

## **THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW -Sustainable Local Democracy in a Global Environment**

©Moirra Rayner [www.moirarayner.com.au](http://www.moirarayner.com.au) Published in the Proceedings of the National Local Government Conference, Auckland NZ July 2005

I acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land. Thank you for inviting me to speak here, in the land of my birth: I thank them for making me welcome.

### **The political meaning of ‘sustainability’**

I called my paper **The Day After Tomorrow – sustainable local democracy in a global environment**. This is, I hope, fashionably catastrophic.

I see a lot of movies, mostly on planes. In one of them, **The Day After Tomorrow**, New York (and ‘therefore’ western civil society) collapses under the entirely foreseen geophysical consequences of global warming – tsunamis, blizzards and a new ice age – and the social consequences, including millions of American asylum-seekers swarming into the misery of, ironically, Mexican refugee camps. It has personal stories of love, sacrifice and redemption as well of course, but it is a disaster film, and responsible scientists have told us that, though ‘speeded up’ for dramatic purposes, its environmental catastrophe scenario is an arguably realistic one.

It has not moved the populace to demonstrate in the streets or ring talk back radio programs, and thus it has not moved Ministers. I still drive two cars and use aerosols and Australia’s failure to ratify the Kyoto agreement does not keep me awake at night. I have not connected the message of the movie to my place and my life. Would I have felt more alarmed if, instead of Liberty drowning it was Sydney’s Opera House, or Melbourne’s recently World Heritage listed Exhibition Centre, or the

Beehive that was engulfed? I suspect not. People have an almost infinite capacity to deny the facts.

So do their leaders. Arthur Koestler showed in **The Sleepwalkers** how great scientific truths are discovered, forgotten and rediscovered over the millennia. Historian Barbara Tuchman in **The March of Folly** cites one case study after another proving the compulsive 'wooden-headedness' of governments - rulers convincing themselves that it is proper to commence or maintain a course of action despite overwhelming evidence that it will end in disaster.

A few years ago, in the heady days of 'freedom' after the break up of the Soviet empire, the Russian pilot of a commercial plane took his family and friends for a ride. He left his teenage son in the cockpit with the plane on automatic pilot while he shared a drink out the back. The Black Box records the boy's scream that he didn't touch anything and the sound of running feet followed by a steep and fatal fall. Our fingers are itching for those buttons. That prompts the universal question: what makes people do stupid, self-destructive things?

Amartya Sen, the Nobel Prize winner, recently wrote that the ideal of sustainability must be measured against the sophistication of our understanding of what it really means to be human. If the latter is undeveloped, the former is not achievable.<sup>i</sup> People have needs, but they also have values, he wrote:

*"They cherish their ability to reason, appraise, act and participate. Seeing people in terms only of their needs may give us a rather meagre view of humanity."*

We have the capacity to imagine, and to imagine a future that may not have us in it. People are more than patients whose needs demand attention: human beings have the freedom to decide what to value and how to pursue it, in ways that go far beyond the fulfilment of our personal

needs. We are naturally self-interested but as James Lovelock, scientist and author of the Gaia theory, wrote recently selfish genes can nonetheless permit the evolution of an altruistic planet.<sup>ii</sup>

The basis of this paper is that I see civil society as under increasing threat, from within and without.

From without, the greatest challenge comes with new waves of international investment and competition and the mass movements of people and ideas that come with it, and the fear of isolated communities and political groups, of change and difference. From within, the greatest threat is fear as well, and ignorance and cynicism about the great legal and civil institutions of our society.

So in this presentation I will look at some common reasons why people make mistakes that in hindsight were spectacularly foolish: why democracy is a necessary element of sustainable development and why democracy is a universal value, and the role of local government in saving the world, no less.

