

Culture and Climate Change: An Interview with Richard Eckersley and Clive Hamilton.

A discussion about culture and climate change, with authors, researchers and public commentators Richard Eckersley and Clive Hamilton. This interview was conducted at the Australian National University on November 9, 2005.

Paul Starr (P): To begin with biography, how did the two of you get to where you are now in your thinking and writing?

Richard Eckersley (R): I guess a couple of things got me interested in thinking about human futures in a very broad sense. One was attending undergraduate lectures on the ecological crisis facing the earth, in the late 1960s when the modern environmental movement was beginning. When I went to the lectures it didn't depress me at all, and I think that's one difference between our response then and the response many young people have today. I just found it an enormously exciting issue. I thought: this is a challenge that you can really get your teeth into.

Another event was spending a couple of years in my twenties bumming around overseas, which tended to orient my interest towards big picture issues. And so, through a lot of twists and turns in my career, from journalism to PR, from PR to policy work, to strategic analysis, I did a stint at the Commission for the Future. I then downshifted into a position here at the Australian National University that would allow me to get into these issues full time. My interest in the area is part of a broad perspective on progress and wellbeing, and the relationships between quality of life, ecological sustainability and economic growth are part of that.

P: Clive, what about you?

Clive Hamilton (C): In the eighties I trained as an economist, with a particular interest in development issues, which is what I did my PhD in. I worked in the development area in the eighties, and then I joined the bureaucracy. After a while, I got a job at the Resource Assessment Commission and it was there that I became an environmentalist. I worked mostly on inquiries into the issue of mining at Coronation Hill and forestry. I got a job in the early nineties in Indonesia as an advisor to a US-funded aid project, advising the national planning agency on environmental and resource management. This let me combine the development and environmental perspective, and to learn a lot about what it meant in a country like Indonesia.

I came back from Indonesia to set up The Australia Institute in 1993. Within the first months I came in contact with a couple of energy experts, Hugh Saddler and George Wilkenfeld, and I started to learn from them about climate change and the energy economy and what it all meant. I started to read some of the scientific literature and became terrified about climate change, and I've become more terrified each year since, and more frustrated at the unwillingness of the Australian Government to do anything about it.

P: So Richard, who were the people who signposted your path to where you are now? Were they in the disciplines and areas where you worked, or outside?

R: In my case it was pretty much a road less travelled and not well signposted. It's taken me twenty years to twist and turn and weave and dodge through the normal kind of career paths to a point where I can do what I want to do. But there are a couple of chief executives at CSIRO – Keith Boardman in particular – who gave me the opportunity to get into this sort of thing. Rhonda Galbally, the first director of the Commission for the Future, gave me a chance to go and work for them. Bob Douglas offered me a position here at the ANU after CSIRO and Tony McMichael has allowed me to continue the work. So they've been people like that who have made it possible.

Other than that, I get inspired and excited and influenced by whole hosts of people that I read. The nature of my work is multi-disciplinary synthesis, so I'm drawing on other people's work the whole time, and one of the excitements of the job is coming across these rich veins of research and knowledge that suddenly add another dimension to my perspective, and that's terrific.

Emily Potter (E): Do you think that perhaps the only way we can really address an issue like climate change is to engage all of the available disciplinary knowledges and languages of communication, including the humanities and so forth?

R: Yes, absolutely. One of the things about synthesis is that it is something I've done going back to my journalist days. It is a form of journalism, if you like. What I've learnt over the years is that it is actually a very valid research methodology in its own right and it adds enormous value to the scientific process because the disciplinary perspectives are way too limited, too narrow. They're inevitably and invariably entrenched in their own disciplinary cultures and people find it very difficult to transcend them.

I've been involved in a project on young people's wellbeing, which is a multidisciplinary exercise, and we've found that we simply can't agree on key issues. They tend to be broad issues and disciplinary perspectives are too narrow to deal with them. It may even be impossible to get agreement on these issues. It's certainly very difficult and yet I think it's fundamental to dealing with these macro kind of human problems, like global warming.

P: Do you think that it is the cultures of some disciplines, such as economics, that are part of the problem with achieving the disciplinary synthesis and common understandings required by problems such as climate change?

C: I go back to my days at the Resource Assessment Commission where I headed an area that was set up explicitly to attempt to integrate scientific, economic and social concerns, and to explore new techniques and methods for analysing environmental problems (drawing on different disciplines). The dynamic in that group was very interesting. In terms of the underlying, although unarticulated, philosophy or values, I had a lot more in

sympathy with the scientists than the economists. But then the economists we had were pretty conventional in their thinking. But whenever we had discussions about where our work was going or how to solve a problem, the economists would win hands down because scientists aren't taught to think about social impact, they're taught to think about amoeba, or kangaroos, or carbon cycles.

