

## Do the Right Thing a Little Badly...

On August 21, during the World Water Week in Stockholm, Professor John Anthony Allan will receive the 2008 Stockholm Water Prize from the hands of H.R.H. Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden. A powerful acknowledgement for a man who introduced a virtual water concept and whose work is helping solve conflicts over water, even in places where water is scarce and politics tense. Stockholm Water Front wanted to learn more about him, his thoughts and pathways to accomplishments during his distinguished career.

### Professor Allan, how did you feel when you found out you would receive the 2008 Stockholm Water Prize?

Very pleased. But surprised as the water science and professional community is so diverse and one did not expect recognition from a community that mainly values concrete rather than abstract contributions.

### What makes you most proud, professionally?

I am proud that I have been able to operate in an interdisciplinary mode and on as many occasions as possible been able to dismantle parts of the walls that separate the disciplines and professions.

### How did you become interested in the issue of virtual water?

For nearly 40 years, I have been interested in the technical, environmental and socio-economic problems of those managing water in water scarce regions, mainly in the Middle East. As an environmental scientist, my early preoccupations were with using water resources more efficiently. Environmentalism was not then the urgent issue that it has become since about 1980.

By the 1980s, all the countries of the Middle East apart from Syria and Lebanon were clearly enduring serious and worsening water deficits. Leading figures in the region – such as King Hussein and Boutros Boutros-Gali – were suggesting that a future war over water in the Middle East was very likely. By the late 1980s an Israeli economist began to chide his government and fellow scientists that it was not sensible to export scarce water in relatively low value, water intensive, commodities such as oranges and avocado.

Turning that idea on its head, it was clear that it would be possible to solve very serious water problems by ‘importing’ embedded water in food commodities.

However, the discursive process leading to wide adoption has taken the normal 25 years. We are half way through the process. The idea has been easily diffused in the science community... [and] all the water ministers in the world are aware of it. But the notion is very destabilising for political leaders and senior water professionals who do not wish to publicly admit food and water insecurity. Instead, they hide behind the economic invisibility and political silence of virtual water ‘trade.’ Such ‘trade’ enables political leaders and millions of water consumers to be in denial for decades about their immediate water crisis. But they can convince each other that the crisis will be in the risk-discounted far future and delay the introduction of economic and environmental reforms.

### How have your interests evolved or changed over time?

The water-food-trade nexus remains an interest of mine... [but] my current preoccupation is the link of water and energy. We

*“We need to have the courage to do the right thing a little badly rather than to race, again, to do the wrong thing extremely well.”*

are experiencing an oil price spike which has gripped everyone. I am fascinated to see whether, in this window of opportunity, what we shall do. We have the shadow of peak oil,

the impact of biofuel production and the consequences of the vigour of the demands from the large economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China. We need clean energy solutions and a deeper awareness of the potential of solar energy. In addition, we need to develop ways of producing clean energy from water and producing high quality water with clean energy.

### What did you find hardest to accomplish within your career?

The most tormenting moments have been standing in front of classes when one had neither the inclination nor sufficient knowledge nor the time to prepare material to help peo-

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ple learn effectively. Secondly, I am conscious that I have had the luxury of many decades to move from having the naïve approach of the blind outsider to that of the more sensitive outsider. One can never be the insider. Understanding the political landscape into which one wants to introduce new concepts and approaches is more important than being expert in those concepts.

### What do you see as the greatest and most pressing challenges we face today?

I have already referred to the challenge we face in shifting from doing the wrong things extremely well to doing the right things a little

badly (Drucker 1950s) in managing and using key natural resources such as energy and water. All we might do in this regard will be seriously impaired, and even wrecked, if we do not create a system of global governance that prevent the hubristic responses, and the events to which they are a response, in current world affairs. The erosion of asymmetric power and the elimination of poverty are underlying fundamentals that must be addressed.

### **What do you see as the greatest opportunities to solve or confront those challenges?**

The processes of socio-economic development that eliminate poverty. Socio-economic development does not take place however, until the political circumstances that engender it are in place.

### **What is your view on science and its opportunities today to affect political decisions?**

The findings of water science play a role in the politics of allocation and management. But they will generally be subordinate to politics. After all, water flows uphill to money and power.

Where science attempts to engage with uncertainty the situation is most fraught. Politicians were invented to deal with uncertainty. They have millennia of experience in foregrounding and backgrounding the vast array of uncertainties that they encounter. Scientists for the most part tend to be in

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denial about their lack of experience in such environments. There needs to be a shift in the education of scientists so that they understand and respect political processes, the role of advocacy and the significance of learning how to advocate responsibly.

### **What would you like to change?**

I would like there to be a more effective systems of governance to harness three features of neo-liberal society. First, the wonderful innovation and energy of the market. Secondly, the essential generation in the public sector of public goods and regulatory institutions needed by both society and the market. Thirdly, the priceless ethics – justice, equality and respect for the environment – that inspire the civil movements. Ethics do not self-generate in either the market or the public sector, at least not in the neo-liberal model. We may discover that a new form of engagement that will lead to secure and sustainable modes of engagement will emerge in South or East Asia – provided the neo-liberal model can be resisted. The jury is out on both whether the neo-liberal model will be resisted and whether the alternatives are better or viable.

### **What do you try to convey to your students as a basic “take home” message for their future scientific career?**

To care as much about communicating knowledge effectively as about creating knowledge – if they want to stand tall. If they want to prosper more conventionally, then they should note the narrow features of the knowledge production games that in science bring predictable recognition. The latter will generally pay the mortgage more effectively.

### **What do you like to do in your spare time?**

Boringly, I have little spare time. My partner provides an increasingly sensible frame that involves coffee each weekend morning in a much loved café and many visits to the cinema. This leisure activity is restricted in that we only see films that manage to get screened despite the efforts of Hollywood to destroy the art-form.

### **What are you reading right now?**

A book written by someone I know through membership of the local Labour Party. He is a decade older than myself. Happily he chose to write with humour and touching candour about his raw experience in the army which sharply ended when riding his motor-bike across a heavily mortared field near Caen in Normandy in 1944. He also shares his early political journey as a member of the communist party.

Also, I particularly enjoyed re-reading a piece in Prospect magazine by Lord Hollick on the current global food situation. So well written is it that I am recommending it as a model for students and for anyone wanting to communicate lucidly about an immensely complex topic.

### **Where is your favourite place to travel to for vacation?**

We have friends in Umbria in Italy who have created a version of earthly rural paradise with the bonus of stimulating company where shared interests and shared assumptions on politics can be explored at length. I also love to visit Galway in the west of Ireland which was the home of my partner.

### **If you had not become a scientist, what would have been a tempting alternative?**

I would have liked to discover whether I had the skill to create beautiful objects with wood.

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Photo: Manfred Watz, SIWI

Understanding the political landscape where one wants to introduce new ideas is more important than being an expert in those concepts, Prof. Allan says.