

An interview with: Tim Flannery

By Philippa Chandler

Dr Tim Flannery is one of Australia's best-known scientists and environmental activists.

He is renowned for his work on population levels and carbon emissions, and was nominated for Australian of the Year in 2007.

Tim was interviewed as part of the "Visions & Pathways 2040" project, about the future of Australian cities.

How does your work relate to the future of Australian cities?

Tim Flannery (TF): It's providing people with the basic information that they require to make sensible decisions about their future, about the carbon problem, the climate problem and biodiversity.

It's now 2040 and we're living in a radically low carbon and resilient city in Australia. What does it look and feel like?

TF: I'd like cities to be on the appropriate scale. The question of scale is a really difficult one. Why do cities continue to grow? What are the forces that see them continue growing beyond what is in many areas and optimum threshold?

Secondly, to be rich in nature. How do we create cities that are rich in nature? Nature is pretty tenacious, and natural organisms are evolving and changing all the time and are really invading our cities, often after absences of a century or more, but how do we hasten that process and give it some stability and make sure that we get a rich, natural environment that we can live in, that's right there with us?

How do we deal with the sources of pollution? How do we deal with stormwater run-off? Ideally it would be great to have no human pollution. So that means a revolution in the fabric of our cities really. We should be having no impact, the land around



us should be self-contained. I would like to see cities that are growing a lot of their own food. How do you do that? How do you minimise transport costs? But in order to do that you've got to have clean soils and you've got to have no pollution sources that are going to influence those foods.

I'd like to see cities in which money plays a much smaller role than it does at present. Cities are good for that because social exchanges and interchanges are much more possible and diverse in cities than they are in small communities. So perhaps we can substitute social exchange for money at some level.

I'd like to see cities in which democratic processes are very evident and active as well. So why we have a Parliament in Canberra still bemuses me. Could we have a democratic process that actually exists within the people themselves rather than having career politicians? Would you have just volunteers do parts of the job?

I can also imagine a radically low carbon and resilient city that would be horrific to live in. Some small cities around the world are pretty low carbon, and they're pretty resilient, but they are horrible to live in. Everything from Jaipur to Mumbai. It's getting more high carbon, but you could imagine, terrible dysfunctional cities that are just exactly low-carbon, resilient.

If we return to the optimistic vision that you described for 2040, what changes need to occur to get us to that point?

TF: Well first of all, the questions of scale. We need to understand what the drivers of scale are. I mean maybe some academics have looked at this, but I haven't seen a wide public perception about why scale continues to increase in cities beyond optimum thresholds. Once you understand that, you might be able to do something about it. I think interconnectivity of people might also drive some changes in that area. So that's the first thing, was the scale issue.

The second one, nature, biodiversity in cities. We need to understand the requirements of biodiversity. First of all we need to develop the empathy that people want biodiversity in their cities, and then ask a question of what the requirements of that biodiversity are and how they can be fulfilled within a city. So a good example of that might be ibises. In the 1970s, the director of Taronga Zoo brought a pair of Australian white ibis into the little pond at Taronga Zoo and let them breed there. They lost their fear of people and then they found there was an ecological niche for them and they spread very quickly, right across the city. So today you can go to anywhere from the Botanic Gardens, to the streets of Kings Cross, and you see ibis there, making a living, eating food scraps, scaring toddlers and begging for food. Their behaviour has evolved incredibly over 40 years.

Sydney has got this fabulous biodiversity - it infinitely enriches the city. But a place like Melbourne, you can search in vain for white ibis. It's exactly the same species, but the behavioural adaptations that are required to live in the city haven't spread yet down to here. So it's kind of an interesting question about how--see that's one example of how you might foster biodiversity in a way that makes for an interesting and lively city. You also mentioned about money playing a lesser role. What sorts of things would need to change for us to be able to move towards a society like that?

I'm really encouraged by a lot of the internet based systems which are now coming up, which allow some substitution of social good for money. Uber is a very good one. Uber cuts out the middleman in the transport business, in the motor vehicle taxi business basically, but potentially a lot else as well. It lets anyone participate in that business, and ranks everyone on their past record. So if you are a Uber user, or a supplier, you

get ranked just like you do on eBay. So your social credit is there for everyone to see. So money is part of the transaction, but your social credit is really an important part of it.

Airbnb is an even more transparent example of that where individuals, rather than hotels, are opening their property up for home stays, optimising the use of a property that otherwise would lie idle. Because everyone gets rated, it allows a very transparent system so you can see the social good, or how good someone is as a customer, or someone to interact with.

I think that is hugely important. That's changing, both the value of money and the value of social credit if you want as we go on. So they're just two examples, but there's a whole lot of other ones out there that are all taking place. If you want to challenge the supremacy of money, you have to have a transparent credit system in the social arena where people can see. That's what you've got in the village. Everyone knows everyone in a village from the time you are born to the time they die. It might be true that some people can fool a lot of people for quite a bit of the time, but mostly everyone is very transparent to everyone else. That's what these social credit things are there to do and allow you to challenge money. I think it's probably a good thing for society to move away from money and towards more social credit.

What about barriers between where we are now and the vision of 2040 that you are hoping for? What's in the way? What's stopping us?

TF: What's getting in the way of that change is the status quo - those who have the power and incumbency. On a very practical level and you can see it playing out with groups like Uber, with the installation of rooftop PV and with Airbnb. No one in the energy sector really likes rooftop PV. They'll sell it because otherwise they'll go broke faster, but they don't like it. Hotels don't like Airbnb and are trying to get in the way. Neither do governments like it, because they're losing tax. Taxi companies hate Uber because it's cutting out the middleman, the taxi company owners. So it's incumbency.

The work that you're working on at the moment, how does it speak to the future?

TF: My climate work isn't quite 'value free' but it allows people exposure to facts. I think if you explain some of that stuff to them they can see their own way forward.

Each of us has our own vision about what the sort of city that we'd like to live in is like. Those sort of things will only come out of a consensual discussion around what the city should be like. That's why I mentioned deliberative democracy, where we need to get some handle on what we want into the future in a way that's beyond government policy, or whatever Lend Lease thinks is the best thing, all the banks think are the best thing.

If in 2040 we're living in a city in which money plays a smaller role, that is rich in nature, is on an appropriate scale, and social credit is a driving force....how did we get here?

TF: Well, I think we would have started with deliberative democracy in decision-making. So somehow we've got away from the current political system, and developed a democratic process that either depends on the sort of stuff the new democracy does, so jury-lead decision-making, or is a net based dialogue among people that allows some sort of information and deliberative think tap, and so we've set our course, which is very closely concordant with the will of the people, the will of the people when they're exposed to the facts. So not just asking someone "what do you think of the future?" but taking them through the process of what's involved. The new democracy's jury-based thing does that very work where they take 50 people out of whatever they are doing for five days and pay them to hear the experts and deliberate on what the way forward is for a particular issue.

That's an interesting model.

TF: Yeah, well it's one of the better ones we've got at the moment. As I said, there's some internet-based stuff too that's good. You'd have to start with that. And how do you confront the vested interests? How do we deal with the property owners, with the banks, with everyone else as you move into this new and very different future?

If we were in 2040 now, and we've achieved this, how did we deal with them?

I think in 2040, it's still an ongoing process.

Tim Flannery was interviewed as part of the "Visions & Pathways 2040" project, about the future of Australian cities. For more interviews with influential thinkers, see the project website.

