

Convenient Half-Truths

Al Gore & the politics of planetary protection

Former American vice-President Al Gore, once widely written off as a loser and a rather dull one at that, has been riding high of late. He was jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in this autumn for his campaigning about the threat from global warming. He also won the Documentary Award at the 2007 Oscars for his film *An Inconvenient Truth*. A Quill award went to his book *The Assault on Reason*. Gore also made a dramatic appearance at the 2007 Bali Conference on Climate Change where his contribution shone in contrast to the dismal role of the official United States delegation. It would seem that, at a time when the latest *Global Outlook* report from the United Nations has demonstrated the already dire and rapidly worsening state of the Earth's life-support systems, the planet has found a true champion.

Gore's current status is a remarkable come-back. Having been comprehensively outmanoeuvred in the Presidential election that brought George Bush to power in 2000, Gore was subsequently cast into the political wilderness. He further alienated many sympathisers by what they saw as his failure to really challenge electoral irregularities.

Whatever Gore's failings, however, he shines in comparison to the vast majority of his political peers. His books, his film, his scientific training, indeed his refusal to just go home and sulk are all achievements that show up the ignorance, laziness and all too common venality of many politicians inside and outside the USA. Gore's high public profile demands a robust assessment of whether his diagnosis of the global crisis and the prescriptions he touts do make a true friend of the Earth.

Judging Gore

There are two types of evidence with which to make a reasonable judgement. There is his campaign work, in print, on film and out in lobbies and conference halls around the world. Unlike many environmental campaigners, however, he has also held high office. He had the chance to give governmental policy at least a nudge in more sustainable directions. His performance then provides some indication at least just how solid is his proclaimed commitment to environmental protection when push comes to shove.

Some charges should not, however be given too much weight. The first is the accusation of bad science. *An Inconvenient Truth* suffered particularly vicious attacks for alleged errors of fact and analysis. Yet Gore covered in an accessible way an enormously complex issue about which there is still a great deal of uncertainty. Despite mistakes about, say, the climatic history of Greenland or a failure to address rival theories, the main thrust of Gore's argument — that human activity is altering climatic patterns and the consequences are likely to be dire — stands.

Second is the charge of hypocrisy. Again many have denounced Gore for being two-faced. Attention has been drawn to his electricity-guzzling mansion and gas-guzzling cars. In *An Inconvenient Truth* he is repeatedly shown jet-setting around the world. Others have pointed that Gore is a bona fide capitalist in his own right. He is a major stockholder in firms like Occidental Petroleum and a board member for Apple (a company with a very bad environmental track record and poor labour rights history too). He has also been developing his own financial enterprises. In other words, he is a significant player in the very economic game so central to planetary ruination. Certainly such personal inconsistencies allow enemies of the Earth to score points and drag the debate down to Gore's personal characteristics. Resort to ad hominem arguments is, however, quite sterile. Gore's arguments stand or fall on their own merit, regardless of his personality or lifestyle. He certainly uses his wealth, energy and time in far better ways than the vast majority of individuals from his background and current circumstances.

Power Points?

An Inconvenient Truth provides a good insight into Gore's politics. It is built around Al Gore in more ways than one. He is centre stage in the course of the PowerPoint presentation at the heart of the film. His own life history is interwoven into this narrative. Thus the film cuts at several points

to purely personal matters: his childhood, his education, his sister's death of lung cancer, the near-death of his 6-year-old son and, of course, the disastrous 2000 Presidential election.

There are certainly some gripping visual sequences in the film which should hook the otherwise indifferent. But such sections may be problematic too. *An Inconvenient Truth* pictures a string of environmental calamities as a foretaste of things to come: raging hurricanes, devastating floods, scorching deserts, enormous chunks of iceberg breaking away, shrinking icecaps, retreating glaciers... There may be a danger that the spectacle remains just that: stunning images whose meaning is lost. These images may fail to connect to their everyday lives of many viewers in rich countries. Certainly dramatic pictures of starving Africans in the Live Aid broadcast did stimulate a lot of viewers to make financial donations but it is another question how many actually changed their everyday lifestyles thereafter so that the Earth's bounty might be shared more equitably and sustainably.

