

Hope – as sun sets on growth

CLIMATE CHANGE

THE GREAT DISRUPTION: How the Climate Crisis Will Transform the Global Economy. By Paul Gilding. Bloomsbury, 292pp. \$32.99.

Reviewer: **BOB DOUGLAS**

Can we afford to save civilization or would we rather keep the energy costs down while we hurtle off the cliff into collapse?

– Paul Gilding

The *Great Disruption* is a stimulating, indeed an uplifting, book by a writer who presents his arguments with blunt passion and careful attention to detail. Paul Gilding was the chief executive of Greenpeace International before working as a sustainability consultant to the chief executives of a number of the largest and most successful businesses in the world.

Gilding argues that economic growth has no future in a world that is already overstretched beyond its capacity to replenish resources. He believes we are approaching a period of massive instability, precipitated by climate change, but resulting from the combination of human population and economic growth. We are now facing limits imposed by physics, chemistry and biology, because the Earth is now full. Despite human brilliance at technological innovation, our current naive faith in economic growth as a solution to our difficulties will inevitably fail us and we will hit the wall, probably quite soon.

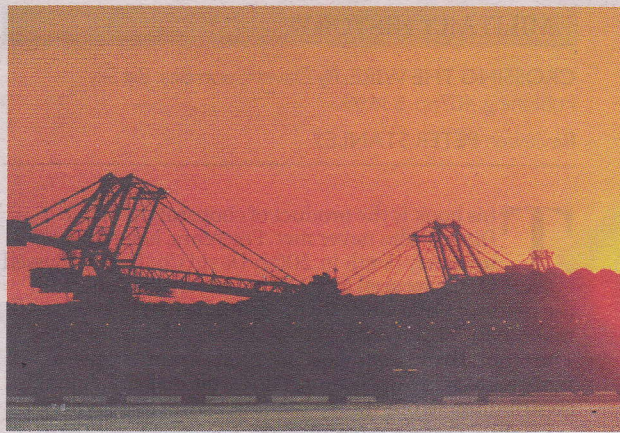
The problem is not only climate change but the massive destruction of the ecosystems on which our lives and livelihoods depend. Gilding has no doubt that we can get through the serious crises and disruption that now lie in wait for humanity. Indeed, he finds the challenge positively exhilarating. He argues that the great disruption will bring out the very best of human innovation, compassion and community spirit, although we cannot now avoid chaos and misery for millions, and perhaps billions, during the transition period.

He says that a successful outcome requires that we reinvent the human economy. When the world finally accepts the seriousness and inevitability of our predicament, we will respond by unleashing massive ingenuity and capacity to adapt. "Our species is slow but not stupid," he says. We will be forced to change from shopping and overwork to sharing and enjoying our leisure time, our communities and our relationships. Because we must, we will share the world's resources with those who are in poverty. And we will all enjoy life more. Continuation of the current consumerist culture now does little for human well-being in developed countries like Australia and has huge crippling costs.

Gilding uses the rapid transformation that occurred as the Allied Powers responded to Hitler's invasion of Poland and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour as evidence of the capacity of human societies to transform and lift themselves to new heights of capacity, communal understanding and support at stunningly short notice. In that situation, as with the one that now faces us, human societies were very slow to act, but once committed, the results were extraordinary.

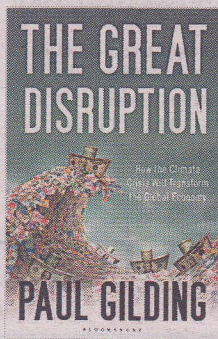
The climate crisis is only one of a series of interconnected challenges, which now face humanity as we contemplate a population of nine billion people by 2050. Food insecurity, water availability, heating of the planet and the destruction of ecosystems are all associated with our pathological addiction to economic growth. Furthermore, he says, it is economic growth that has contributed to growing inequity in the distribution of resources, even though it has also lifted millions out of poverty.

Gilding has great respect for the market and also for the role which economic growth has played in the past. But economic growth is over and the market will only serve society if it is regulated to do so. The problem is we have now passed the planet's limits to growth. We must



rethink the human strategy. Inevitably, he says, the dam of denial that it is holding up global action on anthropogenic global warming will collapse and we will act rapidly and with great ingenuity and effect. The sooner the arrival of the tipping point that will unite the world around the seriousness and mitigation of the gathering storm, the better. But while we wait for that to happen, millions of people and groups around the world are preparing the building blocks for a new stable state economy which will replace our growth addiction.

For a while, the growth addicts will continue to use the growth model to tackle climate change and fight what the author describes as "the 1 degree war". This is the requirement that we reduce the world's carbon emissions budget to one that is compatible with no more than a 1 degree rise in planetary temperature above preindustrial levels. Currently, we are heading for at least 2 degrees and possibly much more, which would be catastrophic.



When the world finally accepts the seriousness and inevitability of our predicament, we will respond by unleashing massive ingenuity and capacity to adapt

This is an optimistic book written by a clear thinker. Gilding shares with the reader his personal journey to these conclusions and the anxieties and uncertainties he has experienced along the way. He also anticipates and deals with many counter-arguments to his optimism. He says that the challenge is not only for big business and government, but especially for ordinary people everywhere. Together we must take charge of the restructuring of society and the economy in ways that serve both humanity and our precious environment.

I found little to disagree with in this important work. Perhaps that is because I have been wrestling for some years with many of the same ideas that have tantalised Gilding for much of his life. This is a book which deserves to be read by people of all ages from many walks of life and especially those in business and government. Young people concerned about tomorrow's world will find meaning and hope here.

• Bob Douglas is a retired epidemiologist. He chairs SEE-Change ACT and has been chair of Australia21 for the past 10 years.