Sustainable development is a guiding environmental principle. It has also become a driving political and *cinematic* image. The last image in the 1980s UK television series, **Edge of Darkness**, shows Gaia, “our mother the earth”, healing her poisoned wounds with black-petalled flowers. It will eventually lead to the eradication of the human species through climate change. Paradoxically the ‘Gaia’ principle appears to have metamorphosed into the comforting popular idea, rather like children forgetting about being abused or neglected, that even if we maintain our damaging habits, destroying vulnerable eco-systems, tearing down forests and poisoning lakes, tinkering with eco-systems, the earth will adapt.

It may, but we might not.

Two hundred years ago Adam Smith had a great idea, that there was an 'invisible hand' that enables individual self-interest to work best in meeting the common economic good. That idea is the basis for our modern ideology of a market-driven, globalised economy, but there is a weakness in the model. Some needs must defer to others because of the value we place on intangibles.

We know that the earth is a benign nursery for life. We also know that human genes are 'selfish' and designed to promote individual, not species, survival. We have to find ways of sorting out these conflicts. But can we?

Just last week, the Melbourne Age newspaper reported the plans of a (regrettably) New Zealand farmer in a Victorian town to fell the last stand of 400 year-old trees and to replace them with thousands of saplings - 'sustainable' development, he argued, and essential to his own business needs. His plan has divided his new community, some of his farmer colleagues decrying his plans as inappropriate to the land and destructive to a fragile and irreplaceable ecosystem: but the majority silent, though apparently disapproving, valuing 'getting along' with, more than speaking out against, a neighbour in a small community.

Here is the dilemma. When Adam Smith developed his ideas there were fewer than a billion of us and nothing we did could significantly harm the earth: today there are six billion, and we know that we already have. Two hundred years ago we could, and did, take the growth of population and industry for granted. Not yet, because we are by nature self-interested. Today we still focus on the personal – *personal* hazards to health, the pollution of our *particular* backyards, and the survival of our *own* children. – Why do we believe that renewable energy sources and organic farming will be enough for the challenges to come? Two hundred years ago we valued privacy and individualism when it was necessary to make living in community bearable. But the times have changed. James Lovelock wrote, 'When we have made the earth our enemy what we

need is a well planned retreat and preparations for the damage that soon may come.”<sup>iii</sup> He doubted our capacity to do either; I put it to you as a challenge to your political leadership.

### **The function of democracy**

Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize Winner, recently wrote in, Democracy as a Universal Value <sup>iv</sup> that we can distinguish three different ways in which democracy enriches the lives of the citizens.

*“First, political freedom is a part of human freedom in general, and exercising civil and political rights is a crucial part of good lives of individuals as social beings. Political and social participation has intrinsic value for human life and well being. To be prevented from participation in the political life of the community is a major deprivation.*

*Second, . . . (In disputing the claim that democracy is in tension with economic development), democracy has an important instrumental value in enhancing the hearing that people get in expressing and supporting their claims to political attention (including claims of economic needs).*

*Third . . . the practice of democracy gives citizens an opportunity to learn from one another, and helps society to form its values and priorities. Even the idea of "needs," including the understanding of "economic needs," requires public discussion and exchange of information, views, and analyses. In this sense, democracy has constructive importance, in addition to its intrinsic value for the lives of the citizens and its instrumental importance in political decisions.”*

Last year I helped edit an old friend’s story about his battle with a local council in Subiaco, Western Australia. Ted had bought into a wine bar, and the neighbours wanted it to close down. Over twelve years the Council and he battled it out, and Ted not only won, he got elected onto the Council itself, where he remained for a symbolic 3 months. I am

pleased to say that in 2003 Ted's story won the first Subiaco History Prize, awarded by the same Council that had so blighted his life.

It was the Council that gave me my first taste of political activity.

I became the secretary of the ratepayers association in Subiaco because of Ted, because his bar, the Vintage, was the only place I could have a drink without being sexually harassed, from which I could walk home. And I joined out of frustration with a high handed, clannish local Council which wanted to shut him down, which had ripped out mature street trees against our objections and paved the swamp to make it into an ornamental lake (creating botulism and nearly exterminating an endangered species of tortoise). But this was not out of altruism but to protect the public interest: it was my own interests, as a member of the public, I was fighting for.

