PLANNING ASSESSMENT COMMISSION PUBLIC HEARING IN NEWCASTLE, MONDAY 13 JULY 2015.
REGARDING PROPOSED T4 COAL LOADER (PROJECT REF. 10 215 / D364/15) –
PRESENTATION IN OPPOSITION TO THE PROJECT BY REV. GREGG HEATHCOTE ON BEHALF OF
‘AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS RESPONSE TO CLIMATE CHANGE’

When I previously addressed a public PAC hearing into this T4 proposal in August of last year I did so as an individual Newcastle resident; a Buddhist priest; and a chaplain who tenders pastoral care to young people who are intensely anxious about the current global climate emergency, in suspense as to whether their future prospects will be ultimately protected or abused by decision-makers of today.

On this occasion I have been asked to additionally speak on behalf of the multifaith organization Australian Religious Response to Climate Change, or ‘ARRCC’. A central mission of ARRCC is “to advocate, from a faith perspective, for public policies which contribute to climate justice” (1). ARRCC brings together people from right across the religious spectrum of modern Australia to argue in good faith FOR good faith in service of a great common good as we necessarily together respond to the thoroughgoing challenge climate change poses.

In unison with a mounting chorus of multifaith advocacy worldwide ARRCC asserts that “a moral collective response to climate change will involve the urgent scaling up of energy generation from renewable sources and the phasing out of coal, both as an export and a fuel source” (2). However the balanced perspective and decisive action that are imperative to effect this goal have been lacking, as yet again evinced in this T4 proposal set to further inflame our life-threatening fever.

In 2009 a pan-Buddhist statement was composed, titled ‘The Time to Act is Now: A Buddhist Declaration on Climate Change’, in preparation for the Copenhagen Climate Conference later that year. The statement was symbolically signed first by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and has since been co-signed by hundreds of Buddhist leaders and organizations around the world, and thousands of individual Buddhists from all dharma traditions. I now quote pertinently from that Declaration:

“Today we live in a time of great crisis, confronted by the gravest challenge that humanity has ever faced: the ecological consequences of our own collective karma. The scientific consensus is overwhelming: human activity is triggering environmental breakdown on a planetary scale. ...

Eminent biologists and U.N. reports concur that “business-as-usual” will drive half of all species on Earth to extinction within this century. Collectively, we are violating the first precept—“do not harm living beings”—on the largest possible scale. And we cannot foresee the biological consequences for human life when so many species that invisibly contribute to our own well-being vanish from the planet.

Many scientists have concluded that the survival of human civilization is at stake. We have reached a critical juncture in our biological and social evolution. ...
Individually, we must adopt behaviors that increase everyday ecological awareness and reduce our “carbon footprint”. ...

[However...] These personal activities will not by themselves be sufficient to avert future calamity. We must also make institutional changes, both technological and economic. We must “de-carbonize” our energy systems as quickly as feasible by replacing fossil fuels with renewable energy sources that are limitless, benign and harmonious with nature. We especially need to halt the construction of new coal plants, since coal is by far the most polluting and most dangerous source of atmospheric carbon. Wisely utilized, wind power, solar power, tidal power, and geothermal power can provide all the electricity that we require without damaging the biosphere. ...

If political leaders are unable to recognize the urgency of our global crisis, or unwilling to put the long-term good of humankind above the short-term benefit of fossil-fuel corporations, we may need to challenge them with sustained campaigns of citizen action. ...

We have a brief window of opportunity to take action, to preserve humanity from imminent disaster and to assist the survival of the many diverse and beautiful forms of life on Earth. Future generations, and the other species that share the biosphere with us, have no voice to ask for our compassion, wisdom, and leadership. We must listen to their silence. We must be their voice, too, and act on their behalf. “(3)

The T4 coal loader proposed is a project expressly designed to drive on, and indeed greatly expand, perniciously fossil-fuelled ‘business-as-usual’. It gives no due recognition to the scale or urgency of the climate emergency we all face. It takes no due responsibility for global climate impacts that will naturally also become local climate change impacts in due course. Instead there is a Pontius-Pilate-like washing hands of the coal exported, coal solely supplied for overseas customers to burn, and our common home burning with it.

