



## **Stop burning diamonds**

by

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*(Mick is the design manager of CH2, the new six-star rated building for Melbourne City Council)*

Have you ever considered, as you pull the trigger on the petrol pump hose to fill your car, that you are about to burn a natural resource worth more than diamonds? Petrol is concentrated solar energy which has taken millions of years to form. We burn about 100 million years' worth of it each year. Without it you could not live in a suburb of a great city, not only because your car could not run without it but also because your food depends on the oil that is used to produce it (in the form of fertilizer, pesticides and the diesel fuel for tractors and transport). Why do politicians talk only about lowering interest rates and taxes and increasing social benefits, when they are not expressing their fear of terrorism? Haven't they noticed that the source of most of our political, social and economic problems is access to and lack of energy?

The total depletion of oil and gas supplies may be 40 years away, but the critical moment for us will be when the rate at which we find more oil, together with the rate at which we can pump it out of the ground, becomes less than the rate at which it flows into our cars, our homes, our offices, factories and cities (in the shape of heating, transport, and electricity). After the peak, which may only be six years away,

the price of fuel will go up faster and faster and higher and higher, never to return to previous levels. At this point we will soon be talking about burning diamonds.

Humanity has benefited greatly from fossil fuel consumption but it has also produced three problems: scale, distribution and efficiency. On the first score we can be sure we have been using it for some time at a far faster rate than the biosphere can absorb. On the second, we know that the 20 per cent who benefit from this energy are getting richer, at the expense of the 80 per cent remaining. On the last, we love bigger and faster cars, glass office blocks and too much food, but there is not enough energy for the planet's 6 billion people to consume at this flamboyant rate. This is the basis of our energy crisis.

The world has arrived at an energy watershed like the one at the beginning of the last Industrial Revolution, when burning wood gave way to burning coal. Changing the energy base then was a springboard for innovation, and maybe this will happen again. Using solar energy in this way could solve a wide range of the social, political and economic problems that face us and will face our children and grandchildren.

I came to Australia in 2002 from Zimbabwe, to help build CH2 and CH1 for Melbourne City Council, with a long experience of life at the leading edge of the energy crisis. This question lies beneath worries about development and economic growth, or the lack of it, in Africa. If some economies grow today, it is simply because they are taking from other economies that cannot. The final limit to growth has, in fact, already arrived. The question of energy use and distribution is therefore fundamental to issues of democracy, human rights and justice.

As I see it, Australia is at a critical turning point. If fear dominates Australia's thinking, its people will opt for protectionalism and the continuation of the way of life they are used to. This way of life entails remaining the highest consumers of fossil fuel energy per capita on this planet. Yet Australia is the greenest continent in the world, despite the lack of rain and its fragile soils. It has a powerful economic base of natural and human resources and skills. This huge, empty continent is surrounded by countries with vast populations, where their social problems obscure their need to develop an alternative, renewable energy source. The present therefore offers Australia a great opportunity: to develop an infrastructure for the new solar and biological age for itself, and as an exemplar to other, less fortunate nations. Iceland, Denmark, Germany and the UK have all embarked on that journey. This continent has more potential for utilizing renewable sources of energy per capita than any other. Why haven't your politicians noticed?

Perhaps it's time to buy a bike and to use our diamonds to make windmills?