

www.citizenonline.org
postkyoto.citizenonline.org
central @citizenonline.org

May 2007

AN OPEN LETTER TO BOB BROWN – FOR A LIVING AND DEMOCRATIC PLANET

Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Bob

As we move into the 7th year of the new century, our democracy is becoming more uncertain. Economic globalisation continues to undermine constructive political authority everywhere and terrorism is not helping either. But now a crowded and wearying planet could make things worse. That's why I write to you. We do not hear a lot about democracy in current energy and climate change discussions – much more about rising sea levels and extreme weather or, more recently, loss of life, limb and GDP.

Yes, all of that's important and yes, the *Stern Review* on the economics of climate change has helped to concentrate many minds. But still we do not hear a lot – from anyone – about the ways in which democracy is also at risk. Its institutions certainly need more practice and its values more energetic affirmation. Put simply, it is the means by which we save the planet **together** – and a *Kyoto Protocol* permanently struggling for effective consensus makes it pretty clear that there may not be a better, or even another, way. Democracy is an invaluable, if not indispensable, resource in the battle to contain climate change.... yet it may also become an early victim. We need to do something about this.... put it to work, save it and save the planet, all in one hit.

We are already witnessing worrying signs and trends. In responding to Queensland's water crisis, Peter Beatty recently declared "These are ugly decisions, but you either drink water or you die". The point is perfectly true. And it was refreshing that human dependence on the planet was acknowledged by a politician in this direct way. But "ugly decisions" can, nevertheless, be a real worry. When they start to happen a bit more often, you suddenly find yourself confronting not just a string of ugly decisions but an ugly authoritarian government.

Democracy may dissolve as emergency states proliferate and either join hands to make a global Leviathan or that tear at each other's throats over the planet's last drops of oil or water. Perhaps they will even make pre-emptive nuclear winter and fast track climate change. The menu may soon be limited to these unpalatable options... and we shouldn't let it come to that. Democracy, everyone knows, takes time. We should leave ourselves time for more inclusive decision-making. Apart from their inherent political morality, democratic decisions secure more effective compliance and generate less conflict.

But we are already witnessing more ominous and insidious trends than Peter Beatty's petulant wit. The Commonwealth and John Howard in particular, are a bigger worry.

Father knows best

Let's start with Howard's contemptuous dismissal of opinion polls favouring more determined carbon emission controls earlier this year. Four out of five Australians want the government to sign up to Kyoto; nine of ten want a greater commitment to renewables. That is spectacularly heartening. Decades of scientific warning, years of droughts and the people think it's time to pay serious attention. But what is John Howard's response?

He says that the polls are unrepresentative, or represent only thoughtless panic. He admits that greenhouse science is now certain enough, but he rejects Stern's economic assessments. The people, according to Howard, don't realise the dire consequences of what

they are saying: their energy bills will rise and so will production costs in the economy more generally. If they understood this, they wouldn't be so eager to save the planet. He will help them get their priorities in order. Many Australians clearly don't understand the national interest as well as he himself does – and an important part of his job is to protect the people from themselves. That's how Howard understands his leadership. In fact, we see two worrying things here.

First, our leader is tilting in this deeply undemocratic direction. He is giving way to dangerously authoritarian and patriarchal impulses: "Now children, father still knows best." Second, and worse, no-one seems to be very disturbed. Our sense of democracy is not offended. No-one in the nation's press has anything to say. And even the many on the right side of climate change and energy debates would rather argue about emission controls and alternative energy sources than take on democracy. There is certainly a lot of concern that John might have his climate change facts or policies wrong. Not much about his barely concealed despotism. Quite apart from the content of what someone says democratic citizens do not allow themselves to be spoken to in this way. Surely we haven't given up on it yet.

Just as worrying, perhaps more worrying, is Howard's decision in April to commit his Government more seriously to the nuclear energy option and indeed, the Labor Party's Conference resolution to follow just a few paces behind. Because of the dangers it creates and the safety measures it demands, nuclear energy requires permanently mobilised mini-states of emergency to manage risk. In other words, when democratic states establish nuclear energy facilities in their midst, they establish little centres from which radiate not just the most serious health and safety risks but also profoundly undemocratic forces and impulses necessary to lower those risks. Can "low" can ever be low enough? And, at what cost? These remain fiercely debated questions but one point is clear enough: the unfortunate trade off between safety and democracy. The more safety we seek in a nuclear state, the more compromised our democracy is likely to become.

In Australia and many other places, the undemocratic nature of nuclear power will reveal itself well before plants are up and running – in siting decisions made against the will of local communities seeking to defend their children and themselves. Violence and repression are likely to make an appearance well before the earthmovers arrive or the massive concrete footings are poured.

Taking democracy too much for granted

We are beginning to debate and plan our energy and climate futures more seriously. Are we, in this debate, taking democracy too much for granted? After all, it will not literally be broken by storms, swamped by rising sea levels or suffer meltdown. But, if this is how we are thinking, we need to think again. Democracy may be weather proof but it is certainly not crisis proof. Indeed, there's nothing like a crisis to unsettle it. Crises can make officials and leaders reach for the emergency power provisions in their constitutions before you can count to three. Or, in the absence of a constitution or the rule of law, just call out the troops and ration the goods without any legal fanfare. Even if John Howard is less of a worry than I make him out to be at the moment, what about the John Howards of tomorrow - when someone must deal with the consequences of today's unhurried John and the shit is really hitting the fan? And, again, its not just conservatives here.

