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Five crises threaten Earth

RODNEY CHESTER

AS SOMEONE who is spruiking his vision of the future, it's perhaps a bit surprising that Thomas Homer-Dixon is a man in two minds about what to expect.

Homer-Dixon, director of the Trudeau Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies in Toronto, warns that the world is on a precipice, with five "tectonic stresses" that threaten society: oil, or at least cheap oil, is running out; the gap is growing between the mega-rich and the extremely poor; climate change; environmental stress on natural resources; and economic stress from global instability.

"Any one of them, we might be able to cope with, but the real concern is that we're overloaded by these developments that are simultaneous," he says, outlining the core of the thesis in his book *The Upside of Down: Is this a world on the brink of a catastrophe?*.

Homer-Dixon can see signs of dark days to come. The conflict for him, however, is as the father of a two-year-old boy, he wants to remain optimistic.

"When I was writing the chapters on energy and climate, I just despaired," Homer-Dixon says, speaking from his 150-year-old Toronto home that he's renovating to make more energy-friendly.

"I guess what we do, quite understandably and reasonably, is that we just turn our minds off to a lot of this stuff.

"I really do think this will be a make-it-or-break-it century. The basic challenge now is how we address the incredible inequality on the planet.

"We're going to have to come face-to-face finally with the challenge that half the people on the planet are living on \$2 a day or less."

Homer-Dixon looks at the lessons learnt in past civilisations and the problem in Energy Return On Investment (EROI), a measure of how much energy must be expended to generate energy. In the 1970s, the EROI for oil was about 25 to 1, meaning one barrel of oil worth of energy was expended in obtaining 25 barrels. Today, it's dropped to 15 to 1.

Energy, and particularly oil, is a topic that Homer-Dixon is comfortable talking about, having hands-on experience of the industry. Long before he completed his doctorate on international relations, he worked on the oil rigs in Alberta, Canada.

"Of all those five stresses, climate and energy are intimately linked," he says. "They're also potentially solvable with things that we know how to do now, both institutionally and technologically."

And that's where the argument of *The Upside of Down* aims to be different. It's not just a description of what could go wrong, it also offers a guide to how to make things right.

"A lot of people have made fools of themselves betting against human ingenuity and human adaptability," he says.

“We have to be lucky to a certain extent, we have to hope the breakdowns or crises that happen because of these stresses aren’t catastrophic, that they fall in that middle range – big enough to motivate us, not big enough to knock us out of the ring. But frequently human beings are lucky.

“You look at the most creative societies in the world, and frequently they’ve become that way because of challenges. The Black Death, as horrible as it was, created the economic conditions in Europe for the Renaissance. The Great Depression created the political conditions for the United States for Roosevelt’s reform of American capitalism. The same economic crisis produced the political conditions in Europe for the rise of National Socialism.

“Crises create moments where things are very fluid; where societies can be pushed in positive or negative directions. And if we want to hope that we can take advantage of these coming crises in the most positive way, then we should start thinking now what we are going to do during these moments.

“That is the most radical message of my book. Political and social extremists will be well organised in times of crisis, the rest of us are usually wandering around saying, ‘Gee, this is really bad, what are we going to do now’.”

Homer-Dixon says part of the solution to avoiding the crises he sees coming is for all of us to reduce our carbon footprint. Another solution is to consider how we can update our democratic systems, perhaps inspired by collaborative projects such as the online encyclopedia Wikipedia produced by submissions of knowledge from people around the world.

“Our democratic institutions are not coping well at all with the challenges. We’re so far off the mark in terms of what we need to do with carbon emissions, it’s really scary.

“We assume democracy is about working within a set of institutions that was developed, for the most part, in the 18th and 19th centuries, when the fastest people moved at the speed of a horse and almost all information was communicated verbally. The world is so different now.”

When he comes to Australia, Homer-Dixon is set to speak to various government ministers, and he’ll be telling them a simple message: be more resilient.

“Resilience is all about creating systems that withstand shock, that don’t fall apart when they’re hit by a surprise or a crisis.

“There’s a tendency in a lot of bureaucracies to just predicate the future by extrapolating current trends, and just assume it is going to be an incremental adjustment of the present.

“The societies and people who do the best are going to be those who are really nimble and really flexible, and who have done a lot of scenario planning in advance.”

Homer-Dixon cites the example of the US National Intelligence Council, in the wake of the 2001 terror attacks, establishing a consultation group called the Red Cell, made up by a diverse group including Hollywood script writers and science fiction writers who could present alternative visions for the future.

“I actually think that’s very smart,” he says.

Thomas Homer-Dixon will be touring with The Courier-Mail Big Book Club on Tuesday, August 28. The club is sponsored by The Courier-Mail, the State Library of Queensland and ABC 612 Radio.