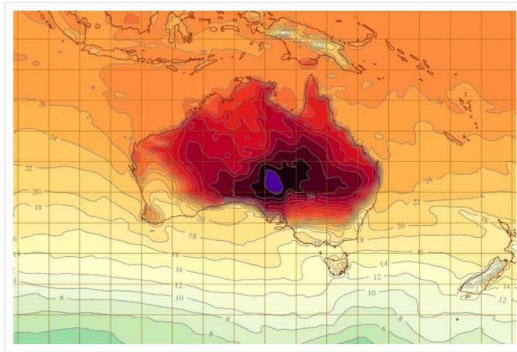


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Sunday, 22 December 2013

The perils of individualism and our dystopian present



As a child, I read constantly and I read anything. Of note however, before I had reached secondary school I had been immersed in numerous novels about the Holocaust, had read [Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock*](#) and had spent a lot of time delving into Alicia Bay Laurel's glorious hand written and illustrated [Living on the Earth](#).

Mine was a childhood vision of a dystopian present and a dangerous future for which I felt the need to prepare by knowing how to survive. This was accompanied by a deep sense of responsibility to be accountable for my own consumption. (A responsibility I admit that I have been only partially successful in fulfilling.)

Surrounded today by news of [climate extremes](#), [oil drilling in the Arctic](#), the real possibility of [dredging in the Great Barrier Reef](#), [expanding coal terminals on the reef](#), [mining approvals over biodiverse regions](#) such as the Galilee Basin's Brimblebox Reserve, [move on powers](#) over Queensland's bat colonies (and so on) the dangerous future I had envisaged has come to pass. And the dystopian present of the 1970s has taken a turn for the worse.

All of these decisions, in which each of us is complicit, arise out of a fundamental dislocation of our very self from our environment and indeed from society. Our governments however have failed to provide a cohesive narrative around these decisions, thus failing to see the inherent inconsistencies in their own positions.

Growth

We are told by government that it is important for our economy to grow. It links this growth with a 'rise in living standards'. 'Below trend' growth rates are concerning. The primary discourse of government is economic yet it is not clear where all this economic growth actually takes us.

What is counted in 'growth'? If we are to take a solely economic view of the world, surely we need to take proper account, proper measurement of that which is around us. This includes the environment, our civic engagement, equity and social inclusion. These measures find little traction, however, in public discourse. They are left to non-government organisations such as [ACOSS](#) to account for. Yet these views, despite being based on credible evidence, seem to be treated outside mainstream economic discourse.

Whose living standards will rise? Well not the [Holden employees due to lose their jobs](#) over the coming couple of years. Not the [childcare workers](#) whose modest rise in their already low income is to be wound back by the government. How is it possible to foster a 'rise in living standards' for mine workers if [Gina Rinehart insists](#) that they are paid too much to

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I lecture in land law at James Cook University and I write and think about the nature of property and its representations in the law; about issues affecting women; about justice generally; and about legal education.

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sustain business in Australia? Will offering mine workers a 'competitive' \$2/hour wage really support the 'rise in living standards' the government seeks?

These narrowly measured economic indicators do not seem to support improvement in living standards for any but those who reap the super profits. Not profits, but *super* profits.

Individualism

The Prime Minister [Tony Abbott said that the laid off Holden workers would feel 'liberated'](#). The Minister for Industry, Ian McLaughlin, said that it would be great for laid off manufacturing workers to move to where new and innovative industries were setting up. Such statements are indicative of the particular and pernicious conception of the individual that permeates our political discourse. It is this atomistic and isolated vision of the individual that dislocates us, as human beings, from our own true self, from the situated selves of others and from the physical world around us.

In this world view, there is no society but simply a competitive mass of individuals seeking to maximise their material wealth through domination, exploitation and claims of entitlement over the natural world. To what end though is unclear and it is this that the government - indeed all our politicians - and business both need to explain.

It is perhaps unsurprising that our political system has arrived at this point. The liberal democratic system of government has, broadly speaking, embraced the notion of the individual. The political philosophy that established the realm of the citizen and boundaries of government was predicated upon a civic being in the public sphere. These beings were men; men of substance. They were of a certain class and background. Those with no means, and women, were excluded. 'Individual' was shorthand for a particular type of person. No need to specify who was included. Government itself was justified on the basis that it protected the means of these citizens to enhance their wealth and standing.

Our system of governance and the principles it upholds, by and large, seek to create barriers for inclusion. This forms a significant limitation to the idea of the individual, and indeed to the freedoms ostensibly celebrated within our system. For example, the Attorney-General's recent call for investigation of our 'traditional' freedoms and the appointment of a 'Freedom Commissioner' provoke the question - whose freedoms are being investigated? And what is 'traditional'?

Individualism does however offer all sorts of possibilities: that each of us can fulfill our potential as a human, according to our gifts and desires, is a powerful idea. But this is not the message nor the effect of government policies which seem to depend on a particular type of person. These ideas are being used, still, to provide a barrier to inclusion for those who do not fit the norm of the 'individual'.

It is possible though, philosophically, to take the best of the idea of individualism but also to understand the importance of context and relationships. Some call this communitarianism, some call it a relational approach - there is a variety of different ways to express these ideas. What is more, they need not move far from liberalism to engender a more socially-oriented approach to governance and civic life (if liberalism is important to you).

The idea is that an individual can only reach their full potential through their engagement with others, and within the institutions of society. Indeed if there were only one human, it is difficult to understand how they would find an expression of self as a human without an available reference to a social context. We can only be an individual through our interaction with others. To take this further, to the extent that our neighbour is damaged, each of us is diminished. In a positive sense, our own individualism is not diminished through sharing but rather it is enhanced to the extent that we uphold the humanity of another.

Environment

And so if we were to consider that we were indeed related, connected and situated beings, it is more likely that we would understand too our place in the natural world. This would cause us to turn to the science and its indicators but it would also cause us to use our intuition. How can it be that we can continue to destroy the natural environment and remain immune from the effects of destruction? How can we continue to pollute without poisoning our own immediate environment? Intuitively, we cannot isolate ourselves from

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the effects of the rises in 'standards of living', business activity, leisure activities and so on.

This requires a significant mind shift. While guidelines, regulations, laws are important, the way these are framed tends to be to facilitate development rather than protecting the inherent value of the natural environment. We need to embrace this idea in the same way that we should embrace the idea of our connectedness with other humans. But so long as we privilege our individual self as separate from all around us, this vision becomes difficult to enact.

What to do?

As our world crumbles around us we need to act. We need to take responsibility for our own place in the world - including our neighbours and our environment. We need to call our representatives to account. What is our purpose? Why don't we measure the environment? How are we helping people? Importantly, we need to know how government plans and policies fit together into a principled, cohesive and defensible vision for our society.

We need to teach our children of their responsibilities and of the huge mop up job we are leaving them. We need to teach with vision, passion, compassion and intelligence.

For those with the capacity, we need to take public action: politically, critically, culturally, socially.

In short, we need to envision ourselves as connected beings who will fulfill our potential through our relationship with the world - and act accordingly.

Posted by [Kate Galloway](#) at [13:02](#)

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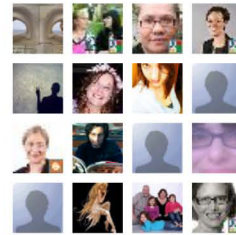
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