Some, and perhaps some of those who are most radically green, will respond to the threat of emergency powers with a shrug: "isn't the suspension of democracy and a little rationing a small price to pay if the planet is saved?" Nor does it sound too unreasonable put that way. But this is ultimately a position born of innocence, complacency or ignorance and we should not accept it too easily. Anyone who has suffered at the hands of occasional arbitrary authority or occasionally unaccountable states can tell you this. Or ask those who have fled from more deeply entrenched tyranny and unaccountable state violence. In the century just gone, millions of people killed and died for a very imperfect and incomplete democracy – not because they were duped but because even incomplete democracy represents an unparalleled moral and cultural achievement. I don't know how to do it justice.

If you're inclined to postmodern, this can sound unfashionably modern. But these are very important questions to engage with. At the same time, our major political parties are asleep or fixated on terrorism – but is this where democracy's biggest dangers lie? Green politicians and activists could and should be in here fighting fast and furious. We need to dust off our copies of Amory Lovens' *Soft Energy Paths*, Fritz Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* and Ivan Illich's *Tools for Conviviality*. Seriously thoughtful green political thinking from the 1970s. I noticed, and was thankful too, that Tim Flannery picks up on some of these themes in *The Weather Makers*. "Where are the nation's political scientists and theorists?" you ask. I know, I left them not long ago – and it's pretty much one of three things: ossification, a fashionably detached postmodern pluralism or terrorism studies – that's where they are. Otherwise the really ambitious are looking for research topics that respond to the Federal Government's new Research Quality Framework that enhance Australia's international competitiveness, its ability to sell more stuff. "What about threats to survival – or democracy?" you ask? What threat? How boring or ideologically driven can you be?

Of course, there have been times when there was little choice other than to reach for emergency powers and their accompanying authoritarian politics. And there will probably be times when that happens again. But we are not at that point yet and one of our most important obligations must be to avert, if we can, the need for that extreme action. In the context of climate change, there is an exceptionally compelling reason for this and it lies in the nature of the war we may have to wage on this front: the climate change "war" could well become a "war" without end. If we allow climate crises to deepen far enough, it may become a matter of democracy's permanent surrender; "ugly decisions" and ugly government forever – or, until the end of time, anyway.

Stern's implicit democracy

This last point mirrors the central logic of Stern's Review. If we don't delay and dither, he argues, we can avoid the more severe economic consequences of excessive carbon emissions and climate change or, in economists' language, we can mitigate their effects at an affordable cost. Rein them in well below his high 20% of GDP mark. Likewise with democracy. There may be no dollar values (or GDP percentages) but, if we act decisively and democratically while we still can, we may avoid its loss or, at least, limit its injury and shorten its convalescence should things get really bad.

Perhaps, because his focus is on physical rather than social capital, Stern does not mention democracy; or rather, mentions it only implicitly as one of those goods that markets cannot value, that has no price tag. Of course, it's great that democracy registers a strong implicit presence but the fact that it remains implicit reminds us yet again of how easily politics – especially reflective politics – is reduced to subtext in a lot of climate change discussion.

Democracy needs to be rendered explicitly, to be named over and over again in this discussion precisely because it does not have a price tag; precisely because, in market societies, goods without price tags are at an enormous disadvantage. If they remain unnamed as well as unpriced, they have no hope. Left unnamed in the company of other unnamed things bearing no price tag, democracy may evaporate altogether, become nothing before our very eyes. So, again, let's invoke it, celebrate it, call it by its name as emphatically and often as we can.

Some of these insights were registered by an Australian historian and political theorist in a brilliant and prescient book also published way back in the 1970s. I am referring to Hugh Stretton's *Capitalism, Socialism and the Environment* - 30 years and perhaps more ahead of its time. Anyone interested in how authoritarian government established to deal with serious energy crises might look and feel, should read Chapter 1 of Stretton's book. It describes a bleak world that is not only cold, but also utterly bereft social capital as neighbours are rewarded for reporting each other for cheating on their rations. Indeed, the book's essence is captured in its first two simple and compelling sentences:

People can't change the way they use resources without changing their relations with one another. For example, there are dozens of ways to economise energy: some would stop the rich wasting it; others would freeze the poor to death.

Stretton's imagined, authoritarian world was a relatively confined one in which police forces enlarged by networks of corruption easily managed the discontent of the freezing poor. From what I witnessed in the Eastern European colonies of the former Soviet Union, these were probably his models. Times have changed and in another half century will have changed for the worse again. The cold and corrupt society that Stretton describes as a warning may well become the best the world has to offer.

