

On governing the end of the world (as we know it)

For a roundtable discussion on

"How Will the World and Hawaii Survive the Convergence of Peak Oil, Global Climate Change, and Fiscal Breakdowns?"

Friday, April 13, 2007, Friedman Room, Saunders Hall, UHM

Jim Dator

Ira and I have had long history of dispute about the futures of Hawaii--he the Green doom and gloom prognosticator and me the Heavy Metal High Tech optimist.

But he was right and I was wrong.

I thought, when we first started debating this in the early 1970s, that if we clearly pointed out the necessity and possibility of moving away from burning fossil fuels and engaging in all the other life-destroying industrial processes, and then if we even understood we could move beyond an "information society" towards a high tech "dream society", that people and decision makers here in Hawaii and elsewhere would see the light and make the necessary transformation.

But I was wrong.

Even though we have known about and even have done the basic research necessary to tap Hawaii's abundant resources for many forms of renewable energy, Hawaii still imports 90% of all of its energy in the form of fossil fuels. And the UH is one of the biggest consumers and wasters of fossil fuels on the island. Hawaii is far more dependent per capita on imported fossil fuels than is the US as a whole, which is far more dependent per capital on imported fossil fuels than is Europe as a whole. So Hawaii is the worst of the worst.

Moreover, you might have noticed that we are stuck here out in the middle of nowhere on some truly "magnificent islands", as Jim Leahy likes to say, with (by world standards) a tiny population. Our economy relies overwhelmingly on the cheap-fossil-fuel-based, and thus extremely fragile, industry called "tourism" while almost all of our food and all of our construction material and consumer products fly or float in on fossil fuel-burning transport. If the ships and planes stop coming, as they might, we will probably starve to death in a month or so. And the days leading up to the deaths will not be a pretty sight, as a Hobbesian war of all against all erupts in these blessed isles.

Bill Mckibben, in an article in the current issue of *Mother Jones* (March/April 2007) that Lynette Cruz forwarded to Ira and myself a day or two ago, writes:

"Given current rates of growth in the Chinese economy, the 1.3 billion residents of that

nation alone will, by 2031, be about as rich as we are. If they then eat meat, milk, and eggs at the rate that we do,... they will consume 1,352 million tons of grain each year—equal to two-thirds of the world's entire 2004 grain harvest. They will use 99 million barrels of oil a day, 15 million more than the entire world consumes at present. They will use more steel than all the West combined, double the world's production of paper, and drive 1.1 billion cars—1.5 times as many as the current world total. And that's just China; by then, India will have a bigger population, and its economy is growing almost as fast. And then there's the rest of the world."

Where will Hawaii stand competitively in such a world? If you produce oil and grain and paper and steel and cars in 2030 will you sell them to China, India, the US, Europe--or Hawaii? What do we have that will command their attention and will encourage them to sell to us and not to much larger markets? And where will we get the, how-you-say, "money" to buy these things even if they are willing to sell things to us.

Now there have finally been some discussions about Hawaii's energy vulnerability recently, and I am very glad that our acting Chancellor and HECO have begun to become active here. Our dean also is talking about Saunders Hall becoming a sustainable building, which is a great idea. I want to credit our own Shanah Trevanna as having been a major spark in starting these discussions.

But folks, we should have done all this 20 or 30 years ago because it takes at least that long to do all the things necessary to move smoothly from our entirely fossil fuel based society to one based on nonpolluting renewable energy sources that are as cheap and flexible as oil is now and has been for the past 100 years.

So more and more careful observers are finally becoming concerned about a looming gap when oil is unbearably expensive and scarce, and before new equivalent energy sources can pick up the slack.

That is what the immediate future is now being called optimistically: "The Gap", with the implication that there will be something stable and sustainable on the other side of the gap, if we can just weather it through. In 1969 Aurelio Peccei, who soon after founded the Club of Rome, wrote a book titled *The Chasm Ahead*. It very well described events that are now unfolding, right on cue, as Peccei said they would if we did not take action to avoid the chasm, which, in spite of his best efforts and my expectations, we did not do.

I think a "chasm" may be a better image than a mere "gap"--which just sounds to many of us like a great place to shop for funky clothes.