The decisions of my council were affecting my daily life. Local government shapes our use of public space and sense of attachment to a geographical location and our neighbours. Its institutions are our most direct experience of democracy or, as it was in the 1970s in Western Australia its antithesis: local government as road-maker, rubbish removalists and health inspectorate. It really mattered to me how it operated.

As Ted Slinger's prize-winning history of the Vintage Wine Bar in Subiaco quotes:

*"When it works well, local government is a fount of personal and political interaction between citizens and their representatives. When it works badly, it is a vipers' nest of parochialism, shady deals and self-interested grandstanding."*

What was critical to Ted's success was the very public nature of his struggle. There was a constant buzz of conversation about this among his

customers, some locals, and in the local newspaper, which reported on his battles with councillors, their staff and members of parliament, reported on public meetings and council intrigues. Conversations were being had, values were being debated (vigorously) and investigative journalists and nousey parker locals were establishing facts. But what happens when they don't?

### **Case study 1 sitting on the volcano**

Now let me propose to you a case study about local government that wasn't sustainable, though it 'democracy' played a part in its end.

It happened in 1902, on the island of Martinique in the Caribbean sea, about 400 miles northeast of Venezuela, whose capital city was Saint-Pierre, a thriving community of about 30,000, managed as a French colonial 'department'. There was an election due on the 10<sup>th</sup> May which would decide who would be governor. There were two individuals competing for that office, both of the ruling Progress coalition party one of whom was the incumbent Governor Mouttet, but two parties vying for representation. The other was a Radical Party that represented Martinique's 'underclass', the black and mixed-race majority.

Behind Saint Pierre was the volcano on which the island was built: Mount Pelee. In early April the mountain started to rumble, spewing out fine ash and noxious fumes, some of which settled in the city, which unsettled the populace. The Governor was worried too, mostly about the possibility of a panic. In the search for someone to blame, afterwards, it was claimed that his concern was because the only people with enough money to leave the island were the wealthy, and if they left he might lose the election. This was probably a calumny.

Nobody on the island knew much about volcanoes and what they could do. The governor set up a commission to inquire into the matter, which is always useful, and meanwhile the official line was, and the newspapers

dutifully reflected it, to downplay the dangers of the volcano and even to blame fears about it as an opposition party ploy by the Radicals.

On 3<sup>rd</sup> May a small Martinique village was destroyed by lava. The US consul sent an alarmed telegram to Washington, which the Governor intercepted, and passed on instead a message that the danger was gone. That was what he believed. On 7<sup>th</sup> May a volcano on a nearby island, St Vincent blew killing 2000 people: the Governor's commission reasoned that this made the mountain safer, the 'pressure valve' having been released, and announced that Saint Pierre was not in danger any more on that day.

It was later claimed that the Governor had ordered the military to block all roads out of the city to contain any civil disorder. That can no longer be proven one way or the other. But what can be shown is that he stayed in Saint Pierre himself, and that at 7.59 am on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1902, a pyroclastic flow, or nuee ardente, a lethal cloud of volcanic gases and debris, raced down the mountain at 700 degrees Celsius and 60 miles an hour, and within two minutes the town in flames and 29,000 were dead, including the Governor and his commission, the editor of the newspaper, and the Governor's cabinet.

There was supposedly only one survivor – a man called Ciparis who had been sentenced to death for murder and was imprisoned in a below ground cell so that he could be executed the following morning. He ended up travelling with Barnum and Bailey showing a replica of his cell, after the authorities pardoned him. In fact about 3% of the population survived.

It was the 20<sup>th</sup> century's worst volcanic disaster, because of the failure of local government leaders to heed the obvious warnings of a mountain that it was about to blow, because of their own inadequacies. Part of it may well have been the Governor's desire to 'manage' an election. But it is far more likely that it was simply a combination of ignorance, micro

management on a familiar scale, and fear of making a politically unpopular decision. A very recent book about the disaster<sup>vi</sup> clearly pins the responsibility on a leadership that was at first ignorant of the danger, then hesitant to take action because of political concerns about an election campaign.

