

Future of Energy: Looking Further Ahead: <http://www.vpr.net/episode/48286/>

By Alan Betts

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(HOST) *All this week, VPR is looking at the future of energy. Commentator Alan Betts says we need to look further ahead.*

(BETTS) When driving a car it is best to look far ahead - so you can anticipate when you need to slow down. The ride is smoother, and your gas mileage even improves.

If you buy a car that gets forty or fifty miles per gallon, you save energy and money for years. But, in our everyday lives, we often don't look far enough ahead. We are too busy with the struggles of life. Family pressures, social pressures and advertising in fact drive us. It is smart, when we buy a new house, to look a few years ahead, but the recent housing and mortgage crisis shows that many did not anticipate the perils of taking on too much debt. Our credit system has been extended far beyond our ability to repay in the current recession. For individuals and businesses, our legal system uses bankruptcy to reduce or eliminate financial debts that cannot be repaid.

We expect the Federal and State governments to help us through the current economic crisis; and we expect them to take care of us in our old age through Social Security and Medicare. We also expect our government to spend vast sums on the military and on foreign wars. And yet we refuse to pay the taxes necessary to fund all of this; and we refuse to tax those whose speculation led to the current economic crisis. The Federal debt is now growing so fast that it cannot be repaid; but when nations and empires go bankrupt, rebuilding can be a slow and painful process.

And then we've incurred far larger debts to the Earth, and these must be repaid, whether we like it or not. Our industrial society, our growing population, our growing energy use - especially the burning of coal, oil and natural gas - and the growth of consumerism have placed an immeasurable burden on this planet, our home. A climate crisis faces us, which will last for centuries. Yet we and our leaders are so reluctant to start the transition away from fossil fuels and a growth philosophy, towards a way of life that is efficient, resilient and sustainable.

Look further ahead and think creatively about the transition that is coming, when all these debts to other countries - and our debts to the planet - have to be repaid. How can we smooth this transition? Only by getting started now - in our own lives and in our state. The transition will take decades, because we must rebuild our infrastructure to be efficient and renewable, and relocalize our essential food and energy supplies. Almost certainly we will have to give up our dream of dominating the world militarily. Remember that every year we delay, life will get much harder for our children, and for all of life on the Earth.

But take heart, because the Earth also moves slowly, and life is forgiving - once we choose to work with her, rather than blindly follow our short-sighted self-interest and our worn-out political doctrines.