

## **Kicking the can upstairs?**

*by Ken Payne*

The state university calls it a ballroom; in a high school the space might have been known as a cafetorium—the place where students ate their meals at long tables, where seating could be arranged for class plays, and where, cleared, dances might be held on Friday evenings—a utilitarian, modernist, multi-purpose space—at the university it has a few unobtrusive details from late 1960s Danish modernism. Here on a March Saturday morning there are some forty plus round tables, each seating eight on folding chairs, and a full house of local conservationists, attending an annual gathering with plenary speakers and breakout workshops. After a welcome and introductions, the first speaker is a Senator, the scion of an old and affluent family, a lawyer, with a solid career in public service at higher levels. A liberal, dark money he intones is corrupting the nation's politics; conservatives who might well be with us in addressing climate change but for the influence rich funders, who would finance challengers were they to stray from denial, thus a Federal response is now frustrated. The second, keynote speaker is an elderly, distinguished physician and former center director at a private elite university, three decades ago a winner of an international prize for peace. Tall and thin, his straw-colored glen plaid suit is impeccable, his tone is lofty, impassioned, and knowing: we need to understand the issues before us in a way that is medically compelling for the public and for convincing decision makers of the need for high level action; without this, life as we know it will likely be lost in a century. Rousing remarks, the room stands in ovation.

The plenary ends. The attendees head off to various breakout sessions. But what was said? And how should it be taken: as an appeal to agency, to moral action, or as something removed from that? For is it not the case, that some decisions are of such magnitude that they can only be made at the highest level, in that rarefied space of great and far-reaching power?

For decades now research findings have circulated within the international scientific community indicating that global warming is occurring and that it is caused by human behavior associated with energy use, with the predominant cause being carbon dioxide emissions. Scientific systems have been able to measure warming trends, scientific methods have been employed to assess atmospheric levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gasses, and scientific analyses have been undertaken to forecast future conditions. Regarding the overall picture there has developed a strong international scientific consensus. But the scientific community is but one community, and its conclusions, even when strongly based on observation and analysis may not be broadly accepted. For thirteen centuries, the West accepted cosmology set forth by Aristotle and Ptolemy. That cosmology was how things were understood and taught; it informed a way of life, in which through the middle ages and the Renaissance the Roman Catholic Church was intellectually dominant. Deviation was met inquisition.

In the seventeenth century, ideas about scientific method (Francis Bacon), about property and individualism (John Locke), and about how natural universe functioned (Isaac Newton) circulated rapidly in Europe among elites, especially in its northwestern corner, which was emerging as strongly commercial. What if knowledge was not something fixed and limited, something which could be learned through training in the classics, what if knowledge could be advanced, what if knowledge itself could grow rather than be something received. In the

eighteenth century bourgeois culture embraced the idea of growth, and by the nineteenth century it had become a prevailing mindset. Growth had become a goal and an expectation: the industrial revolution rode on the back of a cultural evolution and gave that cultural evolution ubiquitous effect. The reality of natural limits on human wellbeing and expansion, the specter of good years being followed inexorably by plague and famine, was moved beyond. Three successive industrial revolutions have made a new standard of living possible. We are the beneficiaries of that.

Climate science itself rests on the cultural, intellectual, and economic developments made possible by coal, steam, and steel. This is a matter of history.

And yet, science has now presented us with a compelling need for change, for another evolution in the way humans think and live. But history shows that status quo upsetting advances in thinking and understanding are typically met with hostility and oppression. The Copernican revolution was not a cakewalk. Neither did the radical democracy of Spinoza travel a smooth path. Conservatives ever endeavor to invoke and enforce traditional values. The holders of wealth and power act to make their hegemony permanent. The play of events decried by the eloquent Senator and the eminent doctor are utterly predictable. Seats of power are commonly secured, by means fair and foul, by those who fear the loss of their own power and privilege.

Revealing the aggrandizing self-interest of their “conservative” exercise of power serves a purpose; it discredits their legitimacy. Before the Revolution mockery of the Court and the aristocracy was widespread in France. Diderot was a humorist too. Yet Paine died not a hero but a derelict. Suppression of free speech was pursued to maintain a regime that was losing its underlying legitimacy. Kicking the can of ethical action upstairs did not hold then and does not hold now much promise. What rational basis is there for believing that the holders of the purse will let go their control and agree to the dispersion of their wealth and power for the common future good? Is a “can do” attitude dependent on upstairs temperance, justice, and love? Are these the virtues of the now incumbent administration?

The day ends, the assembled disperse, and what do they carry with them in their heart, any realistic hope for enlightened action by those now in power--conservatives by self-proclamation but not conservationists with reverence for the natural world, outright deniers of science and reason when it serves their purposes. Does the hardness of this reality effectively shatter hopefulness? Or is liberation to be found in going out doors on an icy March afternoon, walking down a street to a parked car and heading home, quietly yet resolutely accepting that we ordinary conservationists are stewards of the air. Yes, we can. . . change how we live, how we connect with others, how we think and talk, and what the culture of which we are a part values. The “can” is ours, not to be kicked down the road or upstairs where it will go nowhere for now: the ball is over for stewards of the air, the work is begun as we set foot on the street and think up useful, practical ideas that follow from the implications of climate science. Isn't this but a new form of growth and progress and not an abandonment of the enlightenment.

KP  
Merryknoll, 3.15.17.

## Sources

The ideas advanced in this brief piece are not original but derived from reading, mostly from that of the past couple of years. Below are listed works I have had in mind as I wrote the above:

- Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism and the Stealth Revolution*; (Zone Books: 2015).
- Deaton, Angus. *The Great Escape: Health, Wealth and the Origins of Inequality*; (Princeton University Press: 2013).
- Gordon, Robert J. *The Rise and Decline of American Growth: The U.S. Standard of Living Since the Civil War*; (Princeton University Press, 2016).
- Israel, Jonathan I. *Democratic Enlightenment: Philosophy, Revolution, and Human Rights 1750 – 1790*; (Oxford University Press: 2011).
- Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Copernican Revolution*; (Harvard University Press: 1957).
- Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*; (University of Chicago Press: 1962; 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.: 1996).
- McCloskey, Deirdre N. *Bourgeois Equality: How Ideas, Not Capital or Institutions, Enriched the World*; (University of Chicago Press: 2016)
- Milanovic, Branko. *Global Inequality*; (Harvard University Press, 2016)
- Mokyr, Joel. *A Culture of Growth: The Origins of the Modern Economy*; (Princeton University Press; 2017).
- Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy as Poetry*; (University of Virginia Press: 2016).
- Stiglitz, Joseph E. and Bruce C. Greenwald. *Creating A Learning Society, A New Approach to Growth, Development and Social Progress*; (Columbia University Press, Reader's Edition: 2015).
- Taylor, Charles. *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*; (Harvard University Press: 2016.)
- Wolin, Sheldon S. *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*; (Princeton University Press, 2010).
- Wrigley, E. A. *Energy and the English Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge University Press: 2010).