R: Or in my case, gold fish.

C: Whereas the economists are taught from day one to think about social impact, about what is good for society. I found the scientists floundered and yet what I've also found, not only in that group but more particularly in the climate change debate, is that I actually think that most scientists are a bit dopey when it comes to politics and social change. They're fantastic at their science, but to talk to them about social impact is frustrating. There are some very eminent exceptions, but I despair at the hubris among many scientists. They think that because we've got the numbers, they've got the solutions, and are extremely dismissive of economics.

Now I agree with the critique of neo-classical economics, in fact have written books critiquing it, but to dismiss the economic approach to understanding the impact of policy changes is just ridiculous. The scientists endlessly attack economists and economic models, sometimes with half a grain of truth in their arguments, and yet completely fail to understand how economics actually functions, how the models work, what the nature of uncertainty is and the actual objective of building an economic model. They apply a sort of scientific analytic to economics and economic modelling which is completely inappropriate, and I find the arrogance extraordinary. So I actually find that, methodologically, even though I'm a severe critic of neo-classical economics, I'm actually far more in sympathy with the economic approach to understanding these sorts of problems.

In the climate change debate we see a sort of scientific mindset. A lot of my friends and colleagues who are scientists genuinely believe that the problem is that people don't understand the science and what we need is more research and more clarity about what the science actually says about climate change. It's not about the science – there is no more serious argument about the science. It's far more difficult than that. And yet most scientists are true children of the enlightenment and so the answer to every problem is more information. If you haven't yet solved a problem, then clearly there is not enough information.

This to me is so naïve about how politics works, about how societies change, that it's no wonder that most scientists, with some admirable exceptions, are completely marginalised from debates. The exceptions, people like Ian Lowe, are so effective in what they do because they understand the issue from several angles.

R: I think that increasingly narrow disciplinary perspectives add to that difficulty as well. It's very difficult to contribute to public debate or policy development when you are

coming from a highly specialised field of expertise and knowledge. Again, this is where synthesis can add value in terms of making it easier to translate scientific knowledge.

C: But I reckon, Richard, very few people are intellectually capable of synthesis.

R: Yes and the whole system is loaded against it, the whole academic structure really.

C: I think this is particularly the case with scientists, but less so with economists. I don't often defend economists but economics, particularly environmental economics and even more so ecological economics, takes the science and the technological facts as given and then says, well what do these mean for human wellbeing? It incorporates the science, takes it as the given terrain that then needs analysis. If you are trained to do that, in a way you are already capable, in a sense, of integrating the science. I mean you're only taking what the scientists say, you don't do the science yourself. So if you are analysing the economic aspects of climate change, then you start from what the IPCC is saying about the expected changes in global and local climate, and you ask: "What are the impacts on human welfare, including impacts on the economy?"

P: So what difference does it make for synthesis of having a variety of audiences to reach? Is synthesis for a mass audience even harder? And can we assume that synthesis, even when well communicated to a mass audience, will help change behaviours?

C: I think these are utterly different questions. One is how to integrate intellectual disciplines to get a better understanding of climate change, and the other concerns what causes the man or woman in the street to change his or her behaviour, and they are completely different issues.

R: I think they are related, Clive, but I think that the processes of synthesis, as well as bringing and improving our understanding of issues, is a vital part of getting societies to respond to these issues.

C: Well, the IPCC process is one giant interdisciplinary exercise, and you can see in that the difficulties, as well as the successes, of the approach. In fact, the Resource Assessment Commission was a case study of synthesis. If you look at a report (there were only three from the Commission), let's say on forestry: that had a whole bunch of science, science about types of forests and growth rates and so on. Then it had social analysis, such as the impact on timber communities of conservation, then a whole bunch of economics about the timber industry and the impacts on this of various policy options.

But what emerged from these enquiries was that in the end neither the science, nor the social impact, nor the economics is going to give you the answer. Fundamentally a decision on what to do with forests is going to depend on the values of the decision makers. The Commission would do a very detailed report and would send it to Government, with advice from the bureaucracy, to synthesise all its impacts and make a decision. This great synthesising machine is actually in the heads of a number of key

decision makers at the end of the process. And in the end, that's how it should be in a democracy.

