick quoted extensively from John Stuart Mill's 1848 book 'Principles of Political Economy' concerning the advantages of a stationary state combined with growth in creativity and suggested replacing our economic growth system with "a stationary system with cyclical re-use of resources". In December 1969 in a letter to The Age Barwick had referred to ACF's primary role as being the development of a "blueprint of a conservation policy for the Nation". Mill's stationary state alternative, rebranded as the 'steady state economy', also began to receive more attention at this time, largely, through the work of Herman Daly. Daly

for instance edited the publication ‘Toward a Steady State Economy’ in 1973 and in 1980 lectured at well-attended public meetings in Australia.

Barwick in his 1971 paper argued that our “entire pattern of thinking has to be radically altered”. But unfortunately, a radical approach was not adopted by the conservation movement. Instead, we put more emphasis into taking stock and beginning to produce conservation studies and plans from a national, state regional and local perspective. Beginning in 1980 the world began a phase of producing conservation strategies and state of the environment reports at all geographic levels. In Australia our ‘National Conservation Strategy’ was published in 1983 and this was followed by the publication in 1992 of the ‘National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development’. The first of several national state of the environment reports - ‘State of the Environment in Australia’ (in 2 volumes) prepared by the Department of Arts, Heritage and Environment was published in 1985. None of these documents appear to have had any major influence on policy. In fact if you look back at them even though they got watered down by Government and the bureaucracy the suggestions in them are still ahead of the thinking today.

I believe it is also true to say that none of the various population reports of the last five decades, beginning with the Borrie report in 1975 and including the 2011 ‘sustainable population’ discussions, have made any difference to Australian Government policy. In 1986 as a member of the National Population Council I wrote a report which suggested we should aim for a population not greater than 21.5 million by 2030 and in 1994 the Australian Academy of Science suggested a cap of about 23 million by 2040. The situation is that with the present rate of increase of about 1.5% our population is set to reach about four times those suggestions by the end of the century. The discussion of population policy is largely divorced from the bigger question of where Australia should be going. Former ALP federal representative Kelvin Thomson rightly called it a missed opportunity to map out a direction for Australia’s future.

It is an extremely sad thing that we are not facing up to the reality of the situation, that we are more addicted to perpetual economic growth than ever when the need for an entirely new way of living could not be more obvious to those who bother to think about the matter.

So where exactly is the conservation movement today? Generally, it still focuses most of its efforts on damage control or what we call ‘mitigation. In other words it is basically reactionary. Let me take an example – human influence on climate through carbon emissions.

For many in the environment movement this is "the only big issue". Some are fixated on it. We certainly put a lot of our effort into describing how bad this will be for the environment if we do not curb it, but the almost universal approach is one of mitigation - to work for a switch to none or less carbon emitting energy sources with little concern about either the overall level of energy use or the relationship of energy use to economic growth. We treat it as a carbon emission reduction problem when the basic problem, the cause, is the over production of everything including carbon – treating the world as a limitless source of materials. An Emperor is wearing no clothes situation if ever there was one.

The present situation is that the proportion of energy derived from renewable sources is increasing but the amount of fossil fuels being used is also increasing as is, of course, the total amount of energy being produced. This is because in a perpetual economic growth driven system the demand for energy endlessly increases. The result is that while our efforts in relation to developing more renewable energy have reduced the potential impact of energy use on the atmosphere - in the sense that is without renewables the emissions could have been bigger - the overall impact on the earth from higher levels of energy development and use is increasing. Even if we did achieve a goal of zero carbon emissions, all of the other problems associated with energy fuelled economic growth would still remain.

