

## Speech at the launch of *The Mystic Economist* Bay Books, Sydney, April 5th, 1994

(This speech was invited to be published because it completed the book review by Charles Birch and it gives an insight into how such books come to be written — *Editor*.)

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First let me express my sincere thanks to Charles Birch for agreeing to launch the book and to David Breakwater for agreeing to hold the launch in this book shop. I am sure most of us here find book shops almost irresistible, and for that reason often have to restrain ourselves from entering.

People with a love of ideas are indeed blessed with a life-long opportunity for pleasure. But ideas can become a prison, not only in the obvious sense that one can be trapped by a certain set of beliefs, but also in the sense of simply being attached to our ideas. We use them to bolster our egos, to give strength to our characters. People with firm ideas have contempt for mugwumps — who are, as someone said, people with their mugs on one side of the fence and their wumps on the other.

Perhaps the most difficult lesson in life is to learn to let go of our ideas. We are so full of desires and plans. We are caught in a web of attachments to things and relationships and ideas, ideas about ourselves and the world. We try to build around ourselves walls of security, wealth and prestige. We may actually achieve some of the goals we set — a well-paid job, the respect of our peers, a happy marriage, a PhD. But when we manage to reach our goals, somehow they just do not seem to satisfy us. So we set new and more ambitious goals for ourselves — more money, more prestige, more children, more degrees — only to find that they do not work either.

We are, it seems, driven by desire and we plan out our lives to satisfy our desires. But the great irony is that the more we form attachments to things, to ideas, to self-concepts, to outcomes, the more difficult it is to attain liberation. The harder we try to get the things we *think* we want, the more elusive the things we *really* want become. This is a very ancient truth, one that can be found in many of the books in this shop. The great Tibetan Buddhist master Sogyal Rinpoche has written:

“Although we have been made to believe that if we let go we will end up with

nothing, life itself reveals again and again the opposite: that letting go is the path to real freedom.” (*The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, p. 37).

That is why Nelson Mandela appears saintly to many people. After 27 years of imprisonment he let go of the bitterness and vengefulness that would continue to imprison almost everyone else subjected to the same abuse.

Modern economics stands in sharp opposition to the ancient teaching that liberation comes from surrender. Economics canonizes the urge to grasp; the substitution of *having* for being (as Erich Fromm puts it). At one level this is the grasping acquisitiveness that is so apparent in our society, reaching something of an ugly apogee in the 1980s. Economics gives sanction to this. At a deeper level economics is based on the principle of desire. In every textbook, economics is defined as the study of how best to satisfy insatiable desire. That, of course, is the theme of *The Mystic Economist*.

The battle between grasping and letting go is one we fight out daily within ourselves. The history of this book, like almost everything we do, is an instance of the battle between grasping and surrendering. The inspirational ideas for the book came to me as I sat in my office at the Bureau of Industry Economics in Canberra in 1989. Eighteen months later it was a complete manuscript, seemingly ready for publication. But as obstacle after obstacle to publication appeared, I began to accept that I had an enormous amount of ego bound up in the book and its publication. In its earlier version, the book railed against economics, but it was motivated in significant measure by my own grievances against the profession of economics and my inability to let go of those feelings.

Then my wise friend Ron Allen (who has played such an important part in the gestation and publication of the book) suggested in his gentle way that perhaps I should replace the

anger with compassion. Along with some more specific suggestions from, among others, Barbara Lepani, I wholly rewrote the manuscript over a three-week period sitting in a hotel room in Yogyakarta.

I can now see that the force of the message has not been diminished by purging the book of its anger. Indeed, the opposite is true because the way a message is transmitted can wholly determine the way it is received.

Although *The Mystic Economist* excoriates modern economics, I am not, of course, opposed to economics as such. I spend most of my time as a practising economist. I have recently returned from a visit to South Africa where I am helping some people in the democratic movement establish a new economic policy institute. Supported by the Australian Government, the National Institute for Economic Policy will be the principal source of independent economic advice to the ANC-led government after the elections on April 27th. A programme of high-quality economic advice will be crucial to the future of South Africa under the democratic government.

One of the key tasks given to the new Institute by the democratic movement is to quantify monetarily the programme of social and economic reforms that the ANC and its allies have taken to the voters. To do this, the Institute is benefiting greatly from advice provided by the Melbourne-based National Institute for Economic and Industry Research under Dr Peter Brain. The latter's economic modelling work is very much marginalized from official circles in Australia, and is almost everywhere overshadowed by the ORANI model, the most powerful applied tool of economic rationalism in Australia.

I was astounded to discover that a large and powerful parastatal organization in South Africa — one of the key institutions of white economic domination — has employed the ORANI team at Monash University to build a South African version of the model. This model is already being used by conservative forces to demonstrate that the social and economic reforms proposed by the democratic government are manifestly unsound. So we have this wonderful spectacle of the dueling models of Australia being transplanted to South Africa, with the crucial difference that the model that people such as myself favour is aligned with the ruling powers, while ORANI must fight a rear-guard action.

South Africa is, of course, in a state of extraordinary tension as powerful forces try to wreck the election. But the situation is not without its humorous side. One of the parties fighting the election is the SOCCER Party, which claims to be the only party *fit* to govern. I saw on the TV news in Johannesburg a white settler, a woman, declare: "I cannot stop *my* blacks from voting." My colleague from the ANC pointed out that this woman was, in fact, a liberal; the conservatives *would* stop "their" blacks from voting.