More significant is the merit or otherwise of what *An Inconvenient Truth* actually has to say about the state of the world. The essential arguments will be familiar to many. Gore's solutions for saving the planet also contain little that will be surprising. The 'greenhouse' theory is itself far from new. In 1824, for example, such links were suggested by Joseph Fourier. In terms of alerting the wider public, most significant was perhaps the presentation of this theory to the American Congress by a NASA scientist, James Hansen in 1988.

There are still sceptics who doubt the whole 'greenhouse' thesis. They variously question the existence of global warming, the role of human activity (as opposed to, say, changes in solar activity or some other 'natural' cycle like water vapour), and the predicted consequences of any such increase in average temperatures. Some even allege that proponents of the thesis exaggerate their case to entice gullible governments to grant them yet more lucrative research contracts. Gore does not tackle such issues, though his subsequent book, *The Assault on Reason* pursues some of these arguments in more depth (though the Ehrlichs' *Betrayal of Science and Reason* is sharper and more comprehensive, even though older).

Painting Only Parts of the Picture

Gore's diagnosis of planetary ailments is very one-sided. *An Inconvenient Truth*, for example, concentrates on 'pollution', what is being added to the atmosphere by human activity. It further focuses largely on additional carbon dioxide generation by the burning of fossil fuels. Yet his focus is too narrow. For a start, gases like methane, nitrous oxide, CFCs, HCFCs and others could become critical, deserving fuller treatment than Gore provides. Given that the first two are intimately connected to that most fundamental human need, food production (which, in turn, is directly connected to the population growth and the numbers of mouths to be fed), they may be of greater long-term significance than carbon dioxide generated by motor vehicles (whose use is likely to be curtailed by mounting congestion and inevitable rises in the price of oil).

More important still is the role of human activity in changing the surface of the Earth and the living components therein. Many human activities are quite 'clean' in terms of pollution. Yet they so degrade ecological system that they undermine long-term sustainability just as badly and often in worse ways than specific pollutants. Examples include soil erosion, soil compaction, salinisation, over-extraction from waterways, wetland drainage, desertification, deforestation, blockage of hydrological systems by dams and the burial of land under concrete, brick and tarmac.

Many such land uses destroy habitats, thereby reducing the diversity of other lifeforms. Add the direct effects of over-hunting and the side-effects of technologies like driftnets and it becomes clear why there is now a rate of human-caused extinction to rival previous waves. Many of these activities change the Earth surface and, in doing so, create additional sources of greenhouse gases (burning of woodland to make way for farming). They may also reduce the performance of ecosystems as sinks that sequester carbon. Furthermore, living ecosystems such as the Amazon's rainforests play a role in creating a liveable climate, quite aside from greenhouse gas emissions.

The need to assess human activity in toto can be illustrated by Hurricane Katrina and the destruction of New Orleans. Gore uses this to back up his warnings, not least the role of warmer waters in the Gulf of Mexico (in turn linked to the greenhouse effect). Yet he fails to explain how the disaster was magnified by a host of other factors, all human 'own goals'. These included the loss of protective soil sediment due to levee construction, exposure of unprotected soil due to

canal construction (also a cause of salt water intrusion and ensuing destruction of protective vegetation), increased vulnerability due to subsidence, something exacerbated by wetland drainage and subsequent soil oxidation as well as by geologic collapse due to local oil and gas drilling... and of course urban sprawl and construction on inherently vulnerable land. Such contributory factors are all independent of greenhouse gas generation but each played its own malign part. Gore also fails to spotlight adequately how the floods brought to the surface the gross inequities in American society, not least their racial dimension.

