

1. *To fail or succeed*

... today we are subjected in every conceivable sphere to the signs of a seriously fractured social order. – Sara Dowse³

The subtitle of Jared Diamond's book *Collapse*⁴ is "*How societies choose to fail or succeed*". The book recounts the stories of ten or so societies that encountered existential crises. Some societies recognised their imminent crisis, chose a different strategy and survived. Other societies failed to perceive their peril, or failed to make suitable changes, and collapsed.

To some, Australia in 2023 will seem far removed from the Mayan jungles or Norse Greenland, and the possibility of our society collapsing fanciful. It is true there are challenges at present, they will say, but we are dealing with them. There have always been challenges, and there are always some people crying doom.

To others the prospect of drastic, unpleasant change is real, even terrifying. The science of global warming gives us a very clear warning that we are dangerously close to triggering runaway warming leading to a hellish climate. Nuclear confrontation is looming again as politicians fall into the same old mistakes of power plays and, in Australia's case, cringing dependence. A serious nuclear exchange would quickly collapse global civilisation and endanger many of the Earth's species, including us. Short of that, crises in biodiversity, fresh water supply, soil fertility and general environmental degradation beset Australia and the world as a whole.

Australian society is also degrading. Having peaked in social wellbeing around the nineteen eighties, we now have much higher wealth inequality, increasing poverty, absurdly expensive housing, increasing homelessness, pervasive insecurity of livelihoods and increasing divisiveness and extremism. Our First People, despite many individual successes and their obvious abilities and talents, still battle discrimination and vilification and many still live in very deprived communities. We imprison children as young as ten.

It is true we have implemented some more tolerant policies and attitudes towards some minorities, yet scapegoating is still all-to-easy for those so inclined. We can look to the United States to see how such social tensions can lead to a society that seems increasingly to be on the brink of violent disintegration, yet there are those who continue to push us towards emulating that unhappy place.

There are vigorous debates on how to deal with these challenges. The political mainstream, meaning the old political parties and most of the mainstream media, is still firmly pursuing business as usual, with a few tweaks they hope or imagine will be sufficient. Many others are loudly advocating more substantial changes, some of them fairly radical.

This book argues that we are indeed in a perilous state, but that even the more fundamental changes commonly mentioned will still not be enough to get us through the

dangers. The reasons are that some erroneous beliefs and destructive attitudes are still not widely recognised, and a more integrated vision is required.

One can find in the analysis that follows some twenty or more beliefs basic to our governance that are erroneous or quite misguided. Some are to do with economic management, which is in a deplorable state. Some are broader, to do with what human nature is really like and how we can cultivate our better angels, so we work better together and work better with the natural world, as our ancestors mostly did. To have the best chance of avoiding collapse we need to address all the erroneous beliefs.

The required changes range so broadly they are not commonly brought together. For example they range from the banking system to connecting more deeply with each other. Those who understand the banking system are less likely to have focussed on our intimate connections, and *vice versa*. The more we can get right the more all the positive changes will synergise.

The sum of the changes advocated here may seem radical. From the point of view of the narrow and extremist ideology that has prevailed for four decades they are indeed radical, but from a broader and more humane perspective they are not so radical. Some are a return to things we used to do routinely, before our leaders were seduced by neoliberal snake oil salesmen. Some are a recreation of how most people used to live, and how many outside the global consumerist machine still do. Some are things many of us wish for but don't know how to get, like having less pressure in our lives and more time for family, friends and community. Some are fairly novel, but their benefit ought to be fairly easy to see or demonstrate.

This is not to minimise the challenge of adopting the proposed changes. Much of that challenge will be persuading people to recognise and step away from the mistaken or destructive beliefs that saturate our public conversation, things that have become quite deeply entrenched in our culture. There will of course be strident resistance from those who benefit from present arrangements, who will assure us the sky will fall if we go anywhere near these subversive thoughts. That resistance is not to be minimised: people regularly die who get in the way of the powerful.

Yet many people are highly dissatisfied and looking for something better. A few key changes made early on could bring a lot of those people along. For example, raising the minimum wage can not only help the battlers directly and promptly, but it would benefit our anaemic economy as well, because more people would have more money to spend. Such thinking is decried by the short-sighted big-business lobby and denied by the deluded economics establishment, but a recent Nobel prize was awarded for showing how it happened in the real world.

Around sixty years ago Donald Horne made a scathing assessment of Australian governance in his book *The Lucky Country*⁵. He portrayed our leadership class, in and out of government, as complacent and smug, uninterested in the wider world or the big social and political changes already discernible in 1964, though even Horne could not foresee the power of the changes that washed through the world in the following decade. The famous summary line from the book is

‘Australia is a lucky country run mainly by second rate people who share its luck.’

He meant the book title, *The Lucky Country*, to be taken ironically. He meant we were living on our luck, and it was unlikely to last. He went on to say

‘[Australia] lives on other people's ideas, and, although its ordinary people are adaptable, most of its leaders (in all fields) so lack curiosity about the events that surround them that they are often taken by surprise.’

