

Professor Ross Garnaut,
Garnaut Climate Change Review

Re: Your Interim Report-February 2008

Dear Professor Garnaut,

Thankyou for the invitation to provide feedback on your Interim Report. The comments that I make below refer in particular to the Executive Summary and Chapter 4: Mitigating Climate Change, which I have studied with more care than the rest of your Report.

In my humble opinion you have obtained a firmer grasp of the overall nature of the problem and its likely solutions than any of the other many reports I have read on this subject. I say this as one with little faith in conventional economics and the “guiding hand” of the free market. So I welcome your implicit recognition that economics is there to serve society and not the reverse. This brings to mind the answer I received from Dr Nugget Coombs many years ago to my naïve question, “What a pity that economics and ecology cannot be reconciled”: “Young man”, he admonished, “They deal with the same problem: the wise use of scarce resources!”

I therefore endorse the perceptive comment in paragraph 4 of your summary: “The challenge is to end the linkage between economic growth and emissions of greenhouse gases”. This provokes me to ask: “Which link is at fault? Economic growth or greenhouse gases? –or are they both part of the problem?” I would hasten to add that there is nothing wrong with economic growth, in my opinion, provided it is sustainable. Growth is not the same as development which is an unfolding of potential. The latter is sustainable, the former may not be. When natural resources such as soils, water and atmosphere are in limiting supply, the ultimate consequence of unfettered growth is a dead end, as with disease, plague, cancer and “red tide”, which ultimately kill their host. What we call “the economy” is a human construct; society can have the economy it chooses. If society prefers the steady state, the tried and tested formula of Nature, then it is time economists worked out how to achieve a steady state economy.

It is a great relief to me, and no doubt to others, that you accept the fact that the carrying capacity of the atmosphere is limited. No doubt you are familiar with the “Tragedy of the Commons”, a scenario in which unregulated exploitation ended in universal disaster. In systems terms, “regulation” is the necessary feedback mechanism that stabilises the system.

I am pleased you accept the logic that the first step towards self-regulation is a global cap on fossil fuel emissions. It took Nature several billion years to create an atmosphere fit for life on earth - the right balance between oxygen, carbon dioxide and ozone, on the one hand, and animals, plants and micro-

organisms on the other. The use of the atmosphere as a dumping ground for fossil fuel emissions was not part of the equation. The reality of global warming is that Nature is in the driving seat, not Man, and we have to play by Nature's Rules. The global cap on fossil fuel emissions must needs be linked to the carrying capacity of the atmosphere and its relief valve the ocean.

I welcome your comment that "Australia has an important role to play alongside its international partners in establishing a realistic approach to global mitigation ... and developing principles for allocating a limited global emissions budget among countries." (Page 4, paragraph 6). However I submit that the word "limited" in this context may be ambiguous; would "limiting" be a better choice? As to the word "realistic", I wonder which particular brand of "reality" you had in mind: If the only reality that counts is whether or not the nations of the world are prepared to co-operate in a global mitigation program, then the key issue is to identify the one core principle likely to be acceptable to all, developed, developing and undeveloped nations alike.

In this regard, I endorse your statement on page 30 (paragraph 4) "To be widely accepted, principles to guide the allocation of a global emissions budget across countries will need to be simple, transparent and readily applicable". I agree with you that the "Contraction and Convergence" model is part of the solution. Australians in particular, if they stop to think about it, would see this principle in terms of "a fair go for all". I would go further than that and say that it is the birthright of every single person on earth to share equally in the core necessities of life, including the benefits of the atmosphere, and that no one of us is entitled to dump more fossil fuel emissions into the atmosphere than our fair share.

In dealing with "principles for effective international action" (P.27) you make the valid point, "After all, prudent risk management would suggest that it is worth the sacrifice of a significant amount of current income to avoid a small chance of a catastrophic outcome." I heartily agree with that view. Risk is what it's all about and it is made up of a number of disparate elements such as momentum, inertia and irreversibility as well as likelihood and severity.

At last week's Forum in Canberra on "Future directions for Australian climate change science" Lead Speaker John Church, Chair of the Joint Scientific Committee of the World Climate Research Program, saw fit to end his talk with your own words, "Australia could usefully play a leading role in the development of a system of international climate change research, as it did in the development of the established system of international agricultural research."

I am familiar with the work of ACIAR and other intergovernmental research programs such as the IIOE (International Indian Ocean Expedition) and BIOMASS (Biological Investigations of Marine Antarctic Systems and Stocks) so I can vouch for their worth. Australia has the capacity, I believe, to lead the world in climate change abatement and remediation by utilizing links with South Pacific and Southeast Asian nations, developed, developing and undeveloped nations alike. There is the potential here in our own region for a mutually beneficial symbiosis. Nowhere is this more evident than with

Bangladesh, a nation with which we share vital security problems related to the possibility of a significant rise in sea level.

Thankyou for your attention. I look forward to your Final Report. I am sure that it will serve this country well.

Yours sincerely,

David Tranter
(D.Sc., OAM)