But the end of cheap and abundant oil is only one of three challenges facing Hawaii in our view.

A second are all of the environmental challenges that Peccei, Ira, and many others, including myself, have been warning us about for 40 years, most dramatically global climate change, sea-level rise, water scarcity, soil erosion and contamination, food

(especially grain) shortages, air, soil and water pollution, overfishing and ocean pollution, new and renewed global pandemics, and massive global movements of environmental refugees.

Again, Ira and I did not differ about the reality and severity of these challenges. We differed in two ways, first of all, in what to do about them, and secondly, whether action would be taken in time or not.

As I said, I was optimistic, since Hawaii was so vulnerable, that sensible people would of course consider our concern, assess the matter, decide what to do about it, and begin to move quickly towards a preferred future. There was every indication in the early 1970s that we were going to do just that. But a funny thing happened on the way to the future, and, after a great start, Hawaii, and the rest of the US, simply put their butts in the air, their heads in the sand, and boogied on like there was no tomorrow.

However, it is important to understand that this didn't just mysteriously happen. Rather groups and persons favoring conservation and energy source transformation policies in the US were specifically attacked and discredited by heavily funded and very skillful advertising and propaganda campaigns orchestrated by people who felt their immediate interests and fortunes were under attack.

You see, environmentalists and other energy-alarmists initially and suddenly got the upper hand in the late 1960s and very early 1970s with the publication of various books and reports that startled the public into attention. The most powerful of these was *The Limits to Growth* in 1972. It was based on fears for the future expressed by the Italian industrialist Aurelio Peccei in *The Chasm Ahead*, and then skillfully modeled and effectively displayed by Dennis and Donella Meadows, of Dartmouth, using an early computer simulation program developed by Jay Forrester of MIT called "System Dynamics" which, Forrester claimed, revealed the counterintuitive behavior of systems.

It was the first time that anyone had used a computer simulation to try to convince large numbers of people throughout the world--not just in the US--to embrace a specific policy. At that time, most people understood that computers were gigantic and infallible electronic brains that spoke, and could only be spoken to, in a thick German accent. As a consequence, most people were inclined to believe, since they could not understand, whatever a computer said. So almost everyone in the world knew about the *Limits To Growth* and the fact that it forecast global collapse by the early 21st century unless major changes in population growth, economic growth, energy use and rates of pollution were quickly undertaken.

In my experience, almost no one not alive in the 1970s knows of the *LTG* now. Is that the case here?

Well, the Meadows re-analyzed the evidence and published a reassessment in 1992, after 20 years of environmental action and inaction, which they titled *Beyond the Limits*. That title pretty much says it all, though they still urged us to action. More recently, in 2002,

they published *LTG: A 30 year update* in which they bravely still attempted to put a smiley face on an utterly grim future.

But the powers that be were not going to go silently into that good night. The *LTG*, Paul Ehrlich's *Population Bomb* concerns, and most dramatically Gerald Barney's *Global Report to the President* (meaning to President Carter), distribution of which was specifically banned by the incoming president, Ronald Reagan, were all cleverly and effectively attacked and killed by the efforts of the very famous futurist, Herman Kahn, and his Hudson Institute, in a series of books, publications, educational materials widely distributed to schools, and "briefings" with politicians and economic decision-makers.

How they did this is something I have studied and written about extensively over the years. It is an example of one kind of futurists being much more successful, in terms of political and economic influence (though not necessarily more accurate in forecasting the future) than another kind.

But wait, there is more. Herman Kahn's 1970s Hudson Institute spawned the Heritage Foundation which some of you will recognize was the major think tank that invented and perpetuated the stories deftly told with powerful consequences by Ronald Reagan from 1980 onwards.

That date is important because the early 1980s were not only the time when oil prices suddenly went down (after having risen so very rapidly during the 1970s), but also when the US was transformed from being the major creditor nation in the world--the nation to which the rest of the world owed money--into the major debtor nation--the nation that owes the most money to the rest of the world, a ranking we still hold, though our levels of debt now are orders of magnitude higher than they were when Reagan began the trend, and they are now almost exponentially growing.

