

FARNHAM HUMANISTS

The Maltings, Farnham, 23 September 2007

Facing the moral implications of global warming

Mayer Hillman, Senior Fellow Emeritus, Policy Studies Institute

"If you can sleep tonight I will have failed" was Dr Mayer Hillman's opening statement in his impassioned talk "Facing the Moral Implications of Climate Change" given to a public meeting organised by Farnham Humanists on Sunday 23rd September. Dr Hillman is Senior Fellow Emeritus of the Policy Studies Institute and author of "The Suicidal Planet: How to Prevent Global Climate Catastrophe" and "How we can save the planet". Dr Hillman has a reputation for turning conventional political thinking on its head with ideas which, years later, become acceptable government policy.

Evidence of world-scale effects like the shrinking of the glaciers, ice-melt flooding, methane from sea bed sediments, die-back of rainforest and much else, he believes, shows us that we are following a process that realistically cannot now be reversed, a trajectory to ecological Armageddon. The energy from the sun that was captured over millions of years in the form of hydrocarbons is being released in the space of a few hundred years into our atmosphere; as though a balloon that took a lifetime to inflate will now, in an instant, burst.

Dr Hillman argued forcefully that we cannot go on pretending that this isn't happening. Adopting green lifestyles, recycling and renewable energy are simply not enough. Likewise current targets for reducing carbon emissions are totally inadequate. The future of life on earth can no longer be assured.

Having painted a picture of future catastrophe, Dr Hillman went on to present a way forward. We cannot avert what is happening but we can reduce its effect by acting sooner rather than later. As individuals, there is little we can do – unless everyone, or nearly everyone, joins in.

Dr Hillman drew a parallel with 1939. To place responsibility on individuals to act on a voluntary basis to achieve near-universal action is equivalent to the call on individuals in 1939 to fight Fascism. People only joined up following the declaration of war. This is what is required today - governments must declare war on climate change and introduce carbon rationing. Only carbon rationing will put every individual on the same footing and incentivise us all to make the dramatic but necessary changes to our lifestyles.

This leads inexorably, Dr Hillman continued, to recognising what David Miliband has described as the 'simplicity and beauty' of the Global Commons Institute's framework proposal of *Contraction and Convergence*. *Contraction* refers to the reduction in global total emissions to an internationally agreed target amount and by an agreed date. *Convergence* is the route by which national emissions will converge year by year towards this agreed target. National targets would be set based on each country's population using a cap year so that population growth does not accrue additional emissions rights. The underlying philosophy being that every citizen of the world should have an equal right to pollute and thus an equal carbon allowance. Last month Angela Merkel, in her current roles as German Chancellor,

chair of the G8, and chair of the European Community made a statement forcibly supporting *Contraction and Convergence*.

As individuals we need to put pressure on political parties to adopt carbon rationing combined with *Contraction and Convergence* across the European Community. If not, there can only be one outcome according to Dr Hillman: Governments around the world with our implicit approval, presiding over the accelerating devastation of life on earth.

In response to questions Dr Hillman gave more details as to how *Contraction and Convergence* would work using carbon as an international currency parallel to money. It would mean that in the UK we would need to reduce our carbon usage to a 1/10, in the US the reduction would be to a 1/20. He was asked what life in Farnham would be like. He replied it would be very different. There would be no traffic, people would get around on foot and it would be much safer for children. Produce would be grown locally. There would be no travelling round the world. Homes would be much more insulated. Our lives would be much healthier.

The meeting ended on a positive note - one member of the public stating that this was the first time she felt there was hope and a constructive way forward, adding that she would actually sleep more easily. Another stated that adopting carbon rationing would at least result in a world that is more equitable.

A voluntary collection was organised by Farnham Humanists for the DEC Darfur and Chad appeal at the end of the evening.