There are of course many other examples of this sectional approach that I could refer to. We do not just deal with every problem separately but quite often we often deal only with a part of the perceived problem. For instance here in Australia the federal Government is totally ignoring the problems created by Australia's massive coal and gas exports. Another inconvenient truth. Similarly, the conservation movement is rightly concerned about the big new coal proposals and Coal Seam Gas exploitation on climate, water, agriculture and natural areas such as the Great Barrier Reef but it ignores the wider effects of its use in terms of feeding economic growth. Of course Australia is not alone in being firmly committed to increasing the use of fossil fuels. Around the world coal and gas production continues to grow. There are huge coal resources in Russia and the USA as well as Australia and I doubt whether the Paris Agreement will alter the present situation where countries are not responsible for the emissions from their exports.

Another major consequence of this approach of focusing on mitigation, practised by both Governments and the conservation movement, is that in doing this we are helping to create the illusion that this approach will work, that it is not the

underlying system which is at fault but some aspects of the way it operates, something that can be fixed given time. For instance, that we can reduce emissions without tackling the economic growth system which drives the increased use of fossil fuels. In other words in doing this we are actually propping up a bad system and enhancing its legitimacy. 'Green washing economic growth' is probably a more accurate metaphor for what is going on. Or, maybe 'green whishing' in the case of wind turbines. Wind turbines have been a compulsory backdrop for some politicians talking about carbon emissions but how often have you seen an image of them farewelling one of the huge coal laden boats at a Queensland port or staring into a giant open cut coal mine in the Hunter Valley. You could say that wind turbines help to mask the truth that there is a continuing growth in the usage of fossil fuels and in energy use generally.

The closest that we ever come these days to adopting a different approach of tackling the whole is to talk vaguely about 'transforming society' or 'making the transition'. We are obviously a long way off recognising that there are limits to growth and that if the standard of living in the West was applied to all of the 9.7 billion people predicted by the United Nations for 2050 that they would need the equivalent of about 5 Planet Earths.

I began by mentioning the conservation movement's efforts on protected areas and clearly there has been significant progress here. The national reserve system which covered about 2% in the mid 1960s covered 17.9 % of the terrestrial environment (45% in Tasmania) in 2014. The situation with regard to the protection of the national heritage is unfortunately the opposite of this. When it was closed in 2007 The Register of the National Estate that resulted from the recommendations of the 1970s Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate included over 13,000 places and many nominations from the 1990s had not been assessed. After 2012 the Register has had no statutory power. The system that replaced it The National Heritage List includes only 107 places. The way in which this process has slowed down is also matched by the situation with regard to World Heritage in Australia, Australia has 19 sites on this List but the Ningaloo Coast was the last one to be added 6 years ago and Australia's Tentative World Heritage List comprises only 3 sites compared with the 12 for the United Kingdom. Regrettably, the site with the most to tell about the beginnings of the national park system, Royal National Park, has yet to make it onto Australia's Tentative List.

So let me return now to where I began with the efforts to create extensive systems of protected areas around the world. In the late 1960s Sir Macfarlane Burnet said that with world population out of control parks and nature would be eventually crowded out of existence. If these parks are the greatest achievement of the

conservation movement, providing inspiration for a more comprehensive approach, it is essential that they be maintained. Unfortunately, things are not looking good. Australia's number one icon the Great Barrier Reef, added to the World Heritage List in 1981, is facing some serious threats from climate change and the threats associated with the expansion of coal export including new port proposals and thousands of extra vessels sailing through the Reef

So what is the answer? Surely, it is also to find a better way one that deals not just with the dysfunctional relationship between people and their physical environment but one which also provides for a better social relationships – a major system change to steady state economy alternative first outlined by John Stuart Mill in 1848 and referred to by Garfield Barwick 46 years ago. It will need to be a change that affects all aspects of society. Our present institutions have been developed to facilitate growth and therefore must be changed. The idea of national self sufficiency recommended by Keynes is nowhere to be seen. The market oriented free trade system dominates all other considerations to the point where in Australia the export of our gas has taken priority over supplying the local market.