Perhaps our second-rate leaders lifted their game a little over the following decade or two, but by now they have regressed and are much worse. Having immersed themselves in the cults of materialism and selfishness, having scuttled back to the shelter of the the colonial mentality, and having opened themselves to more corruption and to outright capture, they have set us up for failure.

There have recently been some encouraging signs in Australia of change for the better, even though the political mainstream has hardly shifted.

Australia fended off the disease afflicting many of the world's democracies. That disease has featured demagoguery, misinformation, cultivation of division, and disregard for norms, conventions, protocols and even the law, along with excessive secrecy, corruption and incompetence. In the 2022 federal election we removed an anarchic government and installed one that has returned to actually governing and (mostly) to abiding by conventions and laws. But the change is a remission, not a cure. The new government still hews to old beliefs that we need to move beyond, and it is still heavily corrupted.

The election of a clutch of community independents to federal parliament has the potential to get nearer the source of disease. Together with the Greens, they can help to reduce the toxicity and corruption of parliamentary culture, and of our broader political culture, and bring more focus onto what the country needs.

Yet there is a deeper malaise whose source we need to find. We are a materialist society, compared with many past and traditional societies, and the materialism has been raised to new heights by the deliberate cultivation of selfishness and greed. The greed promotes political corruption and is obviously helping to drive the endless growth that our economic managers strive for so relentlessly. The greed leads some people to take more than their share of stuff, leaving other people with not enough, so driving wealth inequality. They have also taken more than the planet can provide, without itself suffering decline.

Why are these people so greedy? There have been many societies in which such greed was constrained, if it existed at all, so we need not resort to the dead-end explanation that greed is just part of human nature. Something provokes or facilitates the greed.

Our materialist focus gets in the way of social connection and love, which are essential to our sense of belonging and being valued, and to our emotional health. Consumerist marketing exploits this by persuading us that buying stuff will satisfy our craving for connection, but of course it does not. Behind the marketing is a deliberate fostering of

selfishness. We are exhorted to be rugged individuals and to compete with each other. Cooperation is seen either as weakness or collusion. One consequence is that livelihoods have become very insecure, by design. In our insecurity we are prone to turning on each other. We have become fractious and divided. Those divisions in turn are exploited by the holders and seekers of power. The conflict consumes our 'social capital', the fund of trust required to keep our society functioning.

Yet selfishness and greed still do not fully explain the perilous situation we are in. The feudal lords were selfish and greedy too, and the lower orders suffered, but feudal society did not grow inexorably, to consume itself and the world.

A feature of our modern governance is to ensure there is never quite enough of something essential. A prime example at present is employment. For a time, postwar, employment was maintained close to a sufficient level, and our society prospered. However for decades now employment has been deliberately kept insufficient, under the bogus guise of combating inflation. So we compete for livelihoods and accept less than we might deserve out of desperation. This keeps us on a treadmill that serves the greedy. The treadmill has been operating for centuries, probably since the land enclosures of late Mediaeval times.

Our modern greed is thus fostered and implemented in way that requires ever more 'economic growth', and that growth requires ever more of everything: materials, people, land, water, crops, poisons, products, devices and so on. We have built a machine with unlimited demands. There is ever less room for anything else on the planet. Nor is there time to stop and enjoy the sunset, to have surprise and poetry in our lives. Uncontrolled and unlimited growth of this kind is correctly called a cancer.

The workings of this lurking machine are obscured by a fog of misconceptions and delusions. We do things that keep the machine grinding along, but tell ourselves we are doing something else. Some of the things not properly understood include banks, money, markets and how we count success. There are also things not acknowledged, in the corridors and forums of power, like being kept subservient, even infantile, in a hierarchy. There are factors not recognised as being significant, like our being physically unable to know everyone personally in a large society, let alone in another society. There are things neglected or forgotten, like our connection with the rest of the natural world, so we fail to understand how it works and how we fit within it.

To address the deep dysfunction in Australian society we require a wider-ranging, deeper and more forensic analysis to support the diagnosis, and to point to potential remedies. There *are* remedies. We can stop harming ourselves, our land and the planet, and we will live more fulfilling lives as we do so.

Two deep streams of belief underlie much of what we are experiencing. Each has brought benefits, but each has been pursued too narrowly and too far. First, the European Enlightenment gave rise to the scientific and industrial revolutions, but also to an increasing focus on materialism at the expense of relationship. Second, though Christ preached love, Christianity has a history of viewing people as separate from and above the

rest of the natural world. It inherited this attitude from the earliest cities, which limited most 'civilised' people's connection with the natural world. We have become too attached to our power over the natural world, power enhanced by our industrial system. So there are deep cultural forces propelling our materialism and our exploitation of the world.