In 50 years time, the world's population will reach 9 billion and fully one third of this number will be living in third world slums. But even before we get there, today's one billion or so slum dwellers living in the already huge and massively riven mega cities are likely to furnish us with the models we need to imagine the future: small islands of extreme opulence and fortified wealth seeking to hold back rising tides of violent desperation, disease, drugs and assorted crime with high perimeter walls and razor wire, smart security surveillance, armoured cars (for which the hummer is a practice run), increasingly well-armed private policing and hired thuggery. Anyone interested in a more detailed account of the divided city should read Mike Davis' just published, *Planet of Slums*.

To be fair to Stern, some of these issues begin to emerge more clearly in those parts of his *Review* dealing with the international dimensions of the climate change problem. Not as politically incisive as Stretton and not as gritty as Davis, Stern repeatedly and rightly emphasises the importance of institution building based on negotiation, co-operation, and equity at the international level. He appeals loudly to the spirit of a liberal internationalism. But the democracy in this world remains implicit. Although I have now twice made this point, I don't really want to be overly critical of Stern either. He wrote the report as a public servant and an economist. And, considered from this perspective, his work is remarkable.

Written almost to formula, government reviews in liberal democracies have overwhelmingly called for smaller states and greater reliance on the market for many years. Stern's work refuses this bleak understanding of the political universe aggressively launched by Margaret Thatcher 28 years ago. That is to say, he takes critical market failure as his point of departure. His 700+ page report then scopes the magnitude of that failure in its earlier sections while the balance of the work provides a blue print for a huge program of public investment, works and action – extending, as does the problem, long into the future and across borders into the realm of international politics.

Even if it not an overtly democratic one, the state lives again in Stern. And it may have found a purpose that is larger than preparing the world for globalising markets: maintaining the planet as a place fit for humans to live. Doesn't that sound a bit more like the real thing, a bit more dignified and worthy than today's politicians-cum-corporate pimps? It does not matter whether Stern intended either to rescue or ennoble the state. His work points in this direction anyway and the economists club will be blackballing him even for his unintended treachery. But he can look after himself, I'm sure. and I want to finally come to the principal point of this letter – doing something about the pervasive and all-encompassing neglect of democracy.

A celebration and (democratic) vote of thanks

Arrogant politicians and despotic fathers are not good listeners. They know everything already. So the volume of the democratic conversation must be turned up. How? ***Why not a festival of planetary celebration and human gratitude – for sunshine, soil and rain and as a show of our equal and democratic dependence on planetary largesse? All of us, black or pink, male or female, young or old, gay or straight, rich or poor, die without Peter Beatty's water. Why not a series of celebrations?*** And perhaps it's already happening and the Green Party is involved. If so, this letter just provides a few more reasons for doing it. If not, what about it? After all, left unnamed, again, left to languish, democracy may, again, evaporate right before our half shut eyes. So, let's invoke it, celebrate it, work it, and call it by its name as emphatically, enthusiastically and as often as we can.

A festival, much more than a paper or a website or a grey-suited conference of serious corporate carbon trading types can have lots of democratic colour, theatre, dance, song, ceremony and satire as well as serious content. Such events can be great learning and levelling occasions as experts and people talk to each other. Conservative governments (or renegade social democratic ones for that matter) determined in their stupidity or working in the

service of corporate agendas can also be held up to public scrutiny and ridiculed as they deserve. Festivals can also provide an opportunity for green activists to remind themselves of their wider commitment to democracy. Or, if they know that well enough already, then they can just win more hearts and minds by making a spectacular public show of it. Above all, such events are symbols of a working democracy that is alive and laughing while listening, that is assertive, aware of and willing to defend itself when under threat.

Finally, and if you think it helpful, we would greatly appreciate your assistance in circulating this letter along with our website addresses: www.citizenonline.org and postkyoto.citizenonline.org Perhaps we could also exchange links or endorsements? If you visit our websites you will see that we have also mounted a climate change petition. Your signature, endorsement or other comments or promotional assistance would be most welcome.

Yours faithfully

Peter Vintila

www.citizenonline.org

Postscript: Howard is no longer as relaxed and comfortable as he would like to appear on climate change. He knows he can't stop the shift from fossils but he wants to go slow – for two reasons. Most obviously he wants every last dollar that can be milked from the carbon economy. No less importantly, early shifting is not to the advantage of the uranium economy he favours in its place. The facts – and informed public opinion – are his big problems here and these can take a long time to undo. A recent parliamentary report referred to the need for 10-year campaigns and rewritten school curricula conveying the new truth about nuclear energy – that it is safe, clean, cheap and necessary. That may well take 10 years of hard brainwashing and “re-education”.

If any energy technology is crisis prone, it is nuclear energy – and there is much more to it than operational safety. Democratic freedom has never had a more effective opponent in technology than this and we risk not just hideous reactor accidents and very dangerous, very long term pollution but democracy's suffocation amidst heavily policed and secured reactor sites and supply lines as well.

But if nuclear energy is one of democracy's greatest enemies, then we should take heart from the fact that the opposite is also true. Democracy is also the enemy of nuclear energy. It is principally community demands for safety that have priced nuclear energy out of commercial energy markets and made 10 year “re-education” campaigns necessary today. We should be encouraged by this.... but not complacent.