



This is the post-print, accepted version of this review. Published as:

Page, James Smith (2009) *Humanity's retreat to Antarctica*. [Review] Australian Democrats National Journal, 32(6). pp. 6-7

© Copyright 2009 Australian Democrats

Page, James S. (2009). 'Humanity's Retreat to Antarctica'. *Australian Democrats National Journal*. 32(2): 6,7. ISSN: 0813-3476.

James Lovelock is one of the foremost environmental scientists of our time. He is now 90 years old, yet his idea of the earth as a self-regulating system or even organism (the Gaia theory) is one of the most dramatic ideas of modern environmental science. James Lovelock is widely published. However his most recent book, *The Revenge of Gaia*, makes important reading for anybody interested in political debate, or indeed for anyone interested in the future of our planet.

Lovelock's basic thesis is that humanity is in danger of irreversibly damaging the planet and that we are in fact at war with our planet – or Gaia. Through the uncontrolled burning of fossil fuels and the resultant greenhouse effect, we are in imminent danger of making the planet almost uninhabitable. Lovelock advocates not “sustainable development” but “sustainable retreat” from disastrous environmental practices that we have been employing for the past two centuries. We need policies that respect the planet – but even more we need policies which will reduce our impact upon the planet.

Unless we do take this urgent action now, Lovelock paints a picture of the degeneration of social order into “a world ruled by brutal war lords on a devastated Earth” (p.154) and eventually nearly all currently inhabited areas of the planet will become uninhabitable. The only chances of survival where a remnant of humanity might continue would be in Antarctica (p. 159). The mean temperature for Antarctica is currently around minus 35°C. The fact that this region might offer the last remaining possibility of a livable environment for humans gives an indication of just how drastic Lovelock anticipates the global warming will be.

Yet Lovelock is not simply a doomsday prophet. He does advocate specific action for the predicament of global warming, and in particular he advocates the widespread adoption of nuclear energy. As readers would be aware, it was the Australian Democrats who were the first political party to raise the issue of global warming in federal parliament some decades ago. However the Australian Democrats have also been a strongly anti-nuclear party, and thus the call to embrace nuclear energy on a global scale is one which might not sit well with many members of the Democrats, and indeed with environmentalists generally.

The response from Lovelock to the challenge of what to do with nuclear waste is interesting. Lovelock points out, correctly, that background radiation is part of normal human existence and that even when one looks at the highly irradiated sites, such as Chernobyl, what is noticeable is the “richness of the wildlife” (p.91). Why? Because “wild plants and animals do not perceive radiation as dangerous, and any slight reduction it may cause in their lifespans is far less a hazard than the presence of people and their pets” (p. 91). This is the crux of the argument of Lovelock for nuclear energy: there are clearly problems and challenges, but nuclear energy is a lesser evil than continuing our reliance upon fossil fuels.

An obvious objection to the Lovelock proposal is why not replace reliance upon fossil fuels with use of renewable energy, such as wind and solar power. Lovelock is not opposed to renewable energy sources, but he argues that the increasing demand for energy worldwide, especially within developing nations, means that renewable energy will not be able to meet this demand. It is also worthwhile pointing out that Lovelock does raise the prospect of nuclear fusion, a form of nuclear energy which does not have the problem of nuclear waste disposal. The reason why we have not committed to this form of energy is, according to Lovelock, that policy has not taken heed of scientific advice (p.90), and has been [6/7] influenced too much by romantic idealism.

So much for the controversial aspects of Lovelock's environmental policy. However what is also interesting in this book is Lovelock's political analysis, and in particular his critique of the Greens (in both the general and political sense of that word). Lovelock calls himself an environmentalist, although he differentiates himself from Green thought and politics, what he identifies as deep ecology, in that "I would like to see us use our technical skills to cure the ills of the Earth as well as those of humans" (p. 142). Elsewhere Lovelock refers to the "impractical romanticism of the Greens" (p. 140).

One of the writers Lovelock cites with approval is (Lord) Dick Taverne, author of *The March of Unreason* (2005). Lord Taverne makes the distinction between pragmatic environmentalism and eco-fundamentalism, the latter functioning as a form of contemporary religion. Eco-fundamentalism works on dogmas which cannot be challenged by evidence. By contrast, pragmatic environmentalism looks towards practical solutions to environmental problems. It is interesting that (Lord) Taverne, a member of the House of Lords, is also a member of the Liberal Democrats, the English sister party to the Australian Democrats.

Now, to some extent Lovelock is sympathetic to the idea that we need to acknowledge our spiritual connectedness to the Earth (pp. 136-138), and he cites Rowan Williams in support of this (pp. 137-138). Indeed, what is known as eco-theology is an important emerging strand within the work of many contemporary theologians. Yet where this becomes problematic is where one translates a mystical regard for the Earth into politics, because this means that one tends to regard one's own party as having a monopoly on truth.

Lovelock's critique of the Greens (and to some extent the critique from Taverne) is an interesting pointer to the traditional difference between the Greens and the Democrats in Australian politics. Any reading of the works of Bob Brown reveals that the word "Green" is used in almost quasi-religious and even mystical terms. Bob Brown often refers to "being Green", mixing the idea of commitment to the environment with commitment to his own party. This is precisely what traditionally has separated the Greens and the Democrats. The Greens work on a fundamentalist basis that the Green Party has a unique control over doctrinal truth. In other words, there is only one way – the Green way. The Democrats have traditionally operated on the basis of engagement with others, on the basis that practical outcomes are important.

What does the future hold? Ought the warnings from Lovelock about an uninhabitable world be taken seriously? It is obviously impossible to say with precision, although the overwhelming majority of the world's scientists now agree on the need for urgent action on global warming. We need to continue to press for this. However I would suggest that we also need to be careful about what sort of political commitment we make as we do this. And we do need to be careful about differentiating fundamentalist from pragmatic environmentalism, as ultimately the latter is what is needed to make effective change.

## **References**

Lovelock, James. 2006. *The Revenge of Gaia: Earth's Climate Crisis and the Fate of Humanity*. London: Allen Lane.

Taverne, Dick. 2005. *The March of Unreason: Science, Democracy and the New Fundamentalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## **Author**

Dr James Page is Senior Deputy National President of the Australian Democrats. His book, *Peace Education: Exploring Ethical and Philosophical Foundations*, is published with Information Age Publishing. Link: <http://www.infoagepub.com/products/peace-education>