CONSTRUCTING OUR FUTURE*

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The two biggest issues that will shape our immediate future are the need to avoid the worst-case global warming scenario and its attendant climate chaos, and the imminent exhaustion of cheap oil supplies. With the Lower Hunter Regional Planning Strategy being put together right now for public comment you would think that these issues would be foremost in the minds of planners and politicians as they look at how and where we will live in the coming decades.

Global warming is such a huge issue that we seem incapable of planning to address its threat. Climate scientists are telling us that there will be longer and more frequent droughts, more intense storms, sea level rise, destruction of coral reefs, contraction of alpine areas and hotter temperatures. Such impacts will transform every aspect of our lives. It will not be possible to adapt to such changes and our coastal lifestyle, agriculture, health and total quality of life is at now at risk. Australia, along with all other developed countries, will have to lead the world with a rapid transition to energy sources that are non-polluting and renewable. The price of not moving in this direction is too high to contemplate because ... it will cost us the earth!

Energy experts worldwide have created a new global fuel gauge called the 'mid-point of oil depletion'. At this point (most agree that it is about right now) we consume oil at a greater rate than it can be produced. The experts point out that no major new discoveries of oil reserves have been made since the 1960s and that with the global emergence of fossil fuel dependent economies, demand is outstripping supply and will do so from now on. Every thing that needs to be transported suddenly gets more expensive. Our fuelish addictions will give us no respite from oil withdrawal symptoms.

Our political leaders in the early C21 are unable to see that cars and the structures we build around them, cities, roads and suburban sprawl, are endangered species. The warning light is on and we are not looking at the petrol gauge. So what is our near future going to be like? Imagine for a moment that our politicians have done nothing to counter climate chaos and mad car disease.

In 2020, after 20 years of consecutive record hot years for the planet, even the Greenhouse sceptics have seen the light and agree the fossil fuels are the nemesis of the world and regions like the Hunter that still burn coal are seen as planetary pariahs. Leaders desperately try to replace coal with clean, renewable energy sources but it is too late. Runaway Greenhouse makes all such efforts futile. Air conditioners have to be turned on but they make the temperatures go even higher.

The price of petrol has gone beyond $4.00 a litre. People living in communities distant from cities, workplaces and shops become trapped. They cannot afford to use their cars to commute and the rail system was closed in 2005 because it was deemed uneconomic. The people of Maitland and other more remote parts of the valley are not happy and they berate the politicians for being so blind.

Alternatively, our wise leaders foresaw such disasters and in 2005 put into the Lower Hunter Regional Strategy a number of measures to avoid the climate and oil crises.

The State Government has commissioned solar chimneys, wind farms, geothermal and solar power stations to replace the decommissioned coal-fired power stations. Although some questioned the attractiveness of the 100 MW solar chimneys with their 500 metre high towers and their huge greenhouse bases on the old BHP contaminated site and ex-mined land in Lake Macquarie, they were won over by a comparison with the huge open cuts in the Upper Hunter, many kilometres long, that all agreed were far worse. In 2020 silent, clean, renewable energy from the twin solar towers help give the Lower Hunter its post-coal identity. In the Upper Hunter the government has commissioned 2 new 200MW solar towers on old power station and open cut land. The alternative energy industry has become the biggest employer in the Hunter Region.

Rather than give over the rail corridor to real estate developers, a big decision was made to start, in 2006, a new light rail line system for the Lower Hunter and Central Coast. Newcastle station was revived as the start of a new light rail system that was put right down the middle of the Pacific Highway with a circle line to Garden City, the John Hunter Hospital, TAFE and the University.

Charlestown City has a new Underground Station and from Swansea Station the rail line continues up the Pacific Highway to the new Doyalson Bus-Train Interchange where it meets the Central Coast Circle Line and the heavy rail. Medium and high density urban villages, with some eco-high rise buildings, are built close to rail/bus interchanges on the western side of the Lake and on 'brown-fields' sites on the eastern side at new stations such as Charlestown, Bennetts Green, Belmont, Swansea, Caves Beach and Doyalson. The new high-rise buildings generate their own energy via photovoltaic skins, recycle nearly all of their water and give inhabitants a high quality of life on a small ecological footprint. They all offer commercial and light industrial use as well as residential amenity.

Built along the new rail transport corridors, the cycle ways and walkways give citizens safe and healthy options for transport and recreation. The bicycle undergoes a huge revival and is also used extensively within the conservation corridors that go from the sea to the mountains. The conservation corridors and other green-spaces are permanently protected from development.

Politicians push each other out of the way to champion the new world order based on a green energy foundation and public transport. When the new Light Rail Newcastle Flyer departs silently from Newcastle station on its maiden trip to the Doyalson Interchange, all the politicians are there to celebrate and claim credit. The sun is shining, the temperature is perfect and all is good with the world.

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