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The new book, *Earth in the Balance*** by Mr Al Gore, Vice-President of the United States of America is worth reading. The importance of the book derives, in part, from the election of the author to the Vice-Presidency of the United States, months after its completion on the campaign trail. Already, the impact of his ideas has been seen in the action of the Clinton Administration which is of such importance to people everywhere. In late April 1993, President Clinton announced his intention to propose to the Senate of the United States, for advice and consent, the ratification of the United States of the *Biodiversity Treaty* which arose out of the Rio "Earth Summit". Vice-President Gore participated in that Summit, then in Opposition. A good part of the book is a critique of the Bush Administration's negative approach to global efforts to control the destructive impact on the fragile environment of the world caused by, eg, the thickening blanket of greenhouse gases with their serious consequences for the world's protective ozone layer. Thus, Gore says (at 39):

"[S]ometimes the remaining uncertainties are cynically used by partisans of the status quo for the express purpose of preventing the coalescence of public support for action. On the eve of Earth Day 1990, for example, the Bush White House circulated to its policy spokesmen a confidential memorandum suggesting the most effective arguments to use in trying to convince people not to support action against global warming. The memo, which was leaked to the press, advised that instead of directly

arguing that there is no problem, 'a better approach is to raise the many uncertainties.' So much for Bush's promise to confront the greenhouse effect with the White House effect.

To counter this cynical approach, we must put in perspective all the unknowns that will continue to plague discussions of the environmental crisis. We should begin with the debate over global warming, because while it is only one of several strategic threats, it has become a powerful symbol of the larger crisis and a focus for the public debate about whether there really is a crisis at all. In fact, some people seem to hope that if the seriousness of global warming can be disproved, they will no longer have to worry about any environmental crisis."

Mr Gore's commitment to a more responsible approach to the environment of the world is not new or just politically convenient. It manifested itself in his own campaign for the Presidency of the United States which he launched in March 1987. He was denounced as quixotic. He was lampooned as "running for national scientist" (*ibid*, p 9). He was ignored by much of the media. But he eventually had an impact. And now he enjoys an important measure of power in the most powerful government on earth. It is a government which has hitherto failed to give leadership on strategies for charting and responding to the environmental, demographic, geographical, spacial and other limits which the planet presents to the human species.

Mr Gore's book is full of instructive graphs and illustrations which show the urgency of the concerns that have fired him up. Its major focus is the despoliation of the global environment. But its range is remarkably broad. It looks at the liberation of Central and Eastern Europe from both a libertarian and environmental perspective. A poignant photograph shows three young boys in a town in Romania covered, like everything else there, with carbon which pollutes the air and water of much of Eastern Europe. But he is equally critical of wasteful Western societies. In a chapter "The Wasteland" he takes the United States to special task (*ibid*, p

149)

"It's practically an American tradition: waste has long been dumped on the cheapest, least desirable land in areas surrounded by less fortunate citizens. But the volume of hazardous waste being generated is now so enormous that it is being transported all over the country by haulers who are taking it wherever they can. A few years ago, some were actually dumping it on the roads themselves, opening a faucet underneath the truck and letting the waste slowly drain out as they crossed the countryside. In other cases, hazardous waste was being turned over to unethical haulers, controlled by organized crime, who dumped the waste on the side of the road in rural areas or into rivers in the middle of the night. There is some evidence that we have made progress in addressing these parts of the problem."

"Garbage imperialism" on the international scale is a new threat to world peace identified by Gore. The Tibetan people, for example, have been powerless to prevent the Peoples' Republic of China from destroying the delicate ecology of their homeland during the subjugation of Tibet for forty years. The building of nuclear test sites and the deposit of hazardous material in Tibet is a constant complaint of the Tibetans. They are not alone. Australia had to take France to the International Court of Justice to prevent the testing of its nuclear weapons in the atmosphere not near France but in the South Pacific, near Australia.

Much of Gore's book is concerned with the population explosion and the acute problems of the human condition that it brings about. A chapter "Dysfunctional Civilization" examines global warming as a metaphor for the many other problems which face humanity today: the spread of dangerous waste products, the destruction of HIV/AIDS, the resort to numbing drugs to ease the pain of deprived life, and (even in the developed world) the stress of hypertension and mindless devotion to work for its own sake:

"Most people respond to psychic pain the way they respond to any pain: rather than confront its source, they recoil from it, looking immediately for ways to escape or

ignore it. One of the most effective strategies for ignoring psychic pain is to distract oneself from it, to do something pleasurable or intense or otherwise absorbing that the pain is forgotten. As a temporary strategy, this kind of distraction is not necessarily destructive, but dependence on it over the long term becomes dangerous and, finally, some sort of addiction.