But it was not just the complacency of the governor Mouttet who died with the rest of the population. In its final edition, the local newspaper ran an editorial, 'Where better could one be than in Saint Pierre?'

### **Case study 2 – competing to death**

Let me give you another case study: another island.

By the time Europeans first came across it in 1722 Easter Island was a wilderness deep in the Pacific, with a miserable and half starved population – according to the sailors – huddled among the overthrown remnants of hundreds of enormous statues. They still lie there today, mostly, though some have been raised in modern times for tourist purposes. In a quarry, along its roads, abandoned in transport, these mighty faces lie and there is evidence of hundreds more platforms where they once stood. They are in various states of completion or disrepair, littered about with picks, drills and hammers which they were being carved, or abandoned by the side of the road, as if the people had suddenly thrown down their tools and stomped out leaving each statue in whatever stage it happened to be at the moment. Who carved the statues, how did they move such enormous lumps of stone, and why did they eventually throw them all down? They could only have been moved with timber and rope made from big trees, yet the island is, and was in 1722 a wasteland, without a single tree over ten feet tall.

We know through the work of geographer and botanist John Flenley<sup>vii</sup> how easily even quite complex societies can collapse.

The Easter islanders were typical Polynesians, speaking Polynesian language, making Polynesian tools, who colonized Easter Island and built up a population that peaked at around 15,000 people, divided into eleven territories each under one chieftain and belonging to one clan, yet loosely integrated under one paramount chief for religious, economic and political purposes.

Easter Island was completely isolated so that there was little opportunity for inter-island competition such as trading (and fighting). Competition between its 11 clans became intense and took the unique form of erecting statues representing the high-ranking ancestors of the chiefs of the respective clans. It seems they started building about AD1000, and engaged in hundreds of years of competition, trying to outdo each other.

We might consider the modern parallels of modern CEOs competing for status with lavish salary packages, stock entitlements, luxury cars, insignia and other jewellery.

The competition grew fierce. Transporting and erecting the statues required lots of thick long rope made from fibrous tree bark, and big strong trees for all the sleds, canoe ladders and levers. What we know now from the archaeological evidence is that this activity quite quickly wiped out the local subtropical tall forest, and along with it every single species of native land bird and 25 nesting sea bird species, which had made Easter Island the richest breeding site in Polynesia – a safe breeding site until humans arrived.

When the trees were gone, the locals could not go out to fish in their huge canoes, because they could not make them any more. The birds became extinct – much as the NZ moa did though at least here other flightless land birds managed to survive – from a combination of deforestation, over-hunting and the predation of the rats introduced accidentally.

Every variety of tree became extinct, because after the great statues were made and transported the people needed gardens to grow crops; after they could no longer use the timber make canoes to harpoon large sea creatures for food, they could not go to sea. It was the most extreme example of forest destruction in the Pacific: and the consequences for people were catastrophic.

First came the restricted diet then erosion of the soil and loss of crops and reduced rainfall. The next step was population drop off, starvation and cannibalism, which became ritualised. Then came the collapse of society – the chiefs and priests who had justified their privilege by claiming relationship with gods and promises of prosperity and bountiful harvests, buttressed by monumental architecture and ceremonies, were eventually thrown over in vicious civil wars. The rival clans stopped building and transporting statues, and started knocking down their rivals'. The people retreated to living in sealed caves.

The consequences of cutting down the trees, of self-inflicted environmental damage - must have been obvious. We can only wonder why they did not act on what must surely have been obvious.

### **Lessons from the Islands**

What can we learn from historical evidence of the collapse of Easter Island society?

