

DOESN'T HE KNOW THAT THERE'S A WAR ON?

A Reply to Brian Turner

'Doesn't he know that there's a war on?' This was a common saying in Britain during World War II. It was directed at those who displayed an undue concern for their own petty interests at the expense of the war effort. There were more important things at stake than any one person's comfort or convenience - the survival of Britain as a nation, the survival of many Britons as individuals and perhaps the survival of liberal democracy itself.

Well there is the moral equivalent of a war on now, and the stakes are a lot higher. I don't mean the so-called 'War on Terror' which is a comparatively trivial affair. I mean the war against the consequence of our own actions, the war against Global Warming. The climate scientists are nearly unanimous. If we keep on pumping carbon dioxide into the atmosphere at the current rate, then the global average temperature is likely to rise between 2° and 5° centigrade. The consequences will be catastrophic. 'Extreme' weather events will become more common. When the air is warmer it can hold more water vapour before it precipitates. That's why it rains so hard in the tropics; that's probably why it has been raining so hard in the North Island recently; and that's why it will be raining so hard on the rest of us before too long. As the ice in Greenland and Antarctica melts, sea-levels will rise. Coastal plains will drown, great cities such as London, Amsterdam and New York will be submerged and whole nations will sink beneath the waves. Countries that are mostly above the new waterline such as New Zealand can expect a huge influx of climate refugees. The oceans themselves will become increasingly barren both because sea-life tends to prefer colder waters and because the seas will become more acidic. Tussock will come a poor second to the urgent need to raise food crops. To say that all this will be bad news for the environment would be like saying that Richard III was a little strict with the princes in the Tower or that Te Rauparaha did not always display a scrupulous regard for human rights. We can kiss goodbye to the wetlands (which will become a lot more wet) and the braided rivers (which will join the sea a lot earlier than they did before). We can kiss goodbye to many of the plants and animals that used to flourish on the coasts. We are already

experiencing a mass extinction of species and if Global Warming really kicks in, it is going to get a lot more massive.

But that is not the worst of it. If we get high-end Global Warming - an average increase of 5° worldwide - then some of the most populous countries on earth will be reduced to scrub and semi-desert. That is, they will become un-farmable. No farms, no food. Thus *billions* of people might die and the ancient civilizations of India and China might be extinguished. Even low-end global warming (which is probably unavoidable) would be pretty bad. (There is a study which suggests that 2°C rise across India would result in a 25% decline in agricultural productivity.) World War II was the most destructive war in history and it killed about 60 million people. Well, on the worst case scenario we would have a casualty rate at least thirty times that of World War II. By the time the going gets really tough, India and China will be the most powerful as well as the most populous nations on Earth. The USA, which is mighty now and will still be mighty then, will also suffer a catastrophic decline in agricultural fertility. I don't think it very likely that these nations will go gently into the good night of mass-starvation. And as they rage against the dying of the light things will get really nasty. As belts begin to tighten, they will use their military might to secure the agricultural resources needed to sustain their enormous populations. There will be wars and rumours of wars with nuclear war a very real possibility. In his more ambitious moments Brian Turner no doubt dreams that his poems will be read by future generations. Well, if we keep on emitting carbon dioxide at our present rate, there is a serious chance - a small one perhaps but a real one nonetheless - that in eighty to ninety years time, there will be nobody left to read them, either because there will be no human beings at all or because our civilization will be in ruins.