Two years ago I went to Kalimantan. I flew with a colleague from Jakarta to the capital of West Kalimantan, a scrofulous coastal city called Pontianak. We were travelling into the deep interior of Borneo to inspect the logging. We took a light plane inland to a small town called Nangah Pinoh on the banks of the mighty Kapuas River. The town's main street was a metre under water after heavy rain. We waited in the cluttered hardware shop drinking thick coffee and watching the children play in the brown swirl. I met a German geologist — an old Kalimantan hand — who told me about illegal logging and illegal mining. Gold panners carry big bottles of mercury along the river banks; sometimes they spill. Eventually we made our way to the river bank at Nangah Pinoh and took a speed boat 80 kilometres up-river, past Dayak villages and rickety boats, to the log landing. Logs of some species float while others sink. Machines with giant calipers rolled the logs into the water where half-naked men lashed the sinkers to the floaters with cables ready for their long journey down to the saw-mills at Pontianak. It was intolerably hot and muggy.

We travelled for hours by four-wheel drive over rough roads, veering to the left as heavily laden log trucks careered down the hills. We passed the loggers' base camp at Kilometre 54 and turned off to the research station at Kilometre 91. Located on a disused road, the research station is more or less at the remote geocentre of the huge island of Borneo. We heard orang-utangs whooping high in the trees; a black scarab beetle, the size of a child's hand, waited at the door of the room where I would sleep.

That night, after dinner, I went for a walk with my colleague. We walked for half an hour out of camp on an old logging road and turned onto a track that penetrated deep into the jungle. It was hard to tell at night, but it seemed that this area had never been logged. We turned off our torches and fell silent as we

walked, and we soon began to tread noiselessly as the magic of the night-jungle spread over us and absorbed us. A radiant full moon made the leaves glisten. We sat in the dust, captivated, as the sounds of the jungle drifted across us. In a black patch of forest I saw a light floating, an insect with luminous power. The intensity of the experience was palpable. We dared not move.

I knew then that these forests belonged to the whole world. To log them without care for the consequences was to strike at humanity. That is not to say that logging should not occur, but that when we treat the natural world recklessly we express disrespect for ourselves.

This is why the environment movement is so important. It is not just a question of insisting that we use natural resources sustainably so that future generations will not suffer. The environment movement in the West, especially when it campaigns to protect wilderness and the oceans, and to preserve species, is really about tempering our grasping nature with a respect and a reverence for

the natural world simply as it is, an agreement just to let it be, rather than to have its bounty. It was the struggle between these two fundamentally different ways of relating to the world that lay at the heart of the dispute over mining at Coronation Hill. To simply let it be was a psychological challenge that went to the core of some people's rationale for life.

So these are some of the ideas and feelings that went into the writing of *The Mystic Economist*. Although it is being launched today, the book has been selling well over the last few weeks, thanks largely to the timely intervention of Caroline Jones, and the book is about to go into its second printing. Before finishing I would like to acknowledge the contribution to the book of Marje Prior who designed the cover and persuaded me to swallow my timidity about giving the book the title it now enjoys. Finally I must express my gratitude to my sister Kate Hamilton who has been an unfailing source of encouragement throughout.

Thank you for coming this evening.

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## BOOK REVIEWS — BOOK REVIEWS

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**"Natural Enemies: The Population Biology of Predators, Parasites and Diseases" edited by Michael J. Crawley.**  
Blackwell Scientific Publications: Oxford.

Natural enemies are those species that prey upon, parasitize or infect other species to the latter's detriment. To quote the book's preface it is about death and disease. The nature of the interactions between natural enemies and their victims has stimulated much research and debate in disciplines as diverse as behavioural ecology, population biology, mathematical ecology, epidemiology, pest control, and wildlife and fisheries management. This book assembles the knowledge of thirty authors from Europe, North America and Australia into twenty-one chapters on what we do know, what we do not know and what we need to know about the biology of natural enemies (and their victims). The taxonomic coverage is impressive, from baleen whales through fleas to viruses.

The book is divided into three sections. The first is appropriately titled Background. I found this essential reading in order to understand the complex models presented in later chapters of the book. One could well base a course on species

interactions (of the exploiter-victim kind) on this 114 page section. The presentation is excellent and supported by lucid figures and tables and explanatory boxes of key concepts (as also found in the rest of the book). The section opens with Seger's discussion of the evolution of exploiter-victim relationships. Seger is the only author to explicitly include a discussion of genetics, in this case host-parasite interactions. He makes four important points: the history of research and theory is long with a seminal paper by Haldane in 1949; the junk DNA that perplexes geneticists is probably there to confer disease and parasite resistance; an understanding of evolutionary relationships beyond bacteria and viruses is hampered "... because the time scales involved are expected to be long relative to those of research grants and human lifetimes..."; and models are of two types being either simplifying or summarizing. I found that latter point particularly useful as the book is peppered with figures of inward or outward spiralling lines which I had formerly admired for their geometric elegance instead of their intended function — "... to give insight into general processes..." Harvey and Gittleman follow with a chapter on the value of the comparative method in elucidating the evolutionary consequences of