**1. Ignorance is no excuse: look for the signs.** One lesson can be learned from the destruction of Saint Pierre too: that a plea of ignorance is often a question of lack of will. That we must look for feedback on the consequences of our actions. We must seek objective advice, talk about what we need and value, and allow concerns and fears to be explored

On Martinique, the mountain was speaking but its political leaders were not listening because their attention was elsewhere: on managing the

political debate among people. A hundred years ago the people of Martinique might not have known much about what volcanoes could do, but vulcanologists elsewhere did, and it was up to them to find out. Two hundred years ago the idea of exhausting natural resources or changing climates was incomprehensible: but when they are being depleted, it is an observable fact. Up to about 20 years ago it was possible to argue that we couldn't anticipate the consequences of overdevelopment, overfishing, global warming, or the destruction of civil society, because it was novel. It no longer is.

It is up to us to have those conversations. So we need to be knowledgeable. We need to avail ourselves of the available lessons of modern science, and not just the physical scientists: the social scientists who have information about the consequences of economic and political actions.

**2. Learn to identify conflicts of interest.** We also need to examine another reason, the most important one, for why people don't see the 'obvious.'

They do not have the skills to identify the problem and to address the conflicts of interest that may prevent them from addressing it.

Having a conflict of interest is not, in itself, wrong. It has the potential for wrongdoing and corruption, which must be avoided, eliminated or managed. We are not very good at this in Australia, though our relative isolation, interlocking loops of power elites, the increasing mobility of employment between the public and private sectors, the rising numbers of joint projects and temporary public offices, and the relatively small numbers of individuals making and influencing public decisions, offer so much opportunity for discretionary and casual misuse of power.

In Australia perhaps the narrow range of relationships is the most fertile ground for conflicts of interests. In a small town there are nothing like six

degrees of separation between business, government and social cliques.

Recognising conflicts of interests and their potential risk requires distance. Dealing with them demands clarity, transparency and more than the language of integrity and the public interest. It is a problem not only in the small-town cultures of most of Australia but in complex cities and in more densely populated regions, such as Europe, because economic unions will only cohere if their members can trust each other enough.

That is one of the reasons the OECD set up a project for managing conflict of interest in the public service. Its recently released draft Guidelines adopted a generic definition of conflict of interest:

*“A conflict of interest’ involves a conflict between the public duty and private interests of a public official, in which the public official has private-capacity interests which could [emphasis added] improperly influence the performance of their official duties and responsibilities.”*

Note the use of the word ‘could’. Finding that you have a conflict of interest is not a revelation of wrongdoing. Think of it in terms of Chess: when you find that your King is in check, the situation must be resolved, and if it is not the consequence will be the end of the game.

A conflict of interest is potential, if the public officer is never in a position to make a decision, which each interest could affect. If the elements of the definition are met, though, there is an actual conflict of interest, even if the public official with conflicting public and private interests in, say, the benefit of awarding a contract to a friend or future political mentor which may be at odds with achieving the best price for the public purse, was not in fact influenced by these personal preferences. If he was, the ‘conflict of interest’ has already become misconduct, abuse of office or at worst, corruption. But if it is managed properly; if it is identified and

acknowledged, and adequate steps are taken both to make sure that misconduct does not in fact result, and that it is made apparent that they have been taken, then the conflict of interest has been managed to meet the true aim of public service, the protection of the common good, and of public service ethics, the preservation of public trust in their government.

On Easter Island, the major reasons for the collapse of their society appear to be conflict of interest. A chief's status depended on his statues. Any chief who failed to cut trees to transport and erect them would have been out of the job.

We have a more modern example, recently in Australia. A few weeks ago the Anglican diocese of Adelaide published an independent report about entrenched child abuse after one of the leaders of its Church of England Boys Society was charged with sexually assaulting some of what may have been up to 80 children, and suicided. The report commented that the current leadership had sought to explain their inaction on years of complaints by children that the children's complaints had been dismissed, because they 'couldn't be expected to understand about child abuse'.