The IPCC spends years on all of the science and economics, but that's not communicating, that's writing reports. There's a lot to be done between that and shifting public opinion so that the public will then change their behaviour. To ask why people aren't changing their behaviour is, I think, the completely wrong way to frame the question, because it suggests that the task is to persuade individuals to be more responsible.

E: So how would you frame the question?

C: Well, it's a political question. It's like asking why we don't make taxes voluntary. We require people to pay taxes because we believe as citizens that it's appropriate that we are compelled to pay taxes. The reason why people are happy to pay taxes, despite all the grumbling, is twofold. One is that everybody else is required to do so, and two, the system is more or less fair. Well, okay, it is unfair, but it could come to be much less fair. If it were grossly unfair, confidence in the tax system would be much more in decline.

I think climate change is like that. It is not an individual question. It's *the* international environmental issue. If I have any criticism of Tim Flannery's book ([The Weather Makers](#), reviewed in this issue), which is a terrific book and I commented on it in draft form, is that he ends by saying 'look, if we all did these ten things we would solve climate change'. That's bullshit. I mean, the environment minister Ian Campbell and John Howard are over there cheering on Tim Flannery. Of course that's what they want to do, they want to shift it onto individuals so that nothing will be done, saying that it is not the politicians' fault if people can't pull together, and if they don't feel strongly enough about it then why should we? Oh come on. That is actually an economic way of thinking, an individualistic way; it is market thinking for a collective problem.

E: But obviously we need to motivate people to want the government to act, so then that's where communicating to people must come in?

C: Yes, definitely.

E: As individuals? So there's a relationship between the individual as agent and individual as citizen?

C: Yes.

R: I think the problem with a lot of the happiness literature around at the moment is that it's built around this American model of how positive thinking can solve human problems. A lot of it is around just how individuals can improve their own happiness or wellbeing. I've just been reading a couple of papers about it and there is this real need to inject a broader social or political dimension into this, like the [Wellbeing Manifesto](#) (developed by The Australia Institute) and other work people are doing. But if you look

at the positive psychology literature coming out of America, it has that orientation towards individual issues.

E: Without reference to the local?

R: Yes, and I think there's a recognition of that by at least some of the researchers there and a recognition that we need to pay more attention to this broader social and political dimension. Because when you look at the role of happiness and the role of depression or negative emotions in an evolutionary sense, you can put a good argument that the most appropriate response to our situation now is to be depressed. I don't say that in a frivolous sense.

Coming back to this issue of Flannery's comments, when I give talks on the problem of what individuals can do in this global picture of change, and its impact on wellbeing and the environment. I often use the 5-10-5-10 formula that [Fairshare International](#) (FSI) has come up with, because they pose quite specific targets, but they are framed in very general ways.

If you are not familiar with it, FSI are based in Adelaide and it asks you to: give 5% of your gross income to charities and environmental groups; cut your resource consumption by at least 10% below national per capita levels; spend 5% of your leisure time in voluntary work; and take democratic actions 10 times a year. That might include writing to your politician or a letter to the editor or whatever, but it allows you to frame your personal response around issues that interest you. It's not unduly prescriptive, and importantly (and this is the point that Clive was making) does allow you to make that link between the individual and the social. This is a much more useful way than simply saying vote to change your politician, because that's only one democratic action you can take.

E: Every four years.

R: And part of the challenge of citizenship is to have it embedded in virtually every choice and decision you make, not just what you do once every three years when you go to an election.

C: Which, to just come back to this point, connects to contingent valuation studies and the critique of them. The problem with posing the question of how much are we willing to pay to protect the natural environment (such as Kakadu National Park) is that it frames the citizen's decision as a private consumer's decision.

P: To me, one of the telling examples of where consumer behaviour and citizen thinking around climate change tends to fall over has to do with people's travel choices, including air travel. It's fascinating that mobility, which we treat as a kind of fundamental condition of being a western consumer and western citizen, is one of the hardest things to address as a climate change issue.

R: I think understanding the impacts of air travel, for example, is an educational issue. I think more and more people are starting to understand just what an enormous impact air travel has in terms of greenhouse gases. But taking cars for instance, I don't think it is inconsistent for people to want to have personal mobility, but also want the government to impose very stringent fuel efficiency standards. It's not inconsistent to want to have personal mobility but also to vote for a government that will invest in quality public transport. I'm a bit wary of these arguments that people don't take climate change seriously because they still drive their cars and get on planes. I think people are a bit more complex than that.

P: Or capable of having conflicting behaviours, and values that conflict with behaviours.

