ADDRESS BY MR TOM BURKE

TO THE SHABBATON AT THE LIBERAL JEWISH SYNAGOGUE

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First of all, let me thank you for the invitation to speak to you this afternoon. This is not an every day occasion for me and I admit to being somewhat awed by it. But, having spent thirty years working to protect the environment I have learnt a great deal about what it means to have faith. So I am grateful for, and welcome, this opportunity to share with you something of my beliefs.

As an environmentalist I am, I suppose, a funny kind of secular priest. I have certainly come to know something of what priest and rabbis must know about human strengths and weaknesses. Our environment is a mirror. In it we can see reflected both the best and the worst of human behaviour. I have learnt, as I expect religious leaders must, that the central challenge to any faith is to encourage the best and discourage the worst; to reach for the hope and contain the fear; to seek for the light and avoid the dark.

At its deepest level, the environment movement, if I may call it that, is seeking those things that men and women have been seeking since the first prayer was offered to a god by a human being. As environmentalists, we start from the deepest acceptance in our hearts that we are all connected to something that is bigger and more significant than ourselves and we seek to engage what Abraham Lincoln called ‘ the better angels of our nature’ to honour that connectedness and significance.

We environmentalists have been rather less successful than the world’s religions at turning faith into deeds. So there is much to learn.

There is no shortage of faith, or of the faithful. Opinion polls throughout the world consistently find the overwhelming majority of people anxious about the state of the environment and keen for more to be done to protect it. In Britain, over five million people are members of environmental organisations. That is perhaps ten times the membership of all of the political parties combined.

Yet even the briefest look around shows that although we have made some real gains in some parts of the world in recent years, the overall picture is one in which the problems are growing far faster than the solutions. There remains something deeply fractured in the link between faith and deeds on the environment.

So I am here today to learn as much as to lecture.

The world into which I was born had a population of about two and a half billion people. The world in which I live with you today has a population of some six and a half billion. With some luck and the help of modern medicine there is a good chance that I will be alive when the eight billionth person comes into the world sometime around 2030.

The world into which I was born had six million elephants. Today, there are about six hundred thousand. There is also a very good chance that with that same luck and help from modern medicine that I will be here on the day the last elephant living in the wild dies.

There is no period in history that has experienced change on such a scale in so short a time. Events – natural or man-made – have always changed things, but the deep structural changes of the kind we are experiencing in a single lifetime, or less, today then took place at the slow tick of the passing centuries.

In my lifetime we have unlocked the secrets of the nucleus of both the atom and the cell – the two building blocks of all creation. We have acquired possibilities of which our forefathers could only dream. Indeed, when I was a child reading science fiction, many of them, including this handheld computer on which I am drafting this address, were but distant dreams. I have never forgotten the impact of the day in 1967 when I witnessed a baby being born live in Mexico on the world's first ever satellite broadcast.

In the most literal sense we are now able to remake the earth in our vision. We can transform our environment on a geological and evolutionary scale. If we do not like the place where geology has placed mountains or rivers or seas, we simply move them. That old rhetorical saw about Mohammed and the mountain no longer has any force. But I am not sure that when we humans look at our work on the seventh day we will be able to say with confidence that it was good.

It may truly be said of us that we have eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And we are most definitely out of the Garden. One of our oldest stories has become one of our most contemporary.

The story of the Garden of Eden is a story of hubris. In seeking, and acquiring, godlike powers we have also acquired godlike responsibilities. Sadly, we have failed, as yet, to acquire godlike wisdom. We are now responsible for the fate of all of creation.

Or put more prosaically, in the words Colin Powell pinched from Pottery Barn to use about Iraq, we broke it so we own it.

It is now up to us to care for creation. I want to illustrate the depth and difficulty of that task by taking a closer look at just one of the complex of environmental problems to which we must find solutions if we are to discharge that responsibility properly.

