

# A MODEST INHERITANCE

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In the event of a world catastrophe, future generations will need a book of knowledge to guide them in rebuilding civilization.

PERHAPS JULIAN SIMONS is right to think all will be well for the next few decades. He sees the growth of resources sufficient to meet demand. He thinks it probable that the future air will be warmer and still polluted but not enough to cause discomfort. There may be more of us in some places. There will be more cars but they will be smaller and more efficient. He expects no worse than this for at least the next twenty years.

Others, like Paul Ehrlich, see a much gloomier future. Most of us believe in the maxim "Business as usual" and so we behave like the inhabitants of Tokyo and Los Angeles. We put thoughts about the earthquake at the back of our minds. We act in the hope that the world will continue into the twenty-first century much as it is now.

Few travellers from the North would go to the tropical South without anti-malarial drugs, or without checking how the nearby local war was progressing. By comparison our journey into the future is amazingly unprepared. Where people know well the local danger, as in Tokyo, they prepare for the earthquake to come. When the threats are global in scale we ignore them. Volcanoes, like Tambora 1814 and Laki 1783, were much more powerful than was Pinatubo or Krakatoa. They affected the climate enough to cause famine, even when our numbers were only a tenth as many as now. Should one of these volcanoes stage a repeat performance, do we have now enough stored food for tomorrow's multitudes? If part of a Southern glacial ice sheet slid into the sea, the level of the sea might rise by a metre all over the world. This event would render homeless millions of those living in coastal cities. Citizens would suddenly become refugees. Do we have the food and shelter needed when cities such as London, Calcutta, Miami and Rotterdam become uninhabitable?

We are sensible and we do not

agonize over these possible doom scenarios. We prefer to assume that they will not happen in our lifetimes. We take them no more seriously than our forefathers took the prospect of hell, but the thought of appearing foolish still scares us. An old verse goes, "They thieve and plot and toil and plod and go to church on Sunday. It's true enough that some fear God but they all fear Mrs Grundy."

In science we have our Drs Grundy also. They are all too eager to scorn any departure from the perceived dogma. Scientists and science advisers are afraid to admit that sometimes they do not know what will happen. They are cautious about their predictions and do not care to speak in a way that might threaten business as usual. This tendency leaves us unprepared for a catastrophe such as a global event that was wholly unexpected and unpredicted — something like the ozone hole but much more serious. Something that could throw us into a new dark age.

We can neither prepare against all possibilities, nor easily change our ways enough to stop breeding and polluting. Those who believe in the precautionary principle would have us give up, or greatly decrease, burning fossil fuel. They warn that the carbon dioxide by-product of this energy source may sooner or later change, or even destabilize, the climate.

Most of us know in our hearts that these warnings should be heeded but know not what to do about it. Few of us will reduce our personal use of fossil fuel energy to warm, or cool, our homes or drive our cars. We suspect that we should not wait to act until there is visible evidence of malign climate change — by then it might be too late to reverse the changes we have set in motion. We are like the smoker who enjoys a cigarette and imagines giving up smoking when the harm becomes tangible. Most of all, we hope for a good life in the immediate future and would rather put aside unpleasant

thoughts of doom to come.

WE CANNOT REGARD the future of the civilized world in the same way as we see our personal futures. It is careless to be cavalier about our own death. It is reckless to think of civilization's end in the same way. Even if a tolerable future is probable, it is still unwise to ignore the possibility of disaster.

One thing we can do to lessen the consequences of catastrophe is to write a guide-book for our survivors to help them rebuild civilization without repeating too many of our mistakes. I have long thought that a proper gift for our children and grandchildren is an accurate record of all we know about the present and past environment. Sandy and I enjoy walking on Dartmoor, much of which is featureless moorland. On such a landscape it is easy to get lost when it grows dark and the mists come down. We usually avoid this mishap by making sure that always we know where we are and what was the path we took. In some ways our journey into the future is like this. We can't see the way ahead or the pitfalls but it would help to know what is the state now and how we got here. It would help to have a guide-book written in clear and simple words that any intelligent person could understand.

No such book exists. For most of us, what we know of the Earth comes from books and television programmes that present either the single-minded view of a specialist, or persuasion from a talented lobbyist. We live in adversarial not thoughtful times and tend to hear only the arguments of each of the special-interest groups. Even when they know that they are wrong they never admit it. They all fight for the interests of their group while claiming to speak for humankind. This is fine entertainment; but what use would their words be to the survivors of a future flood or famine? When they read them in a book drawn from the