

A load of hot air

Tim Congdon

COMMON WEALTH
by Jeffrey Sachs

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Jeffrey Sachs, the director of the New York based Earth Institute, has established a formidable reputation as someone who thinks hard, and worries even harder, about the future of the planet. His latest book, *Common Wealth*, like its predecessor, *The End of Poverty*, reviews the major issues of international economic

development in the early 21st century. But *Common Wealth* tries to go further than *The End of Poverty*, and raises the argument to a higher level of moral concern and practical difficulty.

The defeat of poverty would be challenging in the best of circumstances, but global conditions in the early 21st century will be particularly hostile. Sachs identifies a conjunction of new problems, most of them arising from mankind's pressure on the earth's limited resources. Indeed, one of these problems — the much-publicised threat to the climate from greenhouse gas emissions — would be easier to tackle if economic growth were to halt or go into reverse. The world needs development, but it must be 'sustainable development' (to use the term that Sachs emphasises) that leaves a viable biosphere for future generations.

Sachs's interests and sympathies are remarkable in their range. The threats to future well-being identified in *Common Wealth* include the depletion of natural resources, global warming, the ageing of populations in the developed world, and the reduced availability of water in many developing countries. It is difficult to think of any other single-volume work where this multiplicity of threats is discussed with such coherence, humanity and passion. Moreover, Sachs knows that 'ifs' and 'buts' don't sell books, and that too much use of 'maybe' and 'perhaps' does not impress policy-makers. He is a skilful writer, who adroitly uses short sentences to make big assertions and give strong recommendations.

But can humanity and passion become too much of a good thing? When Sachs sets out an agenda (as he often does), it is urgent, ambitious, large-scale and announced with a fanfare. The final pages propose eight 'actions that each of us can take to fulfil the hopes of a generation in building a world of peace and sustainable development'. The eighth such action is to 'live according to the standards of the Millennium Promises', by acting 'honorably' as consumers and citizens. The book's last paragraph quotes from President Kennedy's inaugural address, on the uniqueness of the present generation, and declaims on 'exciting opportunities', the harnessing of science for 'a new ethic of global cooperation' and so forth.

All of which is fine, if you like that sort of thing and agree with everything that preacher Sachs is telling you. If you harbour doubts, the moral certainty of his tone and his robust style of statement will irritate you. The trouble with Sachs is that the world is a complicated and messy place, and few things are as black and white as he paints them. He overstates in order to press his points home and adds spin to prevent the other side having a chance. This may go down well with the politicians and dogooders who belong to the non-governmental organisations (such as the International Campaign to Ban Landmines) which are

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praised in *Common Wealth* as 'sinews of global society'. But for economists with long experience in the development field Sachs has become tiresome. He would be more persuasive if he were more cautious and even-handed.

Take, for example, chapter four on climate change. This is a huge and controversial subject, to which Sachs devotes the grand total of 15 pages of analysis before presenting six prescriptions all starting 'we must...'. Now check the accuracy of the chapter's first three sentences (yes, just the first three sentences) on page 83. The climate is said to have recently 'been buffeted by extremes', with 11 of the 12 hottest years on record during 1995 to 2006, while the frequency of droughts has 'risen significantly around the world' and 'the same is true of extreme hurricanes like Katrina'.

As regards the temperature, Sachs' reliability turns on what is meant by the phrase 'on record'. Is the matter clarified on page 91 where 'the climate record' is said to date back 'hundreds of thousands of years'? If so, the statement on page 83 is plain wrong. Palaeoclimate research has shown that the earth was warmer than today, by perhaps 1°C to 2°C on average (but by very much more inside the Arctic circle), at the so-called 'Holocene climatic optimum', roughly 5,000 to 9,000 years ago. As for Katrina, it was a category 3 hurricane. This may have been ghastly for the citizens of New Orleans, but it was not in fact particularly intense by previous standards. The 20th century saw dozens of category 4 hurricanes and a large number of category 5 hurricanes in the Caribbean, and several of them made landfall in the USA.

Other passages in *Common Wealth* could be dissected in this fashion. So what? Does it matter that Sachs — like a large number of other self-appointed polymaths active in the public policy arena — exaggerates, misunderstands and gets his facts wrong? The answer is that it depends on whether Sachs' books are to be regarded as authoritative and uncontroversial, and hence as establishing a case for the radical policy options he favours. If Sachs does want them to be seen in that way he must not be surprised if reviewers are critical and try to pull him apart. After all, they may disagree with his very opinionated policy recommendations.

Both *The End of Poverty* and *Common Wealth* are lively, provocative and readable. If they merely stimulate discussion, they will make the world a better place. Economics needs people with the vitality and range of Professor Sachs. But it also needs plodders who check details and logic, recognise worth in a diversity of opinions, state conclusions carefully and seek a balance between competing and often conflicting views. Sachs may despise them as not quite living up to their Millennium Promises, but they may still be acting honourably as consumers and citizens.