

# It is the Business of the Future to be Dangerous

by A. H. (Drew) Wilson

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Almost fifty years ago I started to collect quotations and epigrams that took my fancy and to write them down in a book. The title of this piece was one of them. The author was noted simply as 'Whitehead' – most likely mathematician/philosopher Alfred North, rather than poet/dramatist William – but I have not been able to verify this.

Danger, of course, is not just a potential characteristic of the future. It has been and is, as I write, ever-present. It can take many forms, vary in degree and from time to time, scare some but thrill others. Indeed, there are those who try desperately to avoid it, just as there are those who deliberately seek it out. Danger can be a maturing experience, but can do harm both physically and mentally.

It can threaten life. The business of insurance is built around it. A recent development in the consideration of danger in the developed parts of the world, in particular, has been the pressure put on governments to reduce it or, better still, to eliminate it altogether. But both reduction and elimination have costs as well as benefits, and these pressures have had only limited success.

In 1972 the international Club of Rome set danger bells ringing about the future with the publication of the report *Limits to Growth*, which had been prepared for its 'Predicament of Mankind' project. Economists were

among its sternest critics because their view of how the future would come to pass was quite different. As noted in the *U.S. Congressional Record* for 20 March 1973:

***At the approach of danger there are always two voices that speak with equal power in the human soul: one very reasonably tells a man to consider the nature of the danger and the means of escaping it; the other, still more reasonable, says that it is too depressing and painful to think of the danger since it is not in man's power to foresee everything and avert the general course of events, and it is therefore better to disregard the painful till it comes, and to think about what is pleasant. In solitude a man generally listens to the first voice, but in society to the second.***

**Tolstoy**

*"Criticism of the report has come mainly from the traditional economists, from people who expect solutions to all problems of the world from the cornucopia of science and technology, and those who maintain that growth is an inbuilt characteristic of our system and that without growth, stagnation, decay and finally death will result. ....Positive comments have come primarily from environmentally-oriented groups, political and social observers, and many of the commentators in the press, as well as from members of the general public."*

But, surely, the negative comments did not mean that all economic growth or science and technology would necessarily be bad in the context of the future, that 'trading-off' as practiced by economists and experimentation as practiced by scientists would be irrelevant, that no 'technology fix' would work, or that environmentalists, the press and the public were necessarily infallible. What these comments meant was that, over 20 years ago, the Club of Rome through the Meadows report was giving fair warning that a potentially



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dangerous situation for the Planet Earth was appearing on the horizon.

Later reports published by the Club supported the original thesis. This same threat is still with us, and will continue to be so. But not everyone has been made to see it.

In the mid-1980's when I first joined CACOR, and for several years thereafter, the principal activities of the Club in which I took part were the luncheon and annual meetings, held in Ottawa. My recollection is that the luncheons were usually 'informal' and the speakers eminent and well qualified to discuss global problems and the concerns of both CACOR and the Club of Rome. A Newsletter edited by Tom de Fayer also served the needs of the National Association for further communication, information and discussion.

As was pointed out in 1991 in the Club of Rome-King/Schneider book, *The First Global Revolution*, the National Associations of COR are governed by a common Charter which lays out their functions, among which are these:

Each Association shall approach the global problems in terms of the country's own cultural values and thus contribute to the general understanding of the human condition on the planet.

It shall have the duty to disseminate locally to decision-makers, academics, industrial circles and the public at large, the reports, the findings and attitudes of the Club. It shall contribute experience, creative ideas and proposals, towards the understanding of the global problems, to the Club.