But I need also to remind you that there is yet another futures think-tank involved here: The New American Century Foundation. This is also the spawn of both the Heritage Foundation and the Hudson Institute, and in the dark days of Clinton's presidency, The New American Century Foundation issued a signed manifesto outlining how they would capture the presidency, congress, and the courts. The manifesto also announced many of the specific acts and policies brought to you by the current administration from 2000 to the present, including those in the arena of energy. All of the signers of the 1997 manifesto hold, or held, top positions of power in the Bush administration, from VP Cheney on down.

The story in Hawaii is very similar. In the late 1960s, George Chaplin, editor of the Honolulu *Advertiser*, convinced Governor Burns, the legislature, the business community, and the labor unions (then very powerful) to hold an incredibly extensive and intensive series of activities on all islands and with all groups called "Hawaii 2000." This culminated in a huge youth conference which then sent delegates to an even larger three day conference at the Ilikai Hotel with representatives from all islands and all major and minor groups in Hawaii. The outcome was an amazing series of preferred futures for

Hawaii by the year 2000, none of which look like Hawaii in the actual year 2000. The results--and the names of all the participants--are there for you to see in the book, *Hawaii 2000*, edited by George Chaplin and our own Glenn Paige, and published by the UH Press. A thousand flowers of the futures bloomed in the manure of that activity. Among many other things, the legislature created a State Commission on the Year 2000; a Commission on Hawaii's Population and the Future; a task force to determine the "carrying capacity" of the islands; an Environmental Center at the University, and the Hawaii Research Center for Futures Studies.

But then, during the oil crisis of 1974-75, all of these were killed, with the exception of the futures center which, however, was defunded, though allowed to limp along hidden in the deep recesses of the Social Science Research Institute.

Most of the biggest players in the Hawaii 2000 effort became alarmed at the views of the future that citizens expressed. So they used the opportunity provided by the oil crisis to end the discussions and to frighten the state into pursuing the future they preferred which was, and is, of a Hawaii that is fully integrated into the world capitalist economy via mass tourism and (in spite of much rhetoric to the contrary) nothing else.

The recent attempts by some citizens and legislators to revive serious consideration of the future via the Hawaii 2050 Sustainability Task Force has also been stonewalled and perhaps hijacked by persons and groups who seem to wish to propel the community towards the chasm ahead for their own purposes and advantages.

No doubt the magic of the marketplace and the facts of energy science and engineering matter, but in my opinion, ideology and well-funded political actions are the main reasons we are in the situation we are in now, locally, nationally, and globally.

The third challenge racing from the future is economic, and this is one issue where Ira and I have generally been in agreement. We have been predicting a global economic depression for many years. Every time the stock market has taken a major header--and especially when the Asian bubble burst in 1997 along with the economic collapse of Russia, and then the dot.com implosion of 2000--we have thought this might be The Big One.

But no. The managers of the neoliberal economic system have so far been endlessly ingenious, and have come up with all sorts of ways to keep pushing the day of reckoning into the future. At some point it won't work, but, from their point of view, so far so good--for them if not for most of the rest of us whose incomes have stagnated if not actually declined over the past 30 years while theirs have ballooned astronomically.

The way they have done this is by coming up with more and more clever ways to package debt.

When it looked like the economy was about grind to a halt with the first wave of automation and unemployment in the 60s, they came up with consumer credit cards that

now are the major way (other than shoplifting) by which most folks are able to participate in the economy. As a consequence, Americans have had what are euphemistically called "negative savings" for decades so that they can acquire all the goodies they want now, but can't afford--now or ever--thus keeping the economy artificially growing until the debts come due, or are written off, or we die, whichever comes first.

When the limits to consumer credit were reached a few years ago, Congress changed the bankruptcy laws to favor the lenders and screw the borrowers, but by then clever economists had invented derivatives, then hedge funds, followed by the most recent device called "collateralized debt obligations". All of these are basically bets about debts on top of bets about debts on top of bets about debts, and they are so risky that only certain people--a few agents of the large banks and financial organizations who are gambling with your pension fund and mine--are allowed to trade in them. But they are playing with our futures for their immediate profit in very scary and largely unnoticed ways.