Addiction is distraction. We are used to thinking of addiction in terms of drugs or alcohol. But new studies of addiction have deepened our understanding of the problem and now we know that people can become addicted to many different patterns of behaviour - such as gambling compulsively or working obsessively or even watching television constantly ... Anyone who is unusually fearful of something - intimacy, failure, loneliness - is potentially vulnerable to addiction, because psychic pain causes a feverish hunger for distraction." (ibid 220)

Gore works his way up to what he calls "a Global Marshall Plan". How many times the unique success of George Marshall's Post-World War II strategy is invoked as a sign of what can be done. It is like the symbolism of Los Alamos. But the conditions for these efforts were unique. They do not exist exactly today. Above all, the concentration of wealth has passed from the United States to other societies which have different agendas, tend to be less global in outlook and less charitable in philosophy. Yet Gore is optimistic (ibid 298):

"It is fair to say that in recent years most of the world has made three important choices: first, that democracy will be the preferred form of political organization on this planet; second, that modified free markets will be the preferred form of economic organization; and, third, that most individuals now feel themselves to be part of a truly global civilization - prematurely heralded many times in this century but now finally palpable in the minds and hearts of human beings throughout the earth. Even those nations that still officially oppose democracy and capitalism - such as China - seem to be slowly headed in our philosophical direction, at least in the thinking of younger generations not yet in power."

Gore seems to think that the achievements in the vacuum at the end of the Second World War can be replicated today. But he recognises that the institutions to compel environmentally sound

policies will be difficult to achieve. He is opposed to an authoritarian world government. He is sceptical about the United Nations. He is frank in conceding that the United States "cannot conceivably be the principal financier for a global recovery programme". Contributions from Japan and Europe and from wealthy oil producing States will be imperative. But the major objectives should be:

- Stabilising world population without cruel reliance on such checks as war and AIDS;
- Developing and sharing appropriate technologies, such as those that rid the world of CFCs, reduce excessive water consumption, improve crop yields and lessen heavy use of pesticides and herbicides;
- Adopting economic rules of the road or, what he calls, global eco-nomics; and
- Negotiating a new generation of treaties and agreements aimed at predicting the human environment of the world.

Vice-President Gore is fully conscious, as a professional politician himself, of the difficulties of achieving all these ends. Reflecting on his daily occupation, he provides a sub-theme for each of his four global strategies with a discussion of the "US role". In these he gets down to the nitty-gritty of practical things which home-grown politicians can do. They include, for example, the establishment of higher mileage requirements for cars and trucks sold in the United States and urgent steps to reduce the CO₂ emissions caused by the all-American motor car. Tax reform to encourage the introduction of conservation and efficiency measures and government purchasing policies which promote environmentally responsible technology are put forward as the kind of thing that can be done by

politicians to contribute to a better world. The book ends with an account of the way in which a single speck of sand, dropped on a pile, can cause the equivalent of an avalanche. The metaphor is designed to drive home the point that we must not wait for grand solutions. We must begin with little steps which will accumulate in their impact.

Mr Gore is basically hopeful. He believes that humanity is in an adolescent phase but that it has had a sudden insight into its predicament. Even the growth of fundamentalist religious movements are seen by him as a reflection of a powerful global search for spiritualism and meaning for human life.

He stresses the point that setting the limits to the wasteful competitive society does not necessarily mean the loss of jobs. He contrasts the pathetic exhibition mounted by the United States in Rio with that of Japanese industry which he says is:

"... now poised to replicate their stunning coup in the quality revolution with a similar series of breakthroughs in the environmental revolution. ... Many Japanese businessmen ... are again searching for ways to redesign the entire production process, this time with an eye to eliminating unnecessary pollution at every step along the way. What they are finding is that waste in the form of pollution is also economic waste. By eliminating the inefficiencies that lead to initial production of pollution, they have discovered that it is often possible to simultaneously improve product, profits and environmental efficiency." (Ibid, xv)

Perhaps Mr Gore could have spent more time on the very real pains of transition - the dislocation caused by technological change; the generation thrown out of work; the regions and even nations of lost industries; and the hopelessness and social despair that breeds in the denial of self-respect which tends to come with long-term unemployment. But for all this, the book is a remarkable essay by one of the world's now leading political figures. No wonder the *New Scientist* described it as a "nearly encyclopaedic

compendium of environmental problems" and praised the intellectual core of the book with its emphasis on ethical issues. It is rare that a politician's book is so frank and thoughtful. In a time of enormous problems and rapid change it is heartening to know that a person of such ideas now has such influence. But governments have limited power - even the Government of the United States of America. The question is how we, thinking citizens, translate such ideas into global strategies for action.

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