This was a wilful failure to understand the nature of child abuse and to act to detect and prevent it, because of what I can only describe as a conflict of interest: adult relationships and loyalties blinded good men to the facts and the reality of their abdication of responsibility to protect vulnerable children.

There are clear warnings when personal status depends on powerful people doing things that are, rationally, destructive for the group. They can only happen when they are not, genuinely, accountable for what they do.

So we need to know more about and have the skills to identify conflicts of interest, and act in response to them properly. But we also need to ensure that there are accountability mechanisms that really work.

**3. Islands are hard to sustain.** The third lesson is the effect of isolation on sustainability. An isolated community will self-destruct. We need each other to grow, develop and adapt.

This is where local government is unique. Local government is not just about 'place': it is a network linking responsive local government and small communities' concerns through international relationships, shared knowledge, skills and understanding. Through globalisation, trade, air travel, the Internet we all share resources and affect each other. But we are sharing a single planet. Easter Island is as isolated as the earth is today in space. There is nowhere to go if the human race wrecks the place.

We are not blind victims of economic forces. The same weaknesses in human social behaviour that destroyed Easter Island and Saint Pierre can destroy communities today: failing to anticipate problems, failing to act when they manifest themselves, and conflicts of interest.

**4. Democracy is necessary to sustain everything.** I suggest that there are some principles that make democracy – the greatest ‘invention’ of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – sustainable.

Amartya Sen wrote a few years ago, there are no working democracies at all in which they a substantial famine has ever occurred. There are no exceptions to this rule. It is sensible for ‘development’ and economic growth to be predicated on democracy – and respect for citizens’ rights - as a universal value.

Some principles for sustainability that I suggest are pretty obvious

1. Diversity is valued and used, rather than homogenised or rejected or minority groups being subject to discrimination or exclusion;
2. Choices - about land use, development and resource allocation - are made according to a community’s own sense of how and where it wants to grow and what it values, above and beyond its ‘needs’
3. Attachment is necessary for health and sustainability. This is not achieved by commercial transactions or ‘services’ alone
4. People must have reason to believe that they will be treated fairly and their interests and needs met
5. Democratic conversations must be created
6. Infrastructure for healthy communities is cultural, not concrete and asphalt, and cannot be built by the private sector, charities or churches. They go to the heart of good government.

### **Making democracy sustainable in a global environment**

Though we have lived with 'democracy' for 200 years, we still resist the truth that the 'invisible hand' that keeps communities alive is not the market but the faith of the people that they can live in community, and the belief that its children will survive.

One of the earliest warning signs is how our children are faring. We should be looking at the explosion of 'rare' childhood diseases such as diabetes type 2, asthma, obesity, depression and mental illness and the alienation of whole classes of young people from public life and cultural participation and acting, now.

Sometimes we do not anticipate a problem because it is outside our experience – over-harvesting is one example – or we miss the signs – the evidence of global warming was initially difficult to distinguish from year to year fluctuations in temperatures - but we must be aware or, like the frog in a saucepan on top of a warming stove, we are going to disappear. The Governor of Martinique could ignore the volcano because nobody 'knew' when and how it would erupt. We must make seek out the means of predicting and responding to early signs of unexpected outcomes.

Sometimes the problems seem too hard to solve – no one has worked out how to eliminate some problems such as the social effects of economic globalisation, or the effects of new communication media on young people. But the most important factor in poor governance is conflicts of interest that may completely prevent us from addressing an obvious problem. And that is soluble. In a healthy democracy, we need ongoing, informed and lively conversations about our problems, not slogans or campaigns. I wonder what the Easter Islanders were saying as they cut down their forests: 'Jobs not trees!' 'Technology will solve our problems.' 'We need more research: your proposal is premature'?