The entire American and Hawaiian economy, and most of the global neoliberal economy as well, is nothing but a gigantic Ponzi scheme which those who got in first and are now doing so well desperately need to keep going. But that economy, at least as much as the environment, is not sustainable--you can only steal from the future for so long--and it will collapse.

My guess is that if some Asian bank doesn't start a panic by withdrawing funds from American sources and placing them elsewhere, then it will be the double whammy of Peak Oil and Global Environmental Change that will bring the global economy down--when we are forced to move from the supersaturated oil-driven consumer society of the present to a labor-intensive survival society of the future.

And that is what worries me, and Ira.

We fear that people won't go quiet into that good night; that we are all such spoiled brats that when the shit hits the fan in ways no one can duck it, that all hell will break loose.

Our reaction to 9/11 shows that most Americans are at heart fascists in the truest sense of the word: we welcome a tightly controlled world run by an dictatorial government working hand in hand with certain big business interests. And if we can add some repressive Old Time Religion to the mix, so much the better. American reaction to 9/11--from the creation of a Department of Homeland Security, to the PATRIOT Act, to airport humiliation and discipline rituals, to the cathartic invasion of Iraq, and more all show that while we proclaim ourselves to be the land of the free and the home of the brave we are nothing but craven cowards afraid of our own shadow. Give me liberty or give me death? No way: give me shelter.

Are things better here in Hawaii?

They could be, but they won't be unless we begin to think about governance during and after the meltdown of the economy and the environment.

And that is the point of our meeting today: to begin a discussion among the members of this department of so-called political science about how to govern the end of the world as we know it in ways that are humane, just, fair, democratic, nonviolent and effective.

And we have invited Lynette Cruz to help us in this inaugural discussion. Many of you know her. She got her PhD in Anthropology here a few years ago and teaches now at HPU. But more importantly, she is a tireless networker among the various local groups concerned about the futures of Hawaii whether continuing as a part of the US, as a separate nation-state, as a part of a federation of Pacific island communities, or some other configuration, but as a place of aloha and peace and not as a Hobbesian battleground.

But every crisis is an opportunity, and the point of our discussion and actions should be to take advantage of the looming chasm and try to achieve futures we might have thought desirable but impossible.

Over the years, when I have engaged people in Hawaii in an exercise where I ask them to experience four alternative futures and say which they prefer, people in all walks of life and across all cultures and classes have said over and over again, and repeatedly through the years, that they do NOT want the rampant continued growth Hawaii of the present; that fundamental human and environmental values have been lost and not replaced with anything better; and that what they would prefer Hawaii to be is some kind of a laid-back, slowed down, green and lush place with lots of mom and pop stores, a low population, few tourists, few cars, and great waves.

Some years ago, when he retired as editor of the Honolulu *Star-Bulletin* and decided to become a futurist, Bud Smyser called the future I just described "Hawaii as a backwater." He didn't like it. He was all for continued growth. Well, since so many people in Hawaii have told me over the years that this the way they want Hawaii to be, I have labeled that future "The best little backwater on the planet"--a truly unique spot on the globe where time has stood still--maybe turned backwards-- where life is good and sustainable, labor is hard but fulfilling, and everybody knows your name.

Another variation of that future might be reflected in various plans and aspirations for sovereignty or other kinds of self-rule put forward by various Hawaiian or other local groups.

And Ira's magnum opus, the widely read book, *A Green Hawaii*, describes a version of this future in impressive detail and appeal.

There may be real opportunities for achieving these futures very soon if people prepare for them seriously and well, and are ready to move quickly and peacefully forward when the time comes.

While there have always been a handful of people who say they also share my high tech dreams, it just doesn't seem a plausible future now until we bridge the gap or jump the chasm or do a lot of things we should and could have done beginning 30 years ago but now with miraculous speed and cohesion.

It appears to me we have narrowed our futures to either collapse or a disciplined society.

And maybe in that order.

If we are unprepared for the sudden breakdown of existing ecological, economic and political systems, I am very much afraid we will have collapse followed by a disciplined society of the worst form--a brutal dictatorship of whoever prevails in a bloody conflict of killing force.

That fate can only be avoided, if it can be avoided at all, by beginning now a dialog on governing the end of the world as we know it. And that is the purpose of this discussion today.