

Climate Change, Refugee and Refuge Cities

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FCM Sustainable Communities Trade Show
February 14, 2008

A few weeks ago, I attended a meeting in a board room at Natural Resources Canada. It was a large room but crammed to cracking. There were scientists on the floor, leaning against the walls and sitting in every chair available. They were there to listen to a presentation by another geologist, Doctor David Hughes and he was talking about global peak energy. His presentation was the opposite of mine today, he had a blizzard of graphs and because he was talking to colleagues, he whistled through them at express train speed.

I took notes but I would be lying if I said I was able to follow the many details. If I could summarize it in few sentences, it would be something like 89% of energy needs are non-renewable carbon based, three quarters of the world's oil or more is past peak

and thus declining in absolute supply and cost of delivery. This is going to change the way we live, not just in lifestyle but the fundamentals such as food supply.

There was one politician in that room. I have the impression that this meeting was not unusual, that all over the planet, in China, in India, in Europe, scientists are gathering together in worried little clusters discussing the latest global warming, climate change discoveries and what they are seeing and hearing is causing them intense anxiety.

Two degrees has for many years now been considered the tipping point when irreversible dramatic, global climate change will occur. Two degrees has never seemed like much to me, but apparently 2 degrees colder is all that is required to trigger an ice age. Now scientists have 800,000 years of climate data from Antarctic ice coring and in 800,000 years, the global climate has never moved 2 degrees above the mean, nor has carbon dioxide levels ever risen so fast.

As we meet today, the carbon content is rising 200 times faster than at any time in the last 800,000 years. Presently, carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere are 30 per cent higher than anything experienced by humanity and methane (19 times as powerful as carbon dioxide) is 130 per cent higher than it has been in 800,000 years.

I am sure this isn't news to you. I am repeating it because I need to set the context for the predictions made in my speech.

My predictions are as follows: city and national governments will be unable to close the barn door in time to stop the climate change crisis from hitting every city, town and farm on the planet. This is what simple observation of the current economic and social realities around the world tells me.

Nothing is happening out there in Canada to reduce carbon emissions. In fact, it's increasing and we have invented even dirtier methods of producing oil energy. Nothing is happening anywhere else except the tiny, Nordic nations of Europe and most

nations like Canada are going dirtier, not cleaner, witness lignite coal use in China.

There are two questions worth asking – why do we refuse to acknowledge what the scientists have?

The second one is what will be the consequences for administering our cities where there will be food shortages, energy shortages, and unpredictable, violent weather?

The answer to the first question is fairly simple. It's not knowledge which is the problem. It's something else.

There have been fine books written about the financial, social and environmental costs of car and road based growth since it began. Sixty years ago, William H. White wrote, *Lost Landscape* about the loss of Pennsylvania farmland to the mall and sprawl subdivisions of the period. Forty-five years ago, Jane Jacobs wrote the exceptional, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. They continue to pour off the desks of writers today and they don't get more graphic – *Stupid to the Last Drop* or *Asphalt Nation*.

The last thing the world needs is another book documenting the perils of just in time delivery and 10,000 new trucks on the road every year.

So if it isn't knowledge, what is it?

It's politics. We have a political system which is not capable of responding. When it comes to climate change politicians are like deer caught in the headlights. They've heard about it, even George Bush is capable of saying something astonishing like 'we've got an addiction to oil'. But they are not capable of doing anything.

I see it every day in my hometown, the place you are meeting today. Let me give you a very thumb nail sketch of the ongoing political response to climate change in Ottawa and Eastern Ontario.

The province is widening the 417, the expressway that goes through the city, has just approved the Environmental Assessment for the Alta Vista expressway, is twinning highways east and west to serve the tiny communities of Carleton Place and Rockland. Carleton Place and Rockland have a combined population of about 36,000.

The province is spending about 250 million dollars to deliver twinned, commuter highways to downtown Ottawa.

And in the city of Ottawa, we have just enjoyed two record years for new road construction 200 kilometers in 2006 and 150 in 2007...that's just new roads. We're also delivering fresh, piped city water to the township of Russell so the township can continue to grow suburban lots and not have to worry about its ground water which has been polluted by pesticide, fertilizer and herbicide applications by the agricultural folks in the township. And of course, we killed the light rail project which would have have taken 26,000 tons of carbon out of our city air in favour of hiring lawyers to break the contract we signed with the winning proponent, Siemens.

The city had no sustainability plan and no sustainability department. In the city of Ottawa which I don't think is much different than any other Canadian city, we like our politics as usual. In 157 years, we've elected one progressive mayor.