Climate change is one of the most urgent issues facing civilisation. Hardly a month goes by without some new, and alarming, evidence emerging. The latest to catch my eye was an analysis by 250 scientists from the eight nations of the Arctic Council who found that temperatures had risen by 4.4^0C and the thickness of the Arctic ice had halved in the past thirty years.

Climate change has three distinctive features as a problem.

First, its sheer scale. It is a truly global problem that directly affects every single citizen of every single nation. There are far too many of us who live in the direst poverty, who are ill or who lack education. But there are also fewer, but still, very many of us who lead lives of relatively affluent and well educated comfort. This often makes us less engaged with others than we should be.

The scale of climate change creates an entanglement of interests unprecedented in history. No opt-outs are available.

Tackling climate change is a comparable diplomatic challenge to the strategic arms control talks or the creation of the World Trade Organisation. Both of these processes took more than fifty years to arrive at their present incomplete positions. We may not have the luxury of fifty years to address climate change.

The second reason why this problem is different is that it is driven primarily by knowledge – by our understanding of an inexorable natural reality. It is the findings of the International Panel on Climate Change that have compelled governments to act on this

problem. This is a very different motivating force from the collisions of national interest or the clash of deeply held beliefs that have traditionally driven international relations.

By comparison with interests and ideologies, knowledge is a weak influence on international relations: it is more complex and less compelling; its thrust is more easily ignored or deflected. Human beings have a well developed ability to avoid what they cannot easily address.

The third reason is that with climate change there is a ticking clock. During the Cold War the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists would move the hands on a metaphorical clock closer or further away from midnight depending on the state of relations between the superpowers.

The climate clock is no metaphor. Its ticking is the growing concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Today we live in a world in which this concentration has reached 379 parts per million, up from approximately 270ppm in the pre-industrial age.

Because of the delays in the response of the climate to increasing carbon dioxide concentrations we do not know if even this level will maintain a safe climate for civilisation.

When, as we frequently did, we missed a crucial deadline in the arms or trade talks it was a setback but we could always try again to reach the same goal. Wealth increased a little later than it might otherwise have done, security was at risk for a little longer, but the goals remained available.

It is different with climate change. For all practical purposes we cannot return to the world of 270 ppm or even to the 379 ppm world that we now live in. Once we pass a certain concentration it is gone for good. The climate it created is no longer available.

Many climate analysts believe that we are already too late to avoid living in a climate shaped by a carbon dioxide concentration of anything less than 450 ppm. We have no idea whether economic development can succeed in such a climate. There is no experience in diplomatic history of having to negotiate under such relentless and implacable deadlines.

I have used climate change as an example of the dynamics and complexities of the global environmental challenges that we face as the 21st.Century begins. At this stage in the 20th Century few people foresaw the cataclysm to come although, with the benefit of hindsight, we can see there were many indicators already visible.

I could have picked any one of a number of other problems as an illustration: the accelerating pace of species loss, the speed of deforestation, the ravages of over-fishing that are transforming ocean eco-systems we little understand, the increasing area of land suffering erosion and salinisation, the extraordinary rate of urbanisation that will have half the world population living in cities by mid-century, the growing numbers of people living with water stress.

Anyone of these would be a big enough challenge on its own. Taken together, and they must be taken together because they interact, and often reinforce, each other, they pose a threat to civilisation itself. I chose climate change because of its scale but also because it makes all of the other problems worse.

I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that we might have brought civilisation into the 21st Century in reasonably good shape but we will not get it out of this Century in such good shape unless we learn to care much better for creation.

Caring better for creation means making the transition to sustainable development. I know of no other expression, with the possible exception of democracy, that can simultaneously induce both definitional constipation and definitional diarrhoea.

The constipation means that no-one wants to do anything until they have agreed a definition of what sustainable development means. The diarrhoea means that there are so many different definitions of what it might mean that no-one can agree on anything. And when someone wants to do nothing all they have to do is ask for another definition.

