

Toronto Life Magazine, December 2006

Future Shock

U of T prof Thomas Homer-Dixon has made his career warning us about global collapse. If only we'd listen

NICHOLAS DINKA

Thomas Homer-Dixon is holding a cordless phone in his lap, in anticipation of his wife's call. She's in the midst of defending her PhD thesis, and he has asked her to call the moment she is finished. The phone's proximity is the only sign that he's feeling stressed. Serving up tea and cookies in his living room, he's the picture of a celebrity professor—poised, serious, hyper-articulate—except when he smiles, at which point he transforms from Michael Ignatieff's more handsome doppelgänger into an overeager 12-year-old.

Then again, Homer-Dixon (friends call him Tad) knows a few things about handling stress—in a way, it's his professional expertise. The head of U of T's Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, he is the go-to guy on the connections between environmental degradation and war (he sometimes jocularly refers to himself as Dr. Doom). In 2000, Homer-Dixon published his best-selling *The Ingenuity Gap*, a stark warning about how development and innovation may create as many problems as they solve.

The Upside of Down is a sequel of sorts. In it, he argues that as societies grow more complex and use up readily available energy sources, they become less able to cope with such stresses as global warming, energy scarcity and population imbalances.

But those apocalyptic scenarios seem far away as Homer-Dixon offers a quick tour of his home of the last four years, an 1860s stone cottage in Fergus, near Guelph—all high ceilings and intricate crown mouldings. It means a 90-minute commute, but to him it's worth it. "You get a lot more for your money out here," he says. "It's partly why we came."

Another reason is that Homer-Dixon feels most at home in the country. Born in 1956, he grew up near Prospect Lake, on Vancouver Island. His father, a forester, gave him early lessons in ecology. His mother, an artist, was ill with multiple sclerosis for much of his childhood, and died when he was 13. As a child, his main window onto the outside world came from *Time Life* books.

Homer-Dixon paid his way as an undergraduate through a series of jobs, including summers in the Alberta oil patch. He completed a degree in poli-sci at Carleton and spent his spare time setting up the Canadian student wing of the pacifist group Pugwash. Next came a doctorate at MIT. "I was very driven in my 20s," he says. "I was still unpacking the death of my mother, and it took me a long time to understand how traumatic that had been."



Doubting Thomas: the celebrity professor's new book, The Upside of Down, takes on planetary degradation and renewal (Image credit: David Nemeroff)

As a newly minted PhD, he talked his way into the position of director of U of T's fledgling Peace and Conflict Studies program. But his big break came when he was featured in "The Coming Anarchy," a seminal 1994 *Atlantic Monthly* article. Audiences at the CIA, the National Security Council and the dinner table of then-vice-president Al Gore followed. Bill Clinton frequently referenced Homer-Dixon's work.

"I was 38 and still pretty wet behind the ears," Homer-Dixon says. "It was amazing, like being shot into the stratosphere. But at the same time it was disturbing. I think we have this feeling that our leaders actually know what's going on. But when you get into these circles you realize that they don't. The world is too complex."

Thomas Homer-Dixon has had the last laugh — if that can be said of someone who prophesies the end

Not all of the attention has been positive. "Tad the Doom-Meister" read the title of a mordant 1995 article by Mark Kingwell for *Saturday Night*. But Homer-Dixon has had the last laugh—if that can be said of someone who prophesies global collapse—and he knows it. "The world looks a lot different now than it did in the 1990s. It looks like a pretty scary place. As a professional, it's nice to see your ideas verified, though from a human point of view it's obviously very scary."

Two years ago, Homer-Dixon's first child, a son, was born. "Ben has changed my life," he says. "I think I missed a lot of stuff earlier on because I've been such a fiend about working." At the age of 50, he's shifting gears. He'll be stepping down from his position at the Trudeau Centre this year (he'll continue to teach) and wants to do more policy-related work on issues like global warming. "It's about being able to look my son in the eye."

Suddenly the phone rings, and he leaps to his feet. "Hi, hi. What's up?" he says, and then there's a moment of silence. "Oh yes! Yes!" Cheers erupt from the kitchen, where his wife's parents have been standing by. A few minutes later, smiling and relaxed, he admits that scheduling an interview at the most important moment of his wife's career to date might have been a recipe for pain. But for now, at least, there's a happy ending.