In Seeds for Change, we, the six authors, invited readers to write critiques to encourage debate. In this spirit we welcome the review by Hugh Saddler, and we respond to it.

Naturally, we are gratified with Saddler’s description of the model for an alternative lower-energy Melbourne — more than half the book — as an “exciting blueprint for liveable cities”. However, we are somewhat mystified why he objects to this model being advanced as an effective way to reduce energy consumption.

Saddler wants to remove the energy crisis first, under capitalism, then “energy conservation and the gradual transfer to a reasonable energy economy” would be “one item on a whole slate of changes that would accompany the transformation to a socialist society. Changes in urban structure and transport systems of the type described in the book would, in all probability, be another item on the agenda”.

Why, we ask, do changes in urban structure/transport and energy conservation have to be dealt with as separate items? Why not together? And why should we not expect such changes to start now?

As Tribune columnist Dave Davies says: “While Fraser’s energy saving may stop a few dribbles of petrol, hardly anyone seems concerned to stop the gush of waste. How about planning cities to cut down on the length and number of trips by private car? Or would that hit too much at vested interests?” (‘1-Minute Parking’, 4.7.79).

Seeds for Change model did just that, but did not, we admit, “hit at vested interests” to the extent of socialising, nationalising, or even to the extent of naming the corporations obviously involved. The book was sponsored by a non-party conservation body, and the authors do not share any one political-party attitude anyway.

But, of course, Seeds for Change has given birth to a lusty energy-saving baby in the shape of an alternative city model, and this baby is now, in effect, lying on the doorstep of all big decision-makers — state and private — precisely because the model involves interventionist forward-planning. Industrial production and physical and social aspects of city structure are involved, as well as energy management. We agree with Saddler that ESSO-BHP and SECV cannot be bypassed.

Saddler defines “energy fundamentalism” as forgetting what are, in effect, socialist objectives and giving “the reduction of energy use as the sole or principal reason” for “all sorts of political social and economic changes”. We believe that Saddler, in his determination to avoid the rigidity of fundamentalism, has over-reacted to the extent of overlooking something crucial. An energy crisis will set new conditions. We should take this opportunity to involve people in attaining a more equitable society, instead of allowing the authorities to create greater inequities.

This brings us to the first of the three cardinal sins with which Saddler taxes us: “energy fundamentalism”, “parochialism” and falling for “idiotic official energy plans”. The authors agree with Saddler that each of these are sins that can be committed, but the review, we believe, fails to prove any of these charges.

Energy Fundamentalism

It would be wrong to hold that a given level of energy shortages would give rise directly, inevitably and mechanically, to a particular pattern of a restructured city model. Seeds for Change does not contemplate any such connection. The model in Part 3 was not exactly tailored to conserve just that amount of likely shortfall described as the “energy gap” in Part 1.

Maybe, it could be argued, that it is risky politics to propose a model as a solution to a predicted energy crisis. For if, in 5 or 10 years’ time, the model has not been implemented and no crisis has matured either, then supporters of a car-based city can triumph: “You see. The model was unnecessary!”

The answer? The model does more than save energy. It avoids crippling capital investment causing massive pollution and employing minimal labour. These are the heavy costs of not adopting a model that also lifts the quality of life. Better by far, this sort of “fail-safe” tack rather than risking harsh adjustments of devil take-the-hindmost that would fall heaviest on those who
can least afford it in any business-as-usual approach to the energy crisis.

A second confusion about "energy fundamentalism" is the notion that the model is an exciting blueprint for liveable cities "but one would want such changes in their own right, not because they reduced energy consumption, though that would be an additional benefit". What does "in their own right" mean? In any case, Seeds for Change does, in fact, argue for the model on the basis of integrating town-planning, transport planning and social planning.

The book was explicitly written about the energy dimension of life in our cities; this is not to say that other factors were not considered. In fact, the interrelationships between energy considerations and other physical, social and economic problems and objectives is one of the continuing themes of the book.

A third difficulty is that Saddler apparently defines "energy fundamentalists" as those who "forget" socialist objectives. We plead guilty to this. The authors, for reasons explained, did not write the book with a socialist objective, or any other objective than creatively confronting the energy crisis with a liveable city.

The book says: "We have not felt it necessary, or even possible, to deal in detail in this book with the far-reaching political and economic effects of this alternative future for Melbourne" (The Introduction). Just so. It would be nice for a book now to appear making good these deficiencies of which we ourselves were conscious. This is something different, though, to proving that the book is "permeated" with "energy fundamentalism".

The illustration that Saddler relies on is that "the only reference to the hideous toll of death or injury which our present car-based transport system exacts was in the context of the energy used by ambulance, hospital and legal services. Death and injury on the roads are alone reason enough to change the system. That they result in extra energy consumption is to my mind irrelevant."

