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## THE CLUB OF ROME THE LUNAR SOCIETY

"Lunatics" were active at the beginning of the British industrial revolution two centuries ago. Travel at night was difficult and dangerous. A group of people who were at the centre of the industrial revolution (such as Wedgwood the potter, James Watt creator of the steam engine, and Priestley the discoverer of oxygen) dined together each month on the night of the full moon - when there was some natural light for the journey - and discussed the promises and problems offered by contemporary developments in science and industry.

The poet William Blake called them "lunatics" as a play on words both as to the size of the challenge which they had undertaken and the night of their meeting.

The group had no political power or ambitions. Their different professions enabled them to see the interconnections between what was happening around them and the potential for changing the nature of society. They encouraged public debate on the changes taking place.

The late Alexander King, one of the founders of The Club of Rome, liked to refer back to the Lunar Society of Birmingham as a precedent for The Club of Rome.

Like the Lunar Society, The Club began in an informal way. Aurelio Peccei was an Italian businessperson. He had helped build up the Fiat motor car company before World War II and during the war he was a member of the Resistance against the Fascists. The Americans appointed him back to help run the company after the war. He went on to oversee Fiat's activities in Latin America. As a successful businessperson in Fiat and later Olivetti, he believed that business had a social responsibility to help the community.

In 1967, Peccei gave a speech in Latin America on the dramatic changes taking place in the world, especially relating to science and technology. The speech attracted considerable attention and was widely distributed.

Alexander King, who previously had not known Peccei, received a copy of the speech. King was a British scientist, who had been a scientific adviser to the British Government, and who was then at the Paris-based Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (originally created in the late 1940s to distribute US Marshall Aid money to help rebuild Europe). King had arrived at similar concerns and so was anxious to meet Peccei to see how these ideas could be followed up.

## ✓ THE CLUB OF ROME

The Club of Rome has contributed so much to the change in thinking that has taken place in the last four or so decades that it is worth recalling the atmosphere in which The Club started.

This was a period of overwhelming optimism. The 1950s and 1960s were a period of immense economic growth in the western world. There was a very low rate of unemployment and a general belief in the western world that another Depression of the 1930s-type could be avoided thanks to government intervention in the economy. Additionally, it was assumed that there was a standard formula for economic growth that could apply throughout the Third World.

There was very little attention to the environmental consequences of economic growth. Indeed, both capitalists and communists were convinced that there could not be much of an environmental crisis. For capitalists, the market could solve any environmental problem (for example, if resources were used too rapidly then, prices would go up and usage would be forced down). The Communists meanwhile had been assured by Marx that technology could solve all problems. Both regarded criticism of their respective systems as a form of lunacy.

Peccei and King were not so confident about either the market or technology. The Club was established as a way of looking at the larger questions confronting global society. The Club's worldview was based on three characteristics:

- . To adopt a global perspective in examining issues and situations, with the awareness that the increasing interdependence of countries, the emergence of world-wide problems and the future needs of all people posed predicaments beyond the capacity of individual countries to solve.
- . To think holistically and to seek a deeper understanding of interactions within the tangle of contemporary problems - political, social, economic, technological, environmental, psychological and cultural - for which The Club coined the phrase "the world problematique".
- . To focus studies on issues, whether of promise or difficulty, in a longer term perspective than is possible for politicians preoccupied with a short-term desire to stay in power.

Like the Lunar Society, The Club is a club. It is informal - indeed, the first "president" (Peccei) was never elected as such to that position; he just evolved into it. The membership is kept small (no more than 100 people from about 52 countries) and is by invitation only. It is broadly based, so as to provide a variety of perspectives. The membership includes scientists, economists, businesspeople, international civil servants, heads of state/ government, and Nobel laureates.

Its finances come from contributions from members, charitable foundations, sponsorship and government grants. It has only a very small secretariat.

## ✓ THE CLUB'S IMPACT

How, then, has such a small group of people been able to generate so much publicity? The most obvious answer is that The Club tapped into a latent concern. Life in the late 1960s seemed - at one level - to be going so well. But deep in their bones, many people had doubts about whether such an extravagant lifestyle could continue indefinitely.

The Club spoke openly about what was on the hearts of many people. Its first major project was the commissioning of a group of computer experts in the United States to examine what would happen if the earth continued to consume such a high amount of resources.

Limits to Growth (first edition in 1972) has been described as one of the 20th century's most influential books. It sold nine million copies in 29 languages. The book was a warning. It did not predict what would happen - it simply warned that if the consumption patterns and population growth continued at their same high rate, the earth would strike its limits within a century. This was not inevitable. People could change their policies - and the sooner the better.

