

Shaping a Sustainable Planetary Society – A MAHB Dialogue with John Hewson, Chairman, The Commission on the Human Future

Geoffrey Holland

Geoffrey Holland – What is the state of our world at the moment?

John Hewson - I think it's probably one of the most challenging times I can personally remember. Certainly, probably I know now, in terms of our economic circumstances, the reserve bank is saying it's the biggest decline in output and national income since the Great Depression. The orders of magnitude are actually very similar. The state of the US economy is similarly extreme, as it is in Europe. We're about to witness the ominous fate of a lot of emerging countries, particularly some of the debt-heavy emerging countries. At the same time, we've got a whole lot of political or geopolitical tensions that could be inflamed relatively easily in different parts of the world. So, we have this combination of economic collapse and genuine geopolitical tensions, over which the pandemic arrives. Nobody was prepared for it, even though there had been warnings. It's one of the reasons we're looking at these ten catastrophic or existential threats. I mean, they are threats. People recognize they exist, but they don't expect they will have an immediate effect. Now, the pandemic has arrived. The world was unprepared. People have been pretty much learning by reacting ever since. So, I think the state of the world is probably the most uncertain and unpredictable that I can remember.

GH – Can you summarize the human-driven existential threats that are pushing life on Earth to the brink?

JH - We've identified, and I think there's a more or less broadly accepted list of ten that have been distilled from the work of our own, Julian Cribb. I know that Paul Ehrlich at Stanford identifies a similar list. I think this is the way a lot of people look at it. Extinction is certainly one, resource scarcity, weapons of mass destruction, and the threat of a nuclear war. Of course, dangerous climate change for which the world is still only partially responding. The impact of the infiltration of chemical poisoning around the world, in everything we breathe and eat. There's food insecurity; very significant. There are pandemic diseases. There are uncontrollable technologies that have been quite disruptive. Many have come very quickly and were not anticipated in terms of their effect. There are no regulatory structures around a lot of them. There's human overpopulation and the collapse of megacities. There's the delusion, really false beliefs, attacks on science, fake news; all elements of an environment in

which deniers and others have an undue influence on the thought processes and reactions of the world.

GH – A recent study showcased on your website suggests there is a one in twenty chance humanity could be wiped out by the consequences of climate change by 2050. Is it really that tenuous?

JH - We pride ourselves in being able to represent a diversity of views. That's clearly an extreme view, not one that I hold. But you can't say that if we just let the issue drift that we won't have catastrophic consequences from climate change. In terms of the global response. I mean, I was very pleased when we got the Paris accord. We got 190 plus countries to agree. Okay, they put up pretty modest commitments, but at least it was a framework within which we could perhaps move forward. Globally, the orders of magnitude are always going to be debated, but the urgency of the task is unquestioned.

GH – You are Chairman of an Australia-based organization called The Commission on the Human Future. What is its mission?

JH - Yes. Well, this came out of a meeting of professors and others with a common concern that a lot of these existential risks were not being fully recognized. The group decided we should try and get some sort of structure within which we could focus on those issues, elevate them, elevate the status of science, elevate the value of expert opinion and advice. Marshal the best minds on these issues, recognize that it's not all negative, in the sense that, while the risks are very significant, a sensible resolution response to those risks, brings a lot of opportunities for a future in which we can all thrive. So, the Commission's work is now started. We don't want to come up with specific solutions necessarily. We want to keep the discussions more broad. We're now soliciting widespread stakeholder support. I've been surprised at some of the responses that we've already got; for example, the NASA Chief Scientist. We are now doing a formal attempt, particularly in Australia, to raise support. We're linking with other agencies around the world. The Stanford effort is a good example. There's one in Oxford, and Cambridge, and a number of others. That's the way we think we can make a contribution; marshal that sort of expertise to be a reference point for reliable and independent scientific advice, drawn from the best work and research and minds of the world. I've been involved in the political process, one way or another, in Australia, since the early 1970s. The thing that worries me is politics has become so short term. It's become so negative, you know, one side scoring points on the other shifting blame to the other. The opportunity for strategic thinking and planning just hasn't existed. So, we need governments to think longer term to think structurally. We have to recognize that these risks are very

significant. In Australia, we have a long history of a very big, very dry climate. We have bushfire seasons and droughts, each one of which is getting more intense and more severe as time goes on. We've just been through a season of drought and bushfires; the worst in history. Yet, we don't learn anything; we don't put in place policies and structures, which would make our soils more resilient and drought resistant. That's our case in Australia, that's our challenge, but you see it elsewhere. You see it in the United States, and the extent to which somebody like Trump can constantly misrepresent the reality you're facing as a nation, that the globe is facing. We have to break that mentality