R: Yes.

P: Returning to issues of happiness, is it that we need to be less scared of talking about unhappiness, about negative impacts on life? Are we too reluctant to talk about sacrifice, about consuming less? Do we slide too easily into arguing that we can consume differently and that we can keep our quality of life through different (rather than less) consumption?

C: I frame the question differently because I think that way of posing it is now a dead end. I genuinely believe that unless things change, citizens in affluent western countries will quite happily consume themselves to death. I actually think that consuming is so much an entrenched part of who we are in our identity that we must keep consuming at ever increasing levels. This imposes an insuperable obstacle to appeals to people's rationality about the environmental implications of continued growth and a high consumption lifestyle.

I think people will do anything psychologically to keep on consuming, as long as consumption is their way of identity creation. In a way, you are saying "destroy yourself to save the environment." I think it is that powerful. That's why I have been so influenced by the happiness literature, including some of the work that Richard did six or eight years ago. This seems to be a more powerful tactic: instead of saying to people 'If you keep consuming at this level, then we're all stuffed' it is more effective to ask, 'Is all of this consumption actually making you happy?'

When you sit people down and ask this question nearly everyone in affluent countries says 'well actually no, I'd rather have some more meaning in my life – but isn't this what we are supposed to do to have high status and enjoy life?' That's why I think we have seen this efflorescence in the last three years of mass interest in happiness, in downshifting, in getting out of the rat race. There is a strong recognition that high consumption lifestyles, despite all of their appeal, actually don't give people what they need.

E: So why does this not flow on, and why is government not responding to this phenomena?

C: It's deeply threatening, because it challenges the most powerful ideological assumptions of the economic and political system.

R: It's hard to overstate the inertia in the system. I often quote from Michael Dawson's *The Consumer Trap* that big businesses in the United States spend a trillion dollars a year on marketing, which is twice what America spends on all education, private and public, from kindergarten through graduate school. He makes the point that this isn't just about marketing products, it's also macro-marketing, which is about shaping the social environment, including public policy, to suit the interests of business. That is a huge cultural pressure, so our desire to consume isn't just a reflection of human nature, it's being manufactured by this massive effort. I think this is getting more and more desperate in a way because there is a growing resistance to it, but they're putting more and more money into it, to maintain the inertia in the system.

I may be a bit more optimistic than Clive because I think the evidence on downshifting and on the cultural creatives suggests that more and more people are jacking up. They realise that it's not just socially damaging, but also damaging to their own health and happiness. But I agree that you have to go beyond individuals' decisions to take control of their own lives. You have to build in that social dimension.

On the other hand, the way we respond socially and personally to these situations isn't rational or logical, and that is one of the things that interest me at the moment. I think one of the big under-estimated impacts on us individually and collectively is this sustained exposure to images of global disaster and mayhem we are getting now, like the mobile phone footage of the Bali bombings. For me, we are responding in at least three very different and contradictory ways to these apocalyptic suspicions.

One is where you basically abandon belief, where you think and act as if it were a late hour in the day and nothing much matters anymore, a kind of apocalyptic nihilism. That's an extreme, but at a more mundane level its reflected in this disengagement from the broader social national agenda we hear about.

The second response is a sort of apocalyptic fundamentalism, the extreme of which is the end of time thinking of some Christians in the US. For these people, you can welcome global warming and war as harbingers of the rapture.

P: A checklist to tick off?

R: Yes, there's even a rapture index like the doomsday clock that rises and falls depending on what's happening and how close we are to Christ's return to Earth. This totally strips away any kind of reasoned response to these sorts of issues, because you are saying 'bring it on'. People like the philosopher Peter Singer have argued that this characterises Bush's thinking. Other commentators aren't so sure, and it is not characteristic of all fundamentalists, just the end timers.

The third response is the adaptive one, which we have been talking about today, which is an apocalyptic activism. This is where people are galvanised and become re-engaged, attempting to do something about it, either personally or collectively. One of the most recent reports on the mind and mood of Australia from Hugh Mackay suggests that people have this sense that we are lurching from one problem to another, and that a serious crisis could emerge. They're critical of politicians for failing to invest in the nation's future, and maybe that is a sign that people are beginning to feel that they need to get involved with these sorts of things, as disengagement is ultimately self-defeating.

That's the hopeful spin you could put on it, I suppose, but it is reinforced by the downshifters and cultural creatives and others. The point Mackay has made is that behind the ones who are acting, there are many, many more who are thinking about it – they are realising that their lifestyles have come adrift from their values and they are trying to get the two back together again.

