

Speech: Jacqueline Cramer on Circular Economy in a Historical Context

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, dear guests and friends

It is a true privilege to be here with you this evening in the beautiful Melbourne Museum, to celebrate the deep and ongoing bonds between our two countries Australia and The Netherlands. My short talk – ladies and gentlemen- highlights the pressing need to make the transition to a circular economy. We presently overconsume natural resources -some of which are scarce. While in 1970 we produced and consumed as much as the earth could provide, we now need 1.75 planets. And when we continue in the same way, we will need three by 2050. This is simply impossible. Not only because this leads to tremendous environmental problems, but also to geopolitical tensions, mass displacement of people, and socio-economic turmoil. Therefore, we need to deal much more prudently with our resources and transition to a circular economy. This is an economy in which we close the loops of products, materials, and resources, use renewable energy sources, and safeguard the resilience of natural ecosystems.

It is not the first time in history that human civilization is in danger of collapsing due to the overconsumption of natural resources. In his interesting book 'A green history of the World', Clive Pointing provides many examples of great civilizations' expansions and the causes of their fall. Known civilizations like Rome, Easter Island, and the Incas brought about their doom, particularly by damaging their environment. In earlier times this was usually due to deforestation, overgrazing, and bad agricultural practices. And the scale at which this happened, was much smaller than today. Nowadays, particularly the industrialized countries not only misuse agricultural land but also impact the environment by overexploiting raw materials and making products out of them which often end up in landfills after use. This can be avoided if we think about our economy as being circular and act upon this ambition. A great number of examples show that this is possible!

There are many ways to transition to a circular economy. The highest priority on what I call the ladder of circularity is to prevent using natural resources. For instance, by not using plastic straws and other wasteful products that are not necessary. Or by not demolishing a building but renovating it and giving it a longer life. The next highest priority is to reduce the volume of resources needed per unit of product, for instance by applying 3D printing in producing concrete. Then follows the redesign of products in view of circularity. For instance, the Dutch company Fairphone designed a handset in which the battery, the cover, and increasingly other hardware can be easily replaced.

One can also redesign by learning from nature through biomimicry. Janine Benyus, the founding mother of this concept, has shown how clever nature functions and how all organisms are intrinsically connected. By understanding the functioning of a natural ecosystem, we can translate the learnings into an industrial system.

Biomimicry is an intriguing concept, which is well-known among indigenous people. They live with nature instead of trying to control her, as Western societies tend to do since the Industrial revolution. A wonderful book about this difference in our relationship with nature – that I highly recommend - has been written by Robin Wall Kimmerer 'Braiding sweet grass; Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants'.

Going back to the ladder of circularity: after redesign follows product reuse. Not only by reusing a product, like a coffee cup or bottle, but also by repairing, refurbishing, remanufacturing, and repurposing a product. There are so many possibilities for reuse, that it is really a missed opportunity not to grasp them. Again one step lower on the ladder of circularity is recycling. Of course, recycling is important, but only after the previous steps I explained, have been taken first. And when we recycle we should get the highest possible value out of the material. One example: when a building is demolished in a circular manner, the concrete can be crushed and used as foundation material under roads. But it is much better to separate the sand, gravel, and cement and bring these resources back into concrete for new buildings. That is what we now strive for in the Netherlands.

Ladies and gentlemen, all the examples I mentioned show that a circular economy is not wishful thinking but a pathway that can be realized in practice. However, nobody – no company, government, or citizen – can make this transformative change alone. It is a system change in which all actors need to adjust to make mainstreaming possible. To steer the transition to a circular economy, the role of the government at all levels, the so-called 'public governance' is important. However, based on my own experiences in the Netherlands, public governance should be augmented by network governance. This is the governance of coalitions of willing parties that are eager to launch bottom-up circular initiatives in networks. These nuclei of change can help to accelerate the circular economy, particularly when these networks are orchestrated in a goal-oriented manner. Ladies and gentlemen, to close off, it is a privilege for me to be able to share my Dutch experiences during a two-months-stay with all people here in Australia interested in building a circular future. I like to wholeheartedly thank my local partners the Australian Circular Economy Hub/Planet Ark and RMIT University who have made this visit possible, specifically Dr. Nicole Garofano of the ACE Hub and Professor Usha Iyer-Raniga of RMIT. I am also grateful for the support of our contributing partners ING Bank, BUILT, MIRVAC, RABOBANK, RMIT University, UNSW, QUT, State of Matter, and

Monash Business School. Finally, a major thanks to the teams at the Netherlands diplomatic missions, specifically, to Dr. Dai Forterre, who put lots of energy and love into creating circular relationships between Australia and the Netherlands. Let us create a circular future together. It is an inspiring and impactful journey for all of us, and for future generations. Let us learn from the past and avoid the mistakes of overconsumption of natural resources and transition to an economy that is in balance with nature. Thank you for your attention.