Democracy is intimately concerned with listening. It is not efficient. Democratic discussion takes time, creates controversy, does not deal swiftly or easily with complex decisions, and does not make win/win solutions either swift or easy to find. A democratic government does not simply respond to the loudest voices. The greatest needs are often those of people who can't express them - children, for example, and asylum-seekers, and old women. It must consult, and that does not happen at the ballot box. Consultation should not simply be with 'good blokes who agree with one another,' like-minded people in some kind of Club. Democracy is about sharing power, not relinquishing it or taking it from others: about finding balances, and ways of sticking together in spite of our differences and competing interests.

We must find ways to understand that, thanks to globalisation, we share finite resources and that what one community does affects 'neighbours' thousands of miles away. To live together we have to co-operate, because we value something more than competition or meeting our personal needs. We need to invest in social capital, not just roads. One of the quickest roads to disaster is for local government to leave cultural, social and community investment to private enterprise, charities or churches.

We need the public space for cooperation and a sense of common purpose. Politics, in a democratic system, requires public space, a sphere where issues can be exposed, discussed and within which criticisms of arbitrary or unreasonable use of power or authority can be voiced by 'the public', with a sense that these issues are common issues, and that participants are entitled to express their views and try to come to a shared understanding - if not a consensus, then at least an understanding of the different experiences of 'the other'. It need not be physical space such as Aotea Centre. These days, public space, through which criticism and discussion acquires the status of 'public opinion,' is found in newspapers and magazines, on radio talkback and television

current affairs programs and, now, Internet newsgroups or chatrooms. It is also found in coffee bars, concerts, plays and street festivals, child friendly public buildings and youth-friendly streetscapes. Good government demands 'public space' of both the physical and metaphysical kind.

Local government shapes public space. Local government is, and it should be, the most reliable feedback mechanism, where the effects of central government ideologies and changes are felt, can be reported back, challenged and learned from. Local government should be far more responsive: the lines of authority and decision-making are much shorter. Most of all, local government is ideologically significant. It is the best evidence that we are committed to democratic governance. Good local government lets ordinary people become involved, without feeling they have to become professional. Feeling involved, as Putnam said in his study, is one of the indicators of a successful - and efficient, and

### **Beyond fear**

The temptation, after the awful international events of the last three years, is to retreat onto our islands of familiarity and small concerns, into apolitical private life. This is exactly what we must not do. Politics has to be brought to bear upon our problems. Fear is dangerous. It can justify excesses and escapism and irrelevancies - like the Easter Island chieftains' statues. Denying it, as the Governor of Saint Pierre found, can be futile and fatal.

We as citizens have to shape our response to the challenges of today. We must make our own fate. We can use fear to concentrate the mind and act together. Perhaps we may be moved to save ourselves from the brink of catastrophe. A powerful force takes over our lives, sometimes, when we sense that our tribe or nation is threatened from outside. In times of war we accept strict rationing and the loss of personal liberties, without question. We even risk our lives. Perhaps when the catastrophes of the intensifying greenhouse effect, the loss of civil liberties in the name of the 'fight against terrorism', and the abandonment of our brains

to religious and political brainwashing become intense enough we will pull together as a global unit, and stop abusing our world and our most treasured human characteristic: the capacity to empathise.

---

<sup>i</sup> Why We Should Preserve the Spotted Owl. Amartya Sen, scientist and Nobel Prize winner. London review of Books 5 Feb 2004

<sup>ii</sup> Lovelock, as above.

<sup>iii</sup> Once We've Made the Earth Our Enemy. James Lovelock, scientist and author of the Gaia theory, in the Australian Financial Review 11 June 2004:

<sup>iv</sup> Amartya Sen, Democracy as a Universal Value. Journal of Democracy 10.3 (1999) 3-17

<sup>v</sup> Moira Rayner. Rooting Democracy – Growing the Society We Want. Chapter 9, Grass Roots Government. Allen & Unwin 1997 P. 161.

<sup>vi</sup> Ernest Zebrowski, Ernest. The last Days of St Pierre. Rutgers Univ Pr, 2002

<sup>vii</sup> John Flenley and Bahn P. The Enigmas of Easter Island. OUP