Around about the Fall of 1989 some changes were instituted in the operations of CACOR. For example, luncheon meetings became more frequent and more structured. Speakers were drawn principally from the Association's membership, demonstrating its wealth of expertise, experience and commitment. Discussions at the annual meetings remained focussed on CACOR's formal objectives, but became more action-oriented. Study groups were initiated, and their reports generated discussion among the members, as well as contributing to the examination of possible solutions to what ails our

planet. Individual members – who include economists – have contributed articles for publication in the print medium and papers for national and international conferences and have taken part in studies of world problems by other institutions. The addition of the Proceedings to the Newsletter – both now under the editorship of physicist/philosopher Rennie Whitehead – has provided a further vehicle for communication, information and discussion among CACOR's membership and beyond. The group at Guelph has made many useful contributions to broadening the awareness of the direction in which the world is heading. CACOR has attracted the attention of both the international Club and some of the other national Associations.

Now, in the Fall of 1994, it would appear that the expanded activities of our national Association have enjoyed some success – albeit with a Canadian twist, as suggested in the common Charter – in the examination of Peccei's Predicament of Mankind and the Club of Rome's World Problematique. Yet perhaps the exercise as a whole in Canada may, as I suggested in the companion issue of the Newsletter, have reached a watershed – meaning that we should look again for a moment at what we are trying to accomplish and at the possible consequences.

There are dangers for CACOR in doing anything at all in a public forum, and especially if it gets into the ox-goring business of pointing to possible solutions to global problems. CACOR is almost certain to be criticised for whatever it says, concludes, suggests and recommends. An example of what can happen was illustrated in John Hay's column in the *Ottawa Citizen* which appeared just after the King/Schneider *The First Global Revolution*, a solution-oriented book, went on sale in Canada. I know Hay to be a bright, careful, liberally-minded writer of columns and editorials who has developed views based on what he has learned and read and on impressions he has formed over his writing years. The column in question was published on 20 September 1991. He wrote:

Nobody likes a know-it-all, so the international regard for the Club of Rome remains a mystery. Maybe the members' own self-approval is contagious.



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Or maybe the Club earns respect by the quality of its unsolicited advice. The influence of its first report, *The Limits to Growth*, has hardly faltered since its publication in 1972.

Some of the warnings in *Limits* now look misdirected, but its principal, powerful insight still serves: The biosphere is a closed system, and we are all in it together.

Hay went on to say that *The First Global Revolution* was a hodge-podge of well-meant platitudes, doubtful claims and grumpy political arrogance, and could be boiled down to three main points: the world is in a heap of trouble; everything is connected to everything else; and almost nothing works well enough any more. Yet, he wrote, there can scarcely be anyone who does not already understand that all this is roughly true. Hay took the view that 'the suspiciously and unlikely "facts" that supposedly stiffen the gloomy arguments' should not always be believed. And, he said, there was no room in the authors' disapproving view for the creative hell-raising that got acid rain bills enacted and stopped tanks in the middle of Moscow.

I have referred to Hay's piece because – and in spite of what it implied – it did raise a number of encouragements for CACOR. It showed, for example, a degree of understanding that our planet and the people on it are in trouble over the longer haul, that what some people do can affect many others, and that this trouble could be very hard to fix. At the same time it exhibited elements of scepticism, and we were told to get our facts as complete as we could and to present in writing only those that are credible.

Yet things that are interrelated are often hard to analyse. Analysts tend to break a particular problem down into its components and to deal with each in isolation, or to simplify the whole by assuming that some of the parts are of no consequence. In other words, when looking into the World Problematique, we must somehow manage to examine all of its principal parts together using – in the idiom of mathematics – integration rather than differentiation. We must recognize that a problem can be analysed to death, that the logic behind the conclusions of an analysis may be impeccable, but that neither analysis nor logic necessarily provides the correct solution for it.

We have to remember, when dealing with social concepts like justice, equity and factors such as human values, attitudes and behaviour, that conventional number counting and manipulation are not very helpful. And we have to realize that dealing with global problems and their solution is something quite new in human experience.