GH – There is a lot of activism around the world aimed at building a life-affirming, sustainable future. How do we get everybody on the same page and pulling in the same direction?

JH - The pandemic experience has demonstrated how quickly people can accept a reality. This is all levels of society. I've been saying in Australia, that I think this COVID-19 is pretty much a dress rehearsal for what we might expect with any one of these existential threats. Take for example the threat of nuclear war. People say, yeah, we know that's there, but they're never going to let that happen. It wasn't that long ago, people were genuinely concerned about North Korea, and its nuclear ambitions. We worry that India and Pakistan have gotten nuclear capability. There's the threat of Iran wanting to gain nuclear capability. It's easy to say that's not going to happen on our watch, but the possibility is there. Look, if you'd asked people a year ago about the chance of a global pandemic. It would have been maybe one in 10,000. Well, it's happened. We've got the worst economic circumstances since the Great Depression. We found we can effectively work from home. We have responded. That gives me great hope that when the reality of a circumstance is accepted, you can get everyone to sign off on the magnitude and urgency of a problem. So, you close the economy down, and you'll only be able to travel internationally for verifiable reasons until we get a vaccine deployed. That's a big change in a country like Australia. The way I look at the global response is nations have to deal with the pandemic, in the context of their own circumstances. They've put in place many changes that people never anticipated. That's happened within a collaborative global context.

We could apply that same thinking to climate change or to any of the other existential threats. People's behavior can change. Look at the debates we've had on climate in Australia over many decades. Frankly, the sort of adjustments we need to make in Australia in response to climate are really nothing like we've had to do in response to the pandemic. So, I do think we're getting there.

GH – Some claim the world is caught up in a particularly rapacious brand of market capitalism. If so, how can we refine the way humans do business so that it serves the best interests of nature, people, and planet?

JH - That, I think is a very important question because there's no doubt that we've got an imbalance in terms of the way we've responded. We rely on markets and in many cases, uncontrolled markets, but we don't recognize the extent to which they fail to deliver the outcomes we want. As an economist, I'm frustrated at the models on which we base a lot of our thinking about markets, like perfect competition, equal access to all information. The assumptions we make about human behavior really do not match the way it works. So, while the profit motive and cost efficiencies have been important elements of what we've done, we've lost sight of the bigger picture. We see the profit motive dominating as a lot of essential services in Australia have been privatized. They're all about maximizing profit; not interested in the quality and sustainability of the service they're supposed to provide. There have been a lot of mistakes made by the government in handling this. Market forces can and should be relied on wherever possible, but that depends very much on the regulatory framework within which those market forces are working. You don't get that right, then, of course, you've got a significant problem in a country like Australia that has benefited enormously from globalization. No doubt, we've seen a reduction in global poverty, but you can't say it's been managed well. The danger is, we go to the isolationist route. Let's close our borders. Let's focus on domestic issues. For a country like Australia, which depends on the pretty free flow of capital, and people, and trade, isolationism can have a very significant downside. The challenge is to rethink globalization in a more effective way. Not just throw the baby out with the bathwater. It's the balance that's been lost, particularly in areas of essential services. One area, the pandemic is having a big impact is with aged care facilities. The virus impacts older people, perhaps with other health conditions, more than younger people. A lot of these nursing homes and aged care facilities are privately owned. They are all about profit maximization, rather than on delivering quality services. It's become a very big issue in Australia. We have a royal commission looking into this, and it's finding some pretty extreme examples of abuse and mismanagement. That's all come to a head with the pandemic. It's hitting nursing homes hard. In some, it's infecting 30% to 50% of residents, and increasing the death rate quite dramatically. China, for example, has prided itself on being able to take advantage of market capitalism, but maintain very centralized control. There are some real issues with that, They've got pollution and corruption and all the big structural issues, which are causing them, I think, in many cases to pull back from where they were going. But, it's very difficult when you've got a billion or so people to manage that sort of transition in any sense. And then we've got the immediacy of things like mass migration, and now the pandemic, which are very significant challenges for all governments. You can't sit back and say, we'll

leave it to the market because the market is incapable of dealing with a lot of these issues. We're seeing a whole lot of consequences that threaten the future of the planet.