Gore's myopia is also illustrated by his inability to address the a very fundamental fact, that cows actually do more environmental damage than cars. So-called burger culture in particular not only seriously harms human health (obesity crisis etc.) but also badly damages the Earth's well-being. Again questions about vested interests and popular lifestyle choices are posed which Gore prefers to avoid. [That the Gore dynasty has long been in the cattle business might explain this particular oversight]

Furthermore, *An Inconvenient Truth* does not give due credit to the importance of ecosystems in forming global climate. It does convey the impact of global warming on those ecosystems but fails then to make clear that the impacts then become part of positive feedback. This in turn makes the probability of more dramatic change all the more likely. Revealingly, studies that include the full carbon cycle (e.g. those from the UK's Hadley Centre) paint a much more alarming picture than those including the IPCC 4th assessment report which omit it in their projections.

Nor does Gore adequately address the direct depletion of finite resources. The current draining of the Ogallala aquifer beneath the American Prairies and the world's number one breadbasket will cripple food supply, regardless of any climate change. Given that not just transport systems but many other sectors of the economy, most of all agriculture (farm machinery, fertilisers etc), run on readily available and cheap oil, its future depletion will call time on the dominant lifestyle of today. Add all these gathering clouds together. It should now be starkly clear that 'business-as-usual' in anything remotely like its present form is doomed, even if global warming turns out to be the figment of overheated imaginations. It is doubtful whether the average viewer will deduce that likelihood from the diagnosis Gore currently presents (to be fair, his 1992 book, *Earth in Balance*, recently re-released, was more comprehensive).

Realism

It is not clear whether the programme of change advocated by Gore is what he really believes or what he thinks the public will accept. He might argue that the programme suggested in his film is 'realistic'. Yet in such matters, realism is what really will solve the problem being addressed. People might prefer prescriptions that require modest inconveniences to their daily lives. But such popularity might be purchased at the expense of any real lasting resolution of the crisis.

He firmly opts for the 'technofix', technological innovation that avoids the need for disruptive economic and social change. The dream of a 'green car' symbolises such wishful thinking. Advocates overlook questions about their power source and, more importantly, the simple fact they too would eat up land for roads, car parks and garages as well as consume finite resources like metals and plastics. The film also plays with alternatives like wind energy whose output will never meet the demands of modern industrial societies. Other suggestions such as insulation, recycling and less car use are, quite frankly, trivial gestures and even if practised on a big scale, would at best only buy a bit of time.

Gore also avoids other awkward choices. He condemns the scale of fossil fuel consumption but fails to judge the claims of the nuclear power lobby that their alternative is the answer to global warming. Indeed some of his close associates go further. Congressman Bob Clement describes this irrelevant and bedeviled power source as "a smart choice". Much more foolishly Gore endorses large-scale biofuel programmes, whose failings are not just the devastation of wildlife habitat, use of pesticides and aggravated soil erosion but also a doubtful net energy yield and, indeed, an addition to total greenhouse gas emissions (via nitrous oxide).

Gore certainly recognises that human demands upon ecological systems are unsustainably heavy but is rather fuzzy regarding the extent to which some 'feet' (i.e. richer sections of global society) tread on the Earth more heavily than others. There is no possibility that the lifestyle lived by the average American could be sustainably generalised across the planet.

More generally, by focussing on technology and, albeit much less sharply, on consumer choices,

Gore plays down the overriding significance of human population levels, both current and projected. Yet, as a determinant of ecological sustainability, it is, however, decisive. Human numbers decisively do count. In 1992 when Gore became Vice-President, the estimated world population was not far short of 5,450,000,000. Ten years, later, it was nearly 6,225, 000,000. In other words, there were an additional 775,000,000 people to feed, water, clothe, house, educate, heal, transport, employ, entertain and otherwise provide for. Over the next 60 seconds, people pressure on planet Earth will increase by 150 (births over deaths), It is no wonder that it is called the human race. *An Inconvenient Truth*, for example, makes but passing reference to what is the greatest — and most intractable — source of global warming and most significant aggravator of all other ecological problems.

Frameworks

Human numbers are, of course, not the only factor. The core determinants of environmental impact are technology, affluence as well as population: how many consumers, how much they consume and how those items of consumption are cultivated, harvested, mined, refined, manufactured, stored, transported, consumed and disposed of after use. But such factors are mediated through specific institutional frameworks and cultural systems, at the heart of which lie certain assumptions about purpose and satisfaction in life.