I prefer to stick with the original definition from the Brundtland Commission that defines sustainable development as development which meets the needs of today without undermining the ability of future generations to meet their needs.

This is not something human beings have ever been very good at as the bare and degraded lands around the Mediterranean show. And that was the cradle of civilisation. But when we were destroying that cradle there were still other places to go to. Now there is nowhere else. We learn or we lose.

The challenge of sustainable development, if large and difficult, is also fairly straightforward to describe. At its root it amounts to delivering rising real incomes to eight billion or so people without undermining the ecological foundations of the economy.

There are essentially six elements in those foundations. Croplands, rangelands, forestlands, freshwaters, oceans and the atmosphere. We too easily forget these days that they supply all of the goods and services in our economy that are not supplied by fossil fuels and non-fossil minerals. Decline the productivity of that resource base and you eventually decline the productivity of the economy.

It is worth setting this challenge in its historical context. From about the middle of the 18th Century there was a great debate in Europe about how to make the economy grow. Those of you with a memory for sixties song will recall that Bob Dylan had an answer to the same question. Their answer was to free up individuals to pursue their own self-interest and that would add up to the interest of all.

They were not wrong about making the economy grow. It did. Very rapidly. But that growth was accompanied by such disruptive social change that by the middle of the 19th Century Karl Marx had already written the Communist Manifesto. What followed was another long debate about how to maintain the social conditions for economic growth.

The answer, arrived at slowly and painfully over the next hundred years, was that you had to invest some of the proceeds of economic growth in maintaining those conditions or the economy would not grow. Today we call that welfare, the investment in health, education and social security that maintains the social conditions for economic growth.

Arguably, it was the historical forces unleashed by our failure to address this challenge adequately in the 19th Century that were

one of the major reasons we spent most of the 20th Century deciding on whether fascism or communism was our preferred form of totalitarianism.

By the time I was born the argument about welfare was over. We will continue to argue about how much welfare and how it should be created and who should pay for it but no-one argues that we do not need to add welfare to growth – not even George Bush who is clearly doing his best to reverse this, and other, tides of history is actually arguing for it. He is just doing it.

It is when we add welfare to growth that we start to talk about economic development. And it is just when maintaining and enhancing economic development becomes the dominant issue in public policy that world population begins its extraordinary post-war surge.

The modern environmental movement is born out of the recognition that if you do not maintain the environmental conditions for development you will not be able to continue developing, just as if we had not learnt how to maintain the social conditions for growth our economies would not have gone on growing.

It is this recognition that give the substantive meaning to the phrase sustainable development. It simply means economic development in which some of the proceeds of development must be invested in maintaining the environmental conditions for that development. And that is why learning to care for creation is something we must do if we are to continue to thrive now that we are out of the Garden.

I do not believe that we are yet fundamentally short of the resources, capital and technology to deliver those rising real incomes to eight billion people without collapsing the ecological foundations of the economy. I do believe that we have not yet invested anything like enough, financially, institutionally and politically, to put those resources, capital and technology together in ways that are sustainable.

In a modern metaphor, we are continually investing more in ever more sophisticated applications for the resources of our planet, but we are investing next to nothing in upgrading the operating system – that is the system of institutions by which we order our choices.

When the software applications in a computer are too demanding for its operating system that computer crashes.

The problem with the planet is that there is no re-boot mechanism. If we exceed the ability of the environment to support civilisation, it will crash - probably not with a bang, but with a very long drawn out and ugly whimper.

The task I leave you with this afternoon is to explore what we each can do to help make the transition to sustainable development. The world we get is ultimately the one we choose. We do have free will and our destiny is not foreordained. Harnessing that free will to the task of caring for creation is a common goal for religion and environmentalism. I applaud your imagination and responsibility in bringing those streams of experience together today and wish you well in your discussion which I hope I have been able to demonstrate, are far more important than you might have thought.