So what does this mean for transitioning to a low energy city based on relocalizing the economy? It means it's not likely to happen and if it won't happen what will happen?

Look around the planet at cities and you can see the human equivalent of shrinking ice surfaces. Urban habitats are more populous and popular than ever, but they are also becoming more fragile. Cities that used to be secure destinations for refugees from economic and civil conflicts are becoming sources themselves of refugees.

What used to be the exception, a city that can no longer support its population that generates refugees rather than offers refuge is becoming more common. The most dramatic North American example is New Orleans but there are many others.

Refugee cities all share the same basic characteristics:

Entire neighbourhoods become vandalized shells.

Public infrastructure is battered, broken and unreliable.

Schools, libraries, train stations, parks and public places are not places you would want to frequent unless you had no other choice,

In Refugee Cities, both petty and violent crime becomes a way of life and it is the same for refugee nations. It's clear, we're producing refugee cities faster than we're producing refuge cities.

The predictions are that over the next 50 years, the Russian population will diminish from 150 million to 90.

In Detroit, the population declines by about 1,000 people every month and like any other Refugee City, it is in the anomalous position of not having enough city services and too many. It has more neighbourhoods, roads and public places than it needs and the ones that continue to be occupied don't have enough services.

Fortunately Canada is in the happy position of being populated mostly by refuge cities, cities that people are fleeing towards, not away from. A Refuge city is the inverse of a refugee city. It's a place where people want to move to and in some cases are dying to. In the United States, refuge cities would be places like Seattle, New York, Portland Oregon and Boulder, Colorado.

In Refuge cities, municipal services remain intact, efficient and universal. Schools are repaired, safe, pleasant and well staffed. Sidewalk are repaired and walkable. Concert halls, theatres and streets are well patronized at any time of the day or night.

In a Refuge City, public transit is something you complain about but aren't afraid to use. Parks are green and popular, not desolate and dirty. Neighbourhoods are self-organized and run by confident, cranky residents who think they run the city, not the jackass who got elected.

The Refuge city employment base is diverse and resistant to the global bullying of 'give me a tax break or we will leave town'.

In Refuge cities, the police rely on news of crime in other cities to keep their budget from being reduced. Quebec City, for example, had one murder in 2006. Crime in the city of Ottawa has steadily declined year over year and what murders there are the sad products of domestic chagrin or the mentally ill.

If Canada is a refuge nation, stocked with Refuge Cities that folks from Refugee Cities are anxious to get to, what's the problem? It's a comforting thought to think Canadian cities can continue to prosper without worrying too much about global phenomenon such as climate change and the increase in refugee cities. But times can change remarkably quickly. Australia like Canada has long thought of itself an oasis nation well stocked with comfortable refuge cities.

Seven years of drought have finally driven the message home in Australia that climate change can threaten even places as comfortable as Sydney, Australia. Water rationing is now in place in cities and large areas of formerly prosperous agriculture areas are being abandoned. It's taken seven years.

The ultimate destiny of refuge cities is not a happy one. A refuge city is not a sustainable city either, sooner or later its own hot house growth will also overwhelm it. The experience of popular refuge cities like Key West, Victoria and Vancouver at this moment is the influx of wealthy immigrants push the price of

housing so high, so fast that locals are driven out of their neighbourhoods into less comfortable ones and their children become service workers while the homeless problem grows, not shrinks.

It's not just the significance of predictive science which escapes politicians, the significance of grave environmental situations like the city of Atlanta running out of water, fire storms in California, hurricanes along the coasts, an iceless Rideau Canal in Ottawa and so on, simply hasn't penetrated into the daily lives and decisions of Canadian governments, at any level.

We live in a time which demands new thinking, non partisan approaches to governing our cities in the interest of all and we have the reverse. We have never had such a deeply divided federal parliament, never had such deeply divided city councils. I often think it's like being a city councillor on Easter Island when the response to deforestation was to cut more trees and carve more giant heads to appease the Gods.

We're not building giant heads, but we might as well be. President Bush's response to the sub-prime meltdown in his country is exactly the same as it was seven years ago three buildings being attacked in New York, tax cuts, buy more stuff and stimulate the economy and more troops on the other side of the globe would be good. This is what has created the mess the United States and the world is in today because these policies are not sustainable.

Not being sustainable means it cannot continue and that's what's happening in the American economy, it is not continuing. People are losing their homes, banks are staggering, and every year there are more poor people than there were last year. Not being sustainable is not an abstract concept that applies to polar bears, not being sustainable means your life and mine will not continue as it has in the past.

The task we have before us, the only one of any importance is changing our civic and rural landscapes such that society can continue to prosper in all the essential ways.