The book tapped into the latent concerns of many people. But it also ran foul of the prevailing dominant capitalist and communist views, with their respective faiths in the market and technology. They said the book was alarmist; The Club was branded as pessimistic and a threat to capitalism (or communism). All this criticism helped the book's sales!

Conservative Christian groups have been particularly critical of The Club. The Club has a sinister reputation among such groups but I have not been able to get precise details of their concerns. Presumably their dislike of The Club is due to its lack of a total endorsement of capitalism - which such Christians seem to view as being ordained by God and therefore above criticism. (Since such Christians are usually poorly read, not least in theology and church history, they are often unaware of the criticism that capitalism has acquired from many Christians over the centuries!)

Additionally, some conservative Protestants have been worried about the "Rome" in the title, with the implication that The Club is a Catholic plot. The Club was based in Rome because that was where Peccei had his office. After his death in March 1984, King took over as President, and the office was transferred to Paris, where King lived. The position of Secretary-General was established in 1985 and it was held for many years by a former French diplomat and businessperson Bertrand Schneider

Finally, there is the temptation to shoot the messenger if you do not like the message. People - of all religious views and none - simply did not want to be confronted by the challenges identified by The Club. This head-in-the-sand response is not, of course, an adequate way of addressing the problem of global change.

## ✓ THE CLUB'S CONTINUING WORK

The Club has continued to commission reports. The Club itself is a clearing house of ideas and so does not issue policy statements. It encourages an exchange of views.

Among reports commissioned by The Club have been ones on international economics, education, the micro-electronics revolution, the future of the oceans, and the future of Africa.

The first report by The Club itself was The First Global Revolution (1991), which drew together many of the strands in earlier reports. It argued that the globe was undergoing its first simultaneous revolution. This is different from the Industrial Revolution, which began in Britain and then gradually moved around the world; people had more time to adjust to its implications. This time, technological change takes place suddenly and simultaneously.

People feel overwhelmed by the change. This makes The Club's works all the more important and yet all the more difficult. There is a tendency for people to be cocooned in a culture of contentment. They do not want to hear about the world's problems.

They may want to leave the world alone - but the world will not leave them alone. For example, the 1982 report to The Club Micro-electronics and Society: For Better and for Worse warned about the risk of increased unemployment arising from the introduction of micro-electronics (such as computers). That warning went unheeded, and now voters are angry about the high level of unemployment and the way that machines are replacing jobs.

Additionally, The Club has a major annual conference, often hosted by a government. The Club also holds other conferences on specific topics. I find these activities an excellent way of keeping myself up to date on what is happening around the world. They provide me with considerable material for my writing, broadcasting and teaching.

## ✓ THE AUSTRALIAN CLUB OF ROME

The Australian Club of Rome (ACOR) is one of the oldest national clubs. It was formed in 1973 at the instigation of West Australian businessperson the late John Stokes (the 87th member of The Club of Rome).

ACOR arranged the 1974 Australian launching of Limits to Growth. Aurelio Peccei, Alexander King and John Stokes were among the people involved in the launching. It was one of the most publicized book launchings in Australia that year. The book hit the market when so many Australians were developing worries about the environment and so this book helped them to focus their ideas.

ACOR has four main objectives. First, to help Australians of all viewpoints and all walks of life to become better informed about the interlinkage of complex global problems and the role and responsibility of Australia in these problems.

Second, to stimulate discussion of creative policy alternatives for the future as a first step towards appropriate public decisions in Australia.

Third, to provide a network of information, support and encouragement for members and others in Australia who share similar concerns and interests.

Finally, to encourage Australian participation in research undertaken by The Club of Rome and to encourage the initiation of Australian research in areas in which we have a particular contribution to make. Additionally, ACOR members have been well-connected with other organizations and so The Club's ideas have flowed through these people into those organizations. ACOR is now looking at the opportunities for regional co-operation among Club of Rome groups in the Asia/ Pacific area.

ACOR has also benefited from the prestige that The Club itself enjoys. The Club is well known to the Australian mass media and so it is possible to get Australian coverage of The Club's conferences and books.

For example, the Australian launching of The First Global Revolution was very easy to organize because so many journalists were already familiar with The Club of Rome. The launch was done by Australia's best known popularizer of scientific matters, Robin Williams (Head of the Science Unit at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation). He was happy to undertake the task both because he was familiar with the Club and because he was present for the launching of Limits to Growth two decades earlier.

To conclude, anyone wishing to have a quiet life, made a mistake being born in the 20th century; the 21st century is going to be even dramatic. The world is undergoing the biggest change since the Industrial Revolution began two centuries ago. And the pace of change is not slowing down. The Club of Rome performs a useful - if controversial - service of examining present problems and possible future trends, to try to understand what is happening, and then to encourage people to take action to build a saner and more sustainable world.

Keith Suter