Gore takes that choice-shaping framework for granted. In particular he takes capitalism and globalisation as a given. Yet capitalism's expansionist dynamic is inherently unsustainable given that the Earth remains unchangeably finite. At the same time, Gore places unwarranted reliance on market-based economic measures. Not only are they unlikely to work (the EU 'cap and trade' carbon policies are widely deemed to be failures, for example), they are also immoral given that they bestow upon the rich the right to keep on polluting.

Gore presents the challenge as a moral, not a political, one. In one sense he is right — ultimately it is matter of character and conscience. Most people have no immediate, selfish reason to heed his message, even if there is a certain self-interest in acting to protect the future well-being of children and grandchildren.

In another sense, however, he is quite wrong to portray the matter as non-political. It is very much about power. The politics of climate change cannot be isolated from the self-serving vested interests such as the 'fossil fuel barons' of the energy corporations and other business interests as well as various bureaucracies with a stake in the status quo. Gore treats them as atypical 'rotten apples' in an otherwise healthy barrel.

Symptomatic of Gore's selective vision is his failure to look at the environmental costs of militarism. The US armed forces, for example, are the largest single consumer of fossil fuel in the world, using roughly 100 million barrels a year. The direct environmental impact of war needs no comment here though it is worth stressing the role of competition over declining resources are a source of future war. Many other institutions, from banking to the tourist trade, escape close assessment.

'Vested interests' are, however, only part of the problem. More significant and more intractable is the everyday decision-making of ordinary citizens. They vote for politicians who have resolutely failed to address global warming or, as in the case of George Bush, have sabotaged action to defuse the threat. They also 'vote' in other ways, most decisively in their spending patterns. In all kinds of ways, ordinary citizens knowingly and willingly do things whose bottom line is resource depletion, pollution and general environmental degradation. Usually it is not the act itself but the cumulative impact of a myriad such acts, the reasons for which are nothing if not varied: comfort, convenience, laziness, haste, security...including sheer ignorance and prejudice. Motivation may vary but they make no difference to ecological price tags attached to all human actions. Gore prefers to flatter the citizenry than honestly assess popular values and lifestyles.

Political ghosts

Gore likes to joke that he was once the "next President of the United States". But he was once the actual Vice-President. This raises questions about his own track record when he did have a hand on the levers of power. He draws a veil over such matters. Perhaps this is not surprising since he not only failed to push for environmental action when he had the chance but also

supported several anti-environmental policies of the Clinton administration.

There is not space to document in full the failure of the Clinton-Gore team. Even when set against that of George Bush who has so well earned the soubriquet of the Toxic Texan, it was a far-from-green performance. On just about every count, the Democrat government failed: little protection of primal forests from further clear-felling, construction of more toxic waste incinerators, promotion of GM crops, use of depleted uranium weaponry, sweet deals with so-called 'Big Sugar' corporations in Florida further devastating the Everglades, lowered controls on chemicals like Methyl Bromide (an ozone-depleter), relaxation of food protection laws, promotion of oil drilling in Alaska, weakening of the Kyoto agreement as well as broader economic policies such as free trade and NAFTA.

In defence of Gore, it might be argued that Clinton and other government leaders as well as powerful lobbies tied Gore's hands. Yet on some of these critical matters, Gore did not just stay silent. He played an active role promoting the wrong policies. Not least regarding the further globalisation of markets, a sure step toward ecological ruin. At the Kyoto negotiations, his own role was far less positive than he now likes to suggest.

Overall, Gore seems to have no vision of what a sustainable society might look like. His readers and viewers are left with the impression that it will be not too different from the contemporary world, minus some blemishes. If he suggest any picture, it is a high tech one, a world of computers, optical fibres, super-jets, magnetic levitation trains, superconducting ceramics, tidal barrages, giant wind farms... It will be one where the buying and selling of commodities is the major economic nexus. Certain new rules might constrain today's giant corporations but in Gore's new world it would otherwise be business-as-usual.