We agree that accidents provide, in themselves, a persuasive argument against the road system of transport, as is implied in the very sentence complained about (on p. 213) which used the words "road carnage". That our attitude is the same as your reviewer is clearly evident in the mention of the kindred toll of lung cancer due to car exhaust pollution (p. 79). We think your reviewer has overlooked the context in which the offending reference occurred, which was to get some conception of the total urban system-forming effects of car transport.

Parochialism

"Another characteristic", writes Saddler, "which I found somewhat irritating, was its parochialism. It is an excellent idea to take a particular city, Melbourne, as the basis for elaborating a blueprint. But to analyse energy supply and demand patterns purely in terms of 'Victoria's energy prospects' is another matter."

This accusation is just plumb wrong. "Victoria's energy prospects" happens to be the title of chapter 2. But chapter 1 deals with Australian black coal and gas, and Australian and worldwide oil prospects. Even chapter 2 itself says: "Although we are most concerned in this book with Victoria's energy situation, we must also take into account the overall Australian situation. After all, Victoria is not a totally independent entity — a fact we might appreciate in years to come if we become dependent on North West Shelf gas! We have, therefore, made reference to important energy sources in other states, such as black coal in order to formulate a realistic picture of Victoria's energy prospects" (p. 33). We could say more, but need we?

The book shows how energy consumption patterns and energy resources vary widely from state to state, so that appropriate but often different solutions have to be developed for different areas. Seeds for Change is a case study for Victoria and Melbourne in this respect. If this is "parochialism", we need more of it! The microplanning that Saddler approves for social planning applies also to energy planning.

We like Saddler's positive contribution about constitutional obstacles presented by divided state/federal powers over energy, enabling competition between states to flog energy resources cheap, and the possibilities of export control.

Idiotic Official Plans

Saddler writes: "Now it is true that such proposals" (i.e., resulting in drastically reducing brown coal) "have been made by so-called energy planners in the Victorian bureaucracy. But the existence of the proposals does not prove that Victoria faces an imminent fuel crisis on all fronts. Rather it proves how idiotic official energy plans are." However, the problem is that a number of these plans are already "in the pipeline" and will be realised in the near future.

There may be a genuine difference of assessment of energy realities by the reviewer here, but there is also some misunderstanding. Saddler says that the Seeds for Change case is that "Victoria is going to run out of all fossil fuels within, at most, a few decades". No such claim is made. Chapter 1 explains how crisis occurs not with the exhaustion of a reserve, but years or even decades before it "runs out", when investment and production realities climax in a production peak (or plateau) and subsequently decline although demand is still increasing.
We agree with some elements of Saddler’s recipe for energy planning, but have some reservations about others. Although we wonder what he proposes should petrol be in short supply, we agree with him that plans for conversion of brown coal to oil should be “thrown in the wastepaper basket”. It was Seeds for Change which pioneered the analysis which showed why oil-from-coal was a disaster course, leading, as we have since emphasised, directly to plans for nuclear plants, foreshadowed already by the government’s “Energy Policy for Victoria” of March 1979.

We think the case for gas-from-coal is different from oil-from-coal. Manufactured gas is a more efficient conversion of brown coal than is electricity for heat production (55 per cent of Victoria’s current primary energy — see p. 68). And there are other reasons set out in chapter 13 on “Strategies”. Scrapping Newport and Jeeralang power stations, although desirable, would postpone gas deliverability problems only 4 or 5 years (see pp. 40-41). As for Saddler’s idea of raising the price of gas for industrial consumers to a level just less than petroleum fuels, there could be some merit in this. However, if it leads to the expected decline in natural gas demand, the substitution that conserves one resource, hastens the depletion of another. If electricity is substituted, then it means expanding electricity generating power which is less efficient than gas-from-coal. So the short-term advantage of a lower usage rate for natural gas has to be weighed against a long-term disadvantage of a system geared more to electricity than gas from goal.

Finally, the degree of idiocy of official energy plans is not uniformly the idiocy of over-provision of energy-generating capacity. That may be true of SECV over-estimation of electricity growth demands (for some years linear, incidentally, and not exponential). The idiocy of oil from coal plants is different: an oil crisis is likely long before they could be on stream. But it may not be as easy to consign these plans to the wastepaper basket as the review makes it appear. It is true that, originally, these plans may have emanated from the “so-called energy planners in the Victorian bureaucracy”. They have now been elevated to official government energy policy, a Brown Coal Council has been set up in January for this very purpose, and 12 multi-nationals including all major oil companies have contributed funds for research and development. The third idiocy has been easy reliance upon oil import prospects, and over-estimation of availability of world oil supplies of which we have been warning since 1977, and which did not surface as a daily press topic until 1979.

Seeds for Change exposes these idiocies. It did not fall for them. Nor did we say, as Saddler claims, that Victoria faces “an imminent fuel crisis on all fronts”. We said we would experience an oil crisis, a gas crisis and a coal crisis, in that order, if present growth trends continued. We believe that events are beginning to prove us right. And we still hold that models for alternative low-energy capital cities with industry, city design and transport restructured to conserve energy are a better solution than short-term energy brinkmanship based on business-as-usual.