

Needed: a new age of enlightenment

Ian Johnson¹

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Warning Signs

Within the past decade, we have witnessed five warning signs to tell us that not all is well with planet Earth. These have included

- the magnitude of global poverty where we continue to ignore the plight of one-third of our fellow human beings consigned to ignominious poverty;
- a food crisis where we witnessed a dramatic increase in the price of food commodities;
- an ecological crisis driven by enhanced concerns about the impact of human-induced climate change, loss of biodiversity and damage to our oceans; and,
- perhaps occupying most people's minds at the present time, a global financial crisis. Hidden away,
- but no less pervasive, is an employment crisis with more than 300 million unemployed worldwide and an estimated 1.7 billion under the age of 15 soon to be joining the workforce or the unemployment lines.

The Future

Also, let's consider the future. With even modest economic growth (certainly much less than we have seen in India and China over the past decade) we are likely to see our current \$60 trillion U.S. world gross domestic product (GDP) rise to more than \$200 trillion U.S. by the middle of the

century, well within the lifetime of some of us. By then we will be producing and consuming four times as many goods and services as we do at present. Population will likely grow from the present seven billion or thereabouts to 9.5 billion. The demand for services, raw materials and living space will grow exponentially. We will, surely as a matter of justice and moral pressure, have to do our very best to bring the two billion people below the absolute poverty line out of their misery. We have a challenge!

One thing is certain: business as usual will not do. We must change our lifestyles, our values and our commitments to one another and we must manage our global affairs with as much care and respect as we do in our local communities. In tomorrow's world each of us will be global citizens responsible not only to our local and national communities but also to the world at large. What we do and how we live will have an effect on others. What they do will affect our lives. We have a new responsibility. We need a new compact.

The Good News

The good news is that we can make a difference if we want to. We can begin the process of rebuilding our world into one that is compassionate, caring, at peace and at one with nature. We can overcome the crises in front of us and we can become a measured and responsible people willing to manage our planet in a prudent manner and leave it in decent shape for future generations.

Almost 40 years ago a group of concerned academics and business people met in Italy to discuss "the predicament of man." They formed the Club of Rome and from

their meetings emerged one of the most important and controversial books ever published: *Limits to Growth: A Report to the Club of Rome*. It provided evidence even back in those days that continued production and consumption patterns that relied on the depletion of our natural resources would eventually prove to be a limit to our very prosperity. Many derided these findings at the time. Few would do so today.

Outdated Economics

Today, as we look at the emerging crises we face we can begin to see patterns emerge, common fault lines, and interconnections that make sense. Our inability to value the very things that are important to our survival on Earth: natural resources, water, land, our climate. We seem unwilling to think long-term and political paralysis replaces long-term leadership with short-term expediency. The heart of the problem lies in outdated and outmoded economics.

Economics and economic policy are the backbone of public decision making. Economics is important as it helps establish the prices of goods and services in society: It is the cornerstone of our market economies and of our banking and financial systems. Economic growth is the metric by which we measure the wealth of nations and the changes in such wealth are important components of international relations. To secure economic growth we pillage our natural resources; consume more than we ever produce and certainly more than we ever need, and we do so by borrowing more money than our real wealth should allow.

Imperative

We are on a collision course to a destiny that leaves future generations in serious debt. It has been estimated that every year the economy grows by \$1.5 trillion U.S. and yet, at the same time, we devastate the planet by around \$4.5 trillion U.S.: the age of uneconomic growth is upon us. We must, as a matter of urgency and self-preservation, reverse the trends of the past decades and move toward a new age of enlightenment and not as one observer has wryly noted, seek some "light in an age of endarkenment."

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