As well, we have to know what we are talking about, and to make sure that the meanings of the terms we use are clearly and universally understood. We cannot, for example, assume that everyone accepts and applies the term 'sustainable development' as it was used in the Brundtland Report or at the Rio Conference, or as it is now being used by the Government of Canada. We have to know how quickly, or slowly, this state of affairs can reasonably be achieved in the different parts of the world. We must be sure we know what 'carrying capacity' is, how it should be assessed and applied in different countries and regions of the world, and if and how such capacities can be changed. In other words, as Canadians, we have to find out how other peoples and other jurisdictions think, define, and do their counting. But this task should be easier to do with today's, and tomorrow's, communications techniques and with so much information being collected by national and international agencies around the world. After all, we did watch the Gulf War on CNN.

Nevertheless, the solutions that the international and national Clubs of Rome are seeking to global problems are essentially political and – if applied at all – will be applied in the context of politics. Recommended solutions must therefore be communicated to, pressed upon, and accepted by political decision-makers for action. The support of a lot of people will be needed for this to happen and the relevant messages must be clear, unequivocal, and understood. The danger is that these things will not happen. The solutions will be opposed using denunciation, sarcasm and other weapons of written and spoken opposition – to say nothing of the physical side to opposition – and aggravated by the short attention span that political people give to problems likely to extend beyond their current mandates. Still, it is important to remember that some proponents of a concept, idea or course of action never really give up and, at the same time, that political people seldom lead. They follow.



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Why does CACOR have to be prepared to take the lead? The easier thing for the Association to do would be to keep its studies and discussions of global problems at the level of an intellectual exercise and to disclaim any ability to devise solutions. Yet, as the *Congressional Record* and John Hay's column have shown, both the descriptive and the prescriptive can be subjects for adverse public commentary. The easiest thing, therefore, is for there to be no public record at all of the studies and discussions. But this is not what the common Charter bids CACOR to do.

CACOR's resources for its task are obviously limited, and so is the time left before some, at least, of the global problems that concern it become critical for the planet. In terms of finding solutions to these problems, two of the three targeted studies initiated by the Association have been completed and the third, and most difficult since it deals with solutions, has begun. Its completion is not imminent. And several other questions remain to be asked. For example, how useful will CACOR's efforts be when all has been said and done? To what extent is it possible to be sanguine even now about the outcome of these efforts? To what extent will ordinary people willingly and voluntarily change their expectations, values, habits, attitudes – or do they have to be forced to do so by governments, under pressure from single-issue lobbies and the like, or by the arrival of full-blown crises? How concerned should we be about species other than humans? How urgent is it to initiate solutions? What are the priorities? In the circumstances, and faced with these questions, despondency would be understandable. But the wide-eyed optimist is not of much help either.

In any event, danger is the business of the future simply because it can never be eliminated. In spite of the best of intentions, and institutions with mandates to prevent them, wars and violent crimes keep on happening and, like

driving a car or climbing a mountain, even peacekeeping, respect for the law, and the practice of religion can be dangerous. But in some circumstances the danger can be lessened if warnings can be issued and heeded, and precautions taken. We should remember that humans can be adaptable beings. In North America, for example, many responded to the energy crises of a decade and more ago by buying and using smaller cars, and to the dangers of smoking by quitting.

CACOR is obviously dealing with two different dangers. One of them is inherent in the global problems themselves. The other is to the Association itself as its attempts to influence public and institutional policies – and people – to deal with these problems in Canada and elsewhere. There will always be strongly-held contrary opinions – and bad news messengers have been known to come to sticky ends. But therein lies the challenge – and the watershed.

From my book of quotations comes one from Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. He wrote:

*At the approach of danger there are always two voices that speak with equal power in the human soul: one very reasonably tells a man to consider the nature of the danger and the means of escaping it; the other, still more reasonable, says that it is too depressing and painful to think of the danger since it is not in man's power to foresee everything and avert the general course of events, and it is therefore better to disregard the painful till it comes, and to think about what is pleasant. In solitude a man generally listens to the first voice, but in society to the second.*

It would appear that CACOR's main task is to persuade society to think like the individual. Shall we get to work?