We have the knowledge to reduce the climate change threat. The problem is that humanity has never faced this kind of challenge before. It is unique. Threats to society are usually external and specific. Climate Change is a universal, non-analog threat to the existence of all species. This is entirely new and we the people of this planet don't have the public institutions, the traditions or the political cultures to respond to such a threat.

To this moment, the human response has been what any other species would do in similar circumstances. In the past, humans have protected themselves by securing their borders, by increasing their determination to aggressively attack anything that looks remotely dangerous. This is exactly what we are doing today. Humanity's instinctive, knee jerk reaction to climate change is not as different from lemmings as we would like to think. It worked for lemmings to migrate when they overpopulated the neighbourhood, so they migrate.

And so it goes for humans. Canadians are spending record amounts on the military, internal security and all border security

forces and this has certainly worked in the past. We won World War I, World War II and the Korean War reacting in these ways.

But none of these expenditures will increase the number of Refuge cities or decrease the number of refugee cities.

The good news is old fashioned Canadian values' are exactly what we need. If you asked my father, why he fought in the Second War, he would mention democracy and the vote, but it was also about his ideas of inclusiveness and fairness; that no-one should go hungry; that everyone should have reasonable shelter.

My daughter would probably express her values in terms of health care. When she took her six month old to the hospital in Ottawa and he received the vital care he needed to go on. She was one very happy young mother and she said to me, "I saw someone drive up to the hospital in a Mercedes and I saw a woman come to the hospital carrying her baby on the bus, they both received the same careful treatment. She observed how important this was both for the babies and the mothers but for all of society, because this kind of shared, equal treatment connects us in ways that unite, not

divides. These are the same values that her grandfather had and they are just fine.

There's also good news in that it is entirely within our power to create sustainable cities. The physical and institutional landscape determines everything that happens around us. Change the physical landscape and you will change your city. Stop building roads, start building electric light rail everywhere and we will reduce the carbon loading of the atmosphere significantly by both the tonnage of raw emissions. At the same time, we will retreat from consumer values and reanimate our civic values. When this happens the kinds of city governments we elect will change and so will national.

It's that simple. We need to build cities from St. John's, Nfld to Victoria around electric light rail systems instead of an arterial road system – this should be our number one urban priority. As we're doing this, we need to turn our attention to bringing our democracy into the 21st century.

To beat back climate change, we've have got to develop a public voice that says politics as usual is no longer acceptable – that urban sprawl isn't acceptable, that streetcars come before SUVs, that local economies come before transcontinental and transoceanic supply lines. If we don't – the alternative is very clear, climate change will continue dividing human habitations into Refugee Cities and Refuge Cities.

I don't want to turn my face away from a homeless person holding his hand out. I don't believe anyone does. We do it because we feel powerless to help the person with his hand out- as if we are as helpless as he or she may be. We can help that person by creating civic environments where people are not shunted into poor neighbourhoods. We can help the homeless person by building streetcar lines that will change our urban landscapes which will in turn change our values and bring us together. We can stop the privatizing of public values by changing how we live together and by democratic reform.

Democratic reform combined with building different civic landscapes can change the world. The alternative is politics as usual and watching the homeless hands grow into impoverished neighbourhoods, grow into the decaying cities, grow into declining nations.

This is all rather heavy stuff, but it doesn't come from a heavy place. It comes from what makes life worthwhile and I would like to leave you with that beginning place. A place we all share.

I can't describe better than I did in Urban Meltdown from a chapter called "Care for the Soul", Care for the City, Care for the Planet. It goes like this:

"For me the doorstep of my soul doesn't end at my fingertips. For me, the human soul is not a singular Benedictine flight to heaven, nor is the poetry of existence a solitary affaire, but connected like a string of DNA to the community, to the city, to the country and to the planet. And when those connections are broken or damaged, my own soul is diminished and the poetry of existence is reduced for all.

For me, the mundane struggles against school closures, for better public transit, for wider safer sidewalks are part of something grander. It is part of the struggle for my own soul and poetry of existence that can be found sitting on my Uncle's Cape Breton stoop, watching the sun sink behind Cheticamp Island. It can equally be found in the ordinary battles of a citizen for a better city and a safer planet.

This is what makes life grand and wonderful; sunsets, friends and purpose informed not by the accumulation of material things but by moments of pure poetry anchored in a life directed towards creating richer possibilities for all. It is what gives life meaning because for me the divine is rooted in the integrity of creation and all those who struggle for that state of mind which connect us to this ultimate mystery of creation and existence.”

Thank-you.-