

The Earl of Portland's Maiden Speech to the House of Lords.

My lords, this is not only my maiden speech, it is effectively the first of my life and I don't want it merely to add to the five billion words generated in connection with Rio, which resulted in nothing of significance happening. So at the end of the next thousand words, I shall ask your Lordships if we can make something happened here, in this House, and I hope the House will forgive a beginner's temerity.

Paragraph 136 of the Report calls for 'substantial changes in attitude', and it is exactly that to which I will be returning in an attempt to suggest to the house the unique opportunity which its members have in this respect.

Our attitudes to anything depends upon how we perceive it and it is precisely our perception of our environmental predicament that is so confused that it inhibits response. I would therefore like to suggest a clearer perspective and welcome the charming contention today from Lord Mather.

We know that if civilisation and population are allowed to continue unmodified on their present expansionist courses they will cause an ecological catastrophe which will destroy that civilisation and most of our descendants. As yet we do nothing. Why is this? It is a very extraordinary situation. We know what to do but can't yet figure out any way of doing it. Our entire way of life makes it impossible to get to grips with that. So how should we perceive our unprecedented predicament?

Humanity, in common with all life, obeys a survival instinct. Everything we do is motivated by that instinct. We invented the stone axe and then civilisation to pursue the best interests of ourselves and our progeny. And it worked. It worked so well that it is upsetting the balance of nature, upon which everything depends for survival. Thus, civilisation doesn't any longer serve our best interests. It threatens them. And yet we are conditioned to perceive that civilisation as normality. To have to perceive normality as wrong because it threatens our survival is what makes it so difficult for us to think how to respond to the present situation. So all we do is try to titivate our deadly civilisation, hoping to keep it going more or less as it is.

This is not, strictly speaking, a political issue. Since it threatens us and the civilisation we have evolved, it is an evolutionary issue - an unprecedented issue - the crux criticorum of civilisation.

So, how do we face up to it? We know that if we continue to put our best interests in front of those of our environment we will wreck that environment and kill most of our descendants. If, however, we choose to put the needs of that environment just a bit in front of our own, not only will it survive, and therefore us too, but we will also have established a new basis for evaluating our way of life - a new basis for thinking out how to do the things that we know have to be done. We will have started to develop new aims, new values and a new normality. Because for the first time, we will have started to use our minds to choose to evolve on purpose. Hitherto we have only used our brains to follow the instincts we share with the rest of life to survive as comfortably as possible.

Now the decision to act like this cannot be imposed. For one thing, pollution is caused by all of us - individually and collectively - and it only the unique, problem solving propensity of the human mind, working individually and collectively, that is going to figure out how to evolve on purpose by putting the needs of the environment a bit in front of our own so that it survives and therefore us too.

But this propensity needs a catalyst - an inspiration. People are anxious and afraid. Particularly the young. They want to see that someone is taking the matter seriously - doing something about it. They want a lead, they want hope. It is a unique situation. And this House is a unique institution. I don't need to labour its experience, expertise nor most importantly, its probity and its influence.

At the moment, my Lords, it wears many hats. We put on our green hats and address ourselves to environmental problems. Then we take them off and go back to organising our old, unsustainable civilisation. For example, on November 4th, for five hours, this house discussed a sustainable economy without once considering whether it could be sustained by the environment. On November 11th, the chancellor spoke about growth as being the goal. He ignored the work done by modern people on limits to growth as being the only route to salvation.

The plea to which I have been leading, my Lords, therefore is this: could this House keep its green hat always on? Could your Lordships individually look at every piece of business that comes before them to see if there could possibly be a practicable and workable way of doing it that puts the interests of our habitat just a little bit more nearly in front of our own and to acknowledge that that was what they were doing? The change of attitude mentioned in paragraph 136 of the Report would have begun here. The House, being self-regulating, could even remind its Members to keep their green hats always on saying "Attitude, attitude", so that the gravest responsibility ever faced by any Parliament on behalf of humanity could be kept continually in the forefront of the mind.

But finally, my lords, the most important thing is that with this change of attitude, a lead would be given and would be seen to have been given. It will be seen that our predicament was being taken seriously - that something unprecedented was being done and being done here. It would help people to accept that civilisation no longer serves the best interests of our evolution but threatens it. It would influence other decision-making assemblies. It would provide a catalyst to precipitate, out of public anxiety, a unique problem solving capacity to evolve a way of doing what we know must be done, to evolve the acceptance of the fact that unless we choose to evolve on purpose, catastrophe awaits.

My lords, there is only one thing that we cannot do, either here or anywhere else in the world. We cannot look our grandchildren in the eye and say, "I'm alright Jack, I'll be dead."