GH – What steps should the nation of Australia and its people take to inspire positive change in other parts of the world?

JH – Australia is a middle-ranking diplomatic power, but we have at times been able to punch above our weight in terms of driving some of the global debate. I think it's important first to get your own house in order. I get annoyed in our country when we go lecturing the world on human rights. We haven't dealt with our indigenous heritage. We've got a significant issue of Aboriginal disadvantage compared to the average of the rest of the population. And you know, we're about the only major country that has that sort of indigenous heritage that hasn't got some sort of treaty or arrangement that recognizes them in the Constitution, whatever it is. So, you do need to lead by example, if you want to be taken seriously. You can get on the UN Commission on Human Rights and have a seat. If people look behind you, and they see you haven't done what you are asking them to do, you weaken your position. It's just been a frustration for me in the climate area because we have an unusual natural endowment of wind and solar assets. We have the technology; we have the ingredients. Australia is one of the few countries that has both lithium and graphite, so we have all the ingredients of the battery industry. Yet, we haven't been able to put in place an energy policy, if you want to call it loosely, that will allow us to capitalize on those opportunities.

But we can, in some of the bigger global forums, actually lead by example in an argument. More recently, they've called on a review of the origin of the pandemic.

Australia can use various forums, whether it's APEC, the IMF, World Bank, a membership OECD in the industrial world; and we can play a big, big role in the developing world.

GH – In all of human history, there has never been an event that has put every human on Earth at risk, and that has staggered the economic welfare of all nations...until now. Is the current COVID-19 pandemic a point of reckoning, and if so, can it be an opportunity for a new beginning for humanity based on “dignity for all” and a shared responsibility for the planetary biosphere we all depend on?

JH – The COVID-19 pandemic is a dress rehearsal for what we can expect if we continue to ignore science, continue to ignore the natural world, and continue to ignore catastrophic threats, such as climate change. I've been encouraged by our pandemic response. It's happened quicker and more substantively than anyone imagined. It's already caused us and encouraged us to change the way we do things quite dramatically. We're doing what was

unthinkable two or three months ago. The impact on people's businesses and on consumers globally, you know, their lifestyle and how they should be spending their money and their time. If we want to learn from this pandemic, we can't just get a vaccine and forget about it, which is what we've done in Australia on bushfires. When I look back at the original predictions of climate scientists, they were pretty simple predictions. Now, the world is going to see extreme weather events with greater frequency and intensity. You can debate anything you like around that, but it is happening. We've always had floods. We've always had droughts. Yes, that's true, but they are getting worse. We've learned nothing from one disaster to the next. That's the change that's got to be made. We just say, it's up to the government, or it's up to business. It's actually up to all of us. The threats should empower just about everyone: the young, the old, male, female, the poor, the affluent. Together, we can build a safer, cleaner, more sustainable human future. That's the opportunity that exists today. We need a platform on which to become proactive, rather than just being reactive. There's a lot more mileage in being proactive; smart government, smart business, smart individuals take a longer-term view on what is likely to happen.

GH – Some believe we've reached a point in human history, where we all must recognize that "Us vs. Them" is the road to ruin. Does focusing on our common humanity as enlightened planetary citizens offer the best pathway forward?

JH - The response has to be collaborative. I mean, as individuals, as businesses, as governments, civil society organizations, other institutions; we've all got a role to play. The dream I have is that each of those players sits back and looks at the significance of the challenges from their point of view; asking what could they be doing in a proactive way to deal with it. Unfortunately, there is a tendency to isolationism and not collaborating. Your current president has done a damn good job of not doing that. We've got to celebrate the success we've had in globalizing the world, with more collaborative responses. If we go the other way, just close everything down and look after ourselves, that selfishness is what the world cannot afford.