E: So Clive, if you were going to communicate to the public about climate change, what would you do? What particular message would you want to get across?

C: I don't know, but I've got \$10 million to do it over the next five years.¹ We are going to spend three to six months working out what is going to work, what's failed in the past, and how we can get through to people. We're going to get the best advice from the marketers, the PR people, the communicators and so on. We are going to do focus groups and surveys and really sit down and spend a lot of time and money working out how best to do that. I don't have the answers. I think that the correct conclusion to draw now is that we don't really know, but a lot of attempts have failed. There has been some success but we really need to completely rethink, and decide how we can best shift public opinion, but we need a big shift, a tectonic shift, because at the moment we are stuffed.

R: I reckon the big challenge here is the extent to which institutions are lagging behind individual or public opinion. I give a lot of talks and I often ask people at the beginning to put up their hands in support of a way of moving ahead that's either material progress through economic growth (which is the way we do things now) or sustainable development (which is a very different thing). I find the overwhelming majority now, and it has increased over the years I have been doing it, put their hand up for sustainability over material progress, even in Treasury. I gave a seminar to Treasury and even there the majority of them put up their hand for sustainable development. I said to them at the beginning of the talk that I expected them to give me a hard time over all this, but they didn't. So even there, at an individual level many people are realising that the way we are going is not delivering the benefits that it promised. And yet these institutions keep running along these tramlines of past ways of doing things.

C: Treasury is a good example, because I went over there two years ago, after being invited to talk about *Growth Fetish*. Talk about Daniel in the lion's den. But heaps of people turned up. I didn't pull any punches and we had a very civilised discussion and debate, with close questioning. But they didn't throw things at me, which I was half expecting. The point is that there you have a roomful of individuals. Richard and I talk to

people as individuals, about their own feelings, about their own dreams, their own anxieties, and most people are very responsive to that sort of message. The institution of the Treasury is just locked into a completely different way of operating and thinking.

E: But institutions are made up of people.

C: No, they are much more than that.

R: Yes, they are more. I mean you are enormously constrained by just the way it does things. I spent three years on a politician's personal staff and one of the things that struck me was how you can only make finetuning adjustments to policy, by and large. It is very difficult, at least at that level, to challenge the broad strategic direction in policy. If you think that is necessary, if that is your personal conviction, it is very difficult to do anything about it at that level. But I have a lot of respect for colleagues who choose to work within the system, including the bureaucracy, doing what they can (with varying degrees of effort and energy and bravery) to change things.

I'm involved in a project, or what will hopefully become a project with (not-for-profit company) [Australia 21](#), around building a network to look at the prospects of radical discontinuities, whether they be biophysical or social. We are aware that we have these models of biophysical systems and we can predict how they'll change, with phase shifts and non-linear changes and all this sort of thing, but in terms of the social response to these things, we are scrounging around to find the social scientists doing this sort of work.

That's why I come back to these very different – apocalyptic – notions of possibilities. Some people, through circumstances personal or social, will be drawn to nihilism, some to end time fundamentalism, and others towards activism. It is probably impossible to predict at the social level which responses will appeal to individuals or which will dominate. All three of them are growing in intensity, so I think the challenge is not to predict it, but to try to manage it, so that you get the constructive response, which I think is the activist one.

Dr Clive Hamilton is one of Australia's leading environmental economists. He is Executive Director of The Australia Institute, an independent policy research centre based in Canberra. He has published on a wide range of issues including climate change policy, measures of national progress, natural resource management and spirituality. His book, *Growth Fetish*, published in 2003, was a best-seller. His most recent book is *Affluenza* (2005), co-written with Richard Denniss. Dr Hamilton authored the latest *Australian Quarterly Essay* (21), entitled 'What's Left? The Death of Social Democracy'.

Richard Eckersley is a fellow at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University, Canberra, where he is working on aspects of progress, human well-being and ecological sustainability. He has held senior positions with CSIRO and the Australian Commission for the Future, and is a former science reporter for the *Sydney*

Morning Herald. His recent publications include 'Is Modern Western Culture a Health Hazard?' in the *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 35 (2006), and the book *Well and Good: Morality, Meaning and Happiness* (2004).

¹ [The Australia Institute](#) has recently been awarded these funds by an Australian philanthropic group to develop a five-year publicity strategy to persuade Australians of the need for action to address climate change. The newly formed Climate Institute, headed by Clive Hamilton, will establish a campaign office in Sydney this year.