Yet in the late 1990s in the United States, a country borne of the Enlightenment and where Christianity plays a prominent role, fully two thirds of adults agreed that humans are *part* of nature. Two thirds were concerned their children will inherit a degraded world, and four fifths agreed we should change the way we live now so future generations can enjoy a good quality of life.

Nine tenths of Americans thought a prosperous economy and protecting the environment should be compatible⁶.

Currently, more than four-fifths of respondents from G20 (developed) nations want to do more to protect and restore nature, and more than two-thirds believe the benefits of action to protect 'the global commons' outweigh the costs⁷. Overall, most people agree we should move beyond focussing on gross domestic product and instead focus more on the health and wellbeing of people and nature.

There is good reason to believe these views are shared by Australians. For example, many Australians have downshifted: they have changed their employment in order to spend more time with their families, to find personal fulfilment, to lead a more balanced life or to look after their health⁸.

These are startling numbers. However, according to surveyors, the discontented often don't realise how many others are discontented. Often people feel embarrassed to say what they really feel, afraid they will be ridiculed for disagreeing with what 'everybody knows'. So they feel isolated. Perhaps also it is discomfiting to speak openly about, because we carry on with a lifestyle that we believe, deep down, is harming the world. People's real views only come out when they are allowed to feel comfortable and safe from judgement within focus groups and in-depth interviews⁶.

These surveys reveal something profound about our society. We don't like it. *We think it will degrade the world and harm our children.*

These feelings are so widespread they must cross the usual political divides. Yet most of us continue to live the way our society demands. Mostly we still vote for those who will continue it. We evidently feel trapped. To deal with materialism and destructive consumerism we need a big change of direction but we don't know how to do that. Perhaps we don't believe it is even possible.

Yet this materialist, competitive, unsatisfying, destructive society we find ourselves in is the creation of human beings. It must therefore be possible for us to uncreate it. Societies in other times and places have functioned differently, so the present form of society is not inevitable.

If the world is to survive for our grandchildren, clearly it is not enough just to *want* it to survive. We must figure out how to *stop* the machine we have created, the machine that is chewing up all the trees, and everything else. To do so, we must understand some basic

things about ourselves and our society. Why does our society seem like an unstoppable machine? What drives it? Where is the off switch?

Not everyone feels trapped. There are many who have a vision of a better way to live and are working to bring it about: houses that require no energy input, cities that don't require you to migrate long distances every day, farming without poisons that draws carbon back into the soil, community organisations that re-connect people, companies with a positive social role, money that supports rather than exploits, and much more.

Yet these alternatives don't get enough traction, and the old system rolls on. The old habits of thought, the old power networks, the old social institutions like media and parliament have continued in their old ways. There is now the prospect of some change of political culture, and perhaps that change might gather pace if we cultivate it.

How do we tilt the balance? How do we promote the big shifts, so the positive alternatives can replace the old? There are many sources we can draw on. Psychology tells us we are better than we often think. Archaeology and anthropology show us we have more options than we have tended to believe. Resources can be used much more efficiently. There are better ways to run a democracy. Banking and money can be made much simpler and more constructive.

The economy can be harnessed to power the good things we want, instead of subverting them. That may seem to be a radical claim, but consider this: the economy has been erroneously placed above society, and it is currently the locus of power. However 'the economy' is not a separate thing, it is the means by which our society provides for its material needs. Coming from this viewpoint it is evident that a lot of the concepts and practices underpinning the present economic system are misguided or just wrong. It is not hard to understand the problems, if we can shut out the noise of apologists trying to keep the old system staggering along.

Rebecca Huntley⁹ researches people's attitudes to climate, energy and related matters, using surveys and focus groups. One of her methods is to put statements of well-documented fact in front of people and ask if they believe them. One of her subjects asserted that fossil fuels are good for Australia not only because of the jobs they provide but also because of the taxes and royalties they pay. He also asserted that renewable energy is heavily subsidised by government whereas fossil fuels get no subsidies.

Huntley: You don't think coal and gas get subsidies from the government?

Subject: They don't.

Huntley: Would it surprise you to know they get billions of dollars a year in subsidies and some of these companies that are foreign-owned don't pay tax or royalties?

Subject: I don't believe that.

Huntley notes that the *Australia Institute* found fossil fuels received \$10.3 billion in subsidies over the previous financial year (2020-21), just within Australia.¹⁰ Renewable

energy receives a small fraction of that. It is becoming well-known that many large companies, including foreign-owned companies, pay little or no tax.

Huntley finds that people are often reluctant to accept well-documented facts as true. Either they say they can't be right, as in the above example, or they assume the government or the country must be getting something in return for subsidies. They don't want to believe the government is being duded or is just giving our wealth away. In one group the subjects reluctantly supposed it must be true that there are more jobs in health and education than in mining, after Huntley showed them the numbers. However when she asked them did it *feel* right, they said no. Huntley's point is that the mining industry has invested in a lot of public relations aiming to get people to *feel good* about mining. Feelings trump facts.