All this is prefaced by a big 'if'. IF we keep on emitting CO₂ at the present rate, dire consequences are likely to ensue. But we can still have an advanced technological civilization *without* poisoning the planet given two provisos: 1) that we run our society in a less energy-wasteful way and 2) that we make the switch away from fossil fuels (oil and coal) to sources of energy which don't pollute the planet with carbon dioxide. Energy efficiency means insulation. It

means getting out of our cars and onto our bikes. It may mean giving up the internal combustion engine at least as currently configured. But even if we are more efficient, even if we run our society in powered-down mode, we will still need power. (At least we will need it if we want such things fridges, computers, electric light and central heating, conveniences of life which even Brian Turner does not disdain.) Micro-power is part of the answer (the little wind turbine on the roof, the solar panel in the ceiling). But micro-power will not be enough, especially as we will probably be using electricity to do many of the things that are currently done with oil and the internal combustion engine. For the world's oil is nearly half gone and the price of oil is likely to rise steeply once the world wakes up to the fact. There will probably be a big energy shortfall, and there is a real risk that we will solve the problem in the worst possible way by substituting coal for oil. That is why we need to start investing NOW in solar power, wave-power, tidal power - and wind power. Which brings me back to Brian Turner.

Mr Turner's article contains two baseless slurs: 1) that my fondness for wind-farms is based on a mindless cult of progress and development; and 2) that when it comes to energy, I don't 'much care where it comes from or how it is produced'. So far from hoping for 'progress' (whatever that may mean), I think we will be running hard for the next fifty years to avoid a global environmental catastrophe. And it is BECAUSE I care passionately about 'where the power comes from and how it is produced' that I am in favour of the wind-farm. I don't want us to produce power by belching out CO₂ and poisoning the planet. (My use of the phrase 'non-polluting' should have given Mr Turner a clue here.) He asks me how I know that a wind farm is needed. Apart from the general arguments advanced above, I know that one is needed because Trustpower wants to build one. Trustpower is a for-profit organization that lives by selling electricity. It wouldn't build a wind farm if it did not think that it could sell the power. Thus, on the assumption that the Trustpower executives are reasonably competent, we can conclude that there will be a demand for the electricity that it is intended to supply. This is important when we consider what is likely to happen if the wind farm does NOT go ahead. In the short term at least people won't solve their problems by

powering down or installing solar panels. They will make up the power deficit by burning coal.

What does Brian Turner have to set against all this? Stripped of its folksy rhetoric his argument is this. 'Our rivers are dammed and that is bad. There are less fish in the sea and that is bad. So we should not build a wind farm on the Lammermoors.' This not so much an argument as an attempt to smear the wind farm with guilt by free association. Clearly Mr Turner should not give up his day job as a poet for a new career as a logician. But perhaps there is method in his meandering list of damaged habitats. Perhaps it is designed to obscure the point that the wind farm will NOT do serious damage to the environment. It will not obliterate the tussock even in its immediate vicinity - it will simply *spoil the view*. There are some people who like the look of wind farms but I am not one of them. So I agree with Mr Turner that from an aesthetic point of view the wind farm would be a Bad Thing. But that is not a good enough reason for acquiescing in the real-world alternative, which is that we continue to do our bit for Global Warming by burning coal for power.

Mr Turner claims that he is not against wind farms in general, just this wind farm in particular. In theory that may be true but not in practice. For if this wind farm is to be vetoed partly because it will do some damage to a remote stretch of upland country (which truth to tell is not very different from the many other stretches of upland country) but mainly because it will spoil the view, then there is no wind farm that will survive the consultation process. We can't have wind farms in the uplands because they will spoil the view and tear up the tussock. We can't have wind farms in the lowlands because they will spoil the view and interfere with agriculture. We can't have wind farms in the city because they will spoil the view and make too much noise. And we can't have them in the sea because they will spoil the view and ... well, I don't know what. But I am sure some coastal nimby as selfish as Brian Turner and Richard Reeve will be able to think of something. Perhaps they will frighten the fishes.

Mr Turner suggests that I am more concerned with narrow human interests than the good of the environment. If he wants to see someone of whom this is

genuinely true, then I suggest he takes a long hard look at the man in the mirror. For he would rather that we continue burning coal for power thus contributing our mite to a global ecological catastrophe than that his eyes should be offended by the ugly sight of wind turbines in the uplands. Doesn't he know that there is war on? Apparently not.