GH – Our Earth is home to nearly eight billion humans. What should each of us as individuals be doing to address the existential threats at hand in the course, in the course of building a future worthy of our species?

JH – You've got to look at the link between population and the capacity of the planet to support it. Most people think the population could be 10 or 11 billion by the end of the century, which would be impossible for the planet to support. It's already struggling because we've already got issues of resource scarcity, and famine coming in with greater intensity.

There are also water shortages. Imagine a very densely populated city without water. If we sit back in America and Australia, and everyone comes to live the same lifestyle that we live, we need about four planets to support our demands. Those simple realities have to be focused on. The responses on population have always been very difficult. I think probably the best way to deal with population is to put women in charge of the process for a while. You'll start to get some different thinking than what we've had in just the endless pursuit of bigger, bigger populations and more economic growth. Water shortage is really a big debate in this country, about not just the drought, but the fact that key water sources are drying up and fish are dying, and so on. We need people to recognize we could run out of water, and then we'll run out of food. Julian Cribb's writings tell us 80% of wars are related in one way or another to food insecurity, famine, and water shortages. We don't want that as an outcome of our negligence. There are ways to ensure food security and water conservation. We aren't at the point yet, where I think globally, there are enough people focusing on the problem.

GH - What is your hope from young people? What do you think we can expect from them in terms of fighting for their own futures?

JH - The student strikes and protests around the world on climate have been very important and very instructive. In a political sense, once the next generation can vote, you'll get a very different outcome in a lot of areas. We'll certainly see that in Australia. In one of the student strikes, our daughters who are 19 and 15 wanted to go to the strike, take a day off school. And they did, and they produced their own walkouts without any assistance from us. My oldest daughter says denialism is not a policy. And the other one said it's my future. They get it. They understand it much better, perhaps, than the older generations. My kids have very definitive views. They've both become vegetarian. They know we can't just assume we should continue to eat meat. They're prepared to lead by example. The views of the youth are very important. Quite often parents don't like to be educated by their children, but a lot of young people get it, and they will force change as soon as they can vote. I started out as a baby boomer, you know, expecting that I'd be able to work hard, and I give my children better opportunities than I had. As a society, we're leaving young people in very difficult economic circumstances. Job security is nothing like it was in my day. For young people, the mental illness dimension of their experiences is now becoming a very significant challenge for the broader community. With issues like climate and the other existential risks, we kick the problems down the road, leave to the next generation to deal with them. That's a very selfish attitude that is resented by the youth. They will act to change it.

GH - The naturalist Jane Goodall says that if you want to change minds, if you want to inspire people, you have to get to the heart. And to get to the heart, you have to tell stories, with movies, television, art, whatever. Does that make sense to you?

JH - It does. I follow Jane and some of the things she has said and done for the world. Evidence really doesn't motivate much change. You can have the accumulated scientific facts, and people just ignore it. Science has been distorted, as with the climate debate. It's just staggering. In Australia, we've had quite vindictive attacks on the science; community death threats and things like that. Evidence is not enough. It doesn't motivate change, it doesn't inspire people to adjust. So, Jane Goodall is right. You've got to get to the heart. You've got to motivate people, so they will think beyond the evidence that's in front of them, so they will think about what sort of world they want to live in, and they want to leave to their children. One of the frustrations I often hear from people is, all these issues are too big, they're too complex. They don't think they can make any difference. We've got to get to the human dimension of the problem. You can have all the hard scientific evidence you like, but it's the human dimension that's actually, in the end, going to move people.

John Hewson has had several careers in academia, bureaucracy, business, politics, and the media. He is currently a Professor in the Crawford School of Public Policy at ANU, and an Adjunct Professor at Curtin, UTS, Canberra and Griffith Universities, having been Professor and Head of the School of Economics at UNSW, and Professor of Management and Dean Macquarie Graduate School of Management at Macquarie University.

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[The MAHB Dialogues](#) are a monthly Q&A blog series focused on the need to embrace our common planetary citizenship. Each of these Q&As will feature a distinguished author, scientist, or leader offering perspective on how to take care of the only planetary home we have.

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