‘On Care For Our Common Home’ is the telling sub-title of ‘Laudato Si’, the encyclical recently released by Pope Francis to strongly speak out in aid of our ecologically imperilled Earth. It has served to rally concerned Catholics and non-Catholics alike. The Holy Father sounds the dire warning that:

“Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth. The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet’s capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes, such as those which even now periodically occur in different areas of the world. The effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, here and now. We need to reflect on our accountability before those who will have to endure the dire consequences. “(4)
The Pope is most certainly right that “we need to reflect on our accountability”. A planning assessment process of integrity and transparency should reflect truly the accountability of projects it weighs in the balance. In the scheduled conditions of approval for this T4 project however, under the heading “Greenhouse Gas”, it is an absurdly distorting mirror held up. (5) Mandated for T4 there is an Energy Efficiency Plan aiming to “minimise energy use and greenhouse gas emissions attributable to the Project”, possibly including the use of renewable energy to power equipment. To employ renewable energy in the supposed more carbon-neutral operation of a coal loader is a bureaucratic irony worthy of a ‘Yes Minister’ episode! A ‘carbon-loader’ CANNOT be carbon-neutral by any stretch of the imagination. Nor can carbon-accountability be exported along with the coal. The attempt to shift responsibility and charge the ecological cost to the end-user’s account is entirely unethical and unworthy. The attributable price of this project and its black ops will be paid by all, indefinitely.

Pope Francis is therefore ‘right on the money’ when he writes in his encyclical that:

“Many of those who possess more resources and economic or political power seem mostly to be concerned with masking the problems or concealing their symptoms ... However, many of these symptoms indicate that such effects will continue to worsen if we continue with current models of production and consumption. There is an urgent need to develop policies so that, in the next few years, the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases can be drastically reduced, for example, substituting for fossil fuels and developing sources of renewable energy.” (6)

“... economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment. Here we see how environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked. Many people will deny doing anything wrong because distractions constantly dull our consciousness of just how limited and finite our world really is. As a result, “whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenceless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule.” “ (7)

Pope Francis readily concurs with the imperative need to reduce emissions overall, saying:

“We know that technology based on the use of highly polluting fossil fuels – especially coal, but also oil and, to a lesser degree, gas – needs to be progressively replaced without delay.” (8)

But deeply necessary confidence in the fitness of our institutions and processes to fairly and appropriately act upon this imperative cries out for justification. Trust must be established to build upon. Francis puts it aptly and equitably thus:
"Honesty and truth are needed in scientific and political discussions; these should not be limited to the issue of whether or not a particular project is permitted by law." (9)

"With regard to climate change, the advances have been regrettably few. Reducing greenhouse gases requires honesty, courage and responsibility, above all on the part of those countries which are more powerful and pollute the most." (10)

"We must continue to be aware that, regarding climate change, there are differentiated responsibilities. As the United States bishops have said, greater attention must be given to "the needs of the poor, the weak and the vulnerable, in a debate often dominated by more powerful interests". We need to strengthen the conviction that we are one single human family. There are no frontiers or barriers, political or social, behind which we can hide, still less is there room for the globalization of indifference." (11)

Indifference certainly is a curse, and may yet prove fatal. What remains to us all then in these troubled days is the decision and the determination to make the wholesome difference we can.


(3) Declaration available in full at www.ecobuddhism.org/bcp/all_content/buddhist_declaration.


(5) NSW Planning Assessment Commission Project Approval for Application 10_0215, Port Waratah Coal Services Terminal 4 Project, Schedule B.

(6) Paragraph 26, ibid.

(7) Paragraph 56, ibid.

(8) Paragraph 165, ibid.

(9) Paragraph 183, ibid.

(10) Paragraph 169, ibid.

(11) Paragraph 52, ibid.