Looking at the matter in terms of ends and means. We cannot achieve the objective of a steady state economy while retaining the means such as capitalism related to the end of economic growth. It will need to go. Decoupling is also a concept suggested by some as the major answer but it is obvious that gains in efficiency could never keep up with endless economic growth and the increased consumption. Efficiency gains generally lead to increased consumption of natural resources. To work, decoupling must be accompanied by an end to economic growth. The best avenues to greater equity in a finite world are through smaller populations and redistribution.

The lesson is that the solution must be comprehensive and the different parts must be complementary, not in opposition to one another.

A particular source of inspiration for change is the national park system that of was the main conservation innovation of the nineteenth century. Every national park has the potential to both educate and inspire and the most important ones are on your doorstep – The Royal Reserves!

In 2008 I joined the staff of the Centre for the Advancement of the Steady State Economy (CASSE) and since then I have put a lot of my time into working to

explain how we could move to a Steady State Economy alternative to our present endless economic growth system so I will end by saying a few things about this.

DEFINITION AND PRINCIPLES OF THE STEADY STATE ECONOMY

CASSE defines a steady state economy as being one “with a relatively stable, mildly fluctuating product of population and per capita consumption”.

Herman Daly’s short definition for the steady state economy is “one that develops qualitatively (by improvement in science, technology and ethics) without growing quantitatively in the physical dimensions”.

Our current universal ‘economic growth’ model by contrast involves an increase in the production of goods and services - an endless increase in the amount of materials processed, consumed and disposed of as waste. This concept of economic growth started out as a means to the end of creating wealth and power and improving standards of living in a less crowded world but it and population growth became goals with such things as competition, trade, and profit making developed as major means to those ends. Although running up against the physical limits of the world, change is unlikely unless we find another way or wait until there is a ‘planetary shipwreck’.

The principles which underpin the steady state economy alternative are concerned with both the relationship of people and the environment and the relationship between people.

The **FIRST PRINCIPLE** concerns the rate and scale of resource use. Instead of endlessly increasing the use of resources to provide for and stimulate more consumption we will use resources at a sustainable rate – at a rate related to the natural processes of renewal, and the capacity of the environment to deal with waste. In other words in the steady state economy there will be a stable level of material throughput at a level and scale which can be maintained indefinitely. This of course includes complete reliance on renewable resources including energy.

The **SECOND PRINCIPLE** concerns the goal of social equality. It is the opposite of our present system which is inequitable as well as being materialistic, competitive, individualistic and elitist. Our present system justifies disparities in wealth, education, health and justice by saying that these are necessary to provide an incentive for growth in the form of rewards for those who do well and that growth will improve standards of living for all through the trickle down effect. In the steady state, in complete contrast, there will be full and true equality

everywhere. Co-operation will replace competition as the main goal and form of social interaction.

MAIN FEATURES OF THE STEADY STATE ECONOMY:

So, what will be the main features of the steady state economy?

To begin with in the steady state economy, to achieve sustainability, people will live within the earth's means, relating their use of its resources to its environmental capacity through their close relationship to it. They will have direct control of the environment where they live and full respect for it. They will be as concerned for the long term welfare of the environment as they are for its welfare during their lifetimes. This will be achieved partly by people living in small communities, producing most of their own food and other materials. In this way they will have not only have a close knowledge of their environment but an absolute stake in its future.

At the same time the new relationship with people will involve true equality. Not today's flawed concept of equal opportunity for all to climb the ladder to success (which along with the alleged need for competition is used as a justification for inequality) but equal treatment in every respect, including equal access to food, housing, and other services. It will be a non-hierarchical society. No one will be superior to another. There will be respect for all. In the steady state people will gain satisfaction from developing and exercising their skills and from contributing to the well being of the community. It is important with regard to this step that that it is understood that inequality is one of the major facilitators of the Economic Growth system and that unless it is dismantled it will impede the move to a Steady State Economy.

I trust I have said enough to suggest not only that there is hope because there is a better way but also to emphasise that if we are going to have any chance of success it will need a concerted effort a change of focus and by the conservation movement. Over to you.

Geoff Mosley