Gore in political context

Gore is a minor member of the world's ruling elites. It might seem strange, then, to see someone so privileged attacking at least some aspects of the system that has given him those very privileges. Of course there was always been the odd well-to-do renegade who has 'betrayed' his/her class to fight oppression and exploitation. Gore, however, belongs to another tradition.

For some hundred years, there has been a growing trend of environmental concern amongst the more far-sighted business leaders, politicians and bureaucrats. Particularly significant was the administration of Theodore Roosevelt which reacted against the destructive smash-and-grab exploitation of the American environment of previous decades. A more lasting alternative was sought and was embodied in the Forest Service under Gifford Pinchot. George Sessions and Bill Devall have named this approach "resource conservation and development". It was certainly not about environmental protection for non-utilitarian reasons. "Resourcism" is a convenient label for this brand of comparatively enlightened brand of environmental management for, to quote Pinchot, "the service of man".

However it was the World Commission on Environment and Development, especially its famed document *The Brundtland Report*, that crystallised the nature of "resourcism". It popularised the notion of "sustainable growth", advocating increased throughput in the human economy, including expansion of agriculture, greater use of pesticides and more manufacturing output.

The focus was the 'fine-tuning' of production systems to mitigate some of its more undesirable side-effects, particularly those that are interfering with the goal of greater consumption. The economic 'engine' was perceived to be basically a sound one: all that was wrong was some dirt clogging the carburettors and inadequate driving skills. More recently this perspective has been developed by luminaries such as Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins and Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker. Resourcism is about squeezing more out of Nature, albeit in less immediately hazardous or profligately wasteful ways. Environmental systems are simply there to be used as humans see fit to satisfy indiscriminate and open-ended needs. Even the very concept of environmental management — of predicting and controlling enormously complex systems — contains that very hubris which has done so much to create a planetary crisis in the first place.

Similarly, techniques like environmental impact assessments are being used to facilitate further exploitation of the environment, assessing how far it can be stretched; they are not about reducing human impacts. In terms of planning, most 'development control' vainly tries to ameliorate the worst aspects of particular developments (often by a 'beauty strip' of trees and the

like) or diverting it away from the most sensitive sites. As such, it is like the little Dutch boy sticking his finger in the dike, when holes are proliferating all over the sea wall.

In a finite world, belief in infinite expansion is akin to faith in perpetual motion machines. It was intellectually impossible to sustain the concept of “sustainable growth”. Fortunately language came riding to the rescue. Another phrase, “sustainable development” had the power to mean all things. Not surprisingly, it came to dominate debate about the planetary prospect as Gore’s exemplifies. He has a penchant for suggesting that individuals and organisations should ‘review’, ‘identify’, ‘promote’ and otherwise improve their performance. However, such suggestions are not embedded in any meaningful context, against yardsticks by which we can judge the sustainability of goals and the rate of progress towards them. There is a deep reluctance to explore the implications of what might be called a Sustainable Earth Society—one whose members include more than the human race.

Like many advocates of sustainable development, Gore tends to avoid critical concepts as carrying capacity (it implies limits on human numbers) nor is he comfortable with values like the inalienable right of other species to their slice of the Earth (it too implies limits on human activities). For this reason, they are stranded in a conceptual void, unable to articulate any detailed vision of what a sustainable society might be like. Like most mainstream sustainable development literature, Gore is reluctant to suggest that people might have to make major ‘sacrifices’.

In terms of overall policy, contraction, not development, might be a more honest description of the task facing humanity. In other words, the challenge is to slim down our bloated society, to reduce the weight of humanity’s ecological ‘footprint’ to one which the Earth can sustain and which does not stamp out other species. Quite radical changes in both the institutional framework and individual lifestyles would be necessary. Generally, human society would be smaller and life slower.

The politics of Al Gore are a long way from such perspectives. His campaigning for certain kinds of environmental protection is certainly to be welcomed. But it should not be forgotten that at the level of core values and goals, what may seem merely to be two different routes to the same destination, are, in reality, radically different and, beyond a certain point, incompatible perceptions about both the human prospect and the place of humanity within Nature’s order.