

Humans Only Have 200-300 Years Left on Earth

Interview with Michael Meacher MP

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Theme: [History](#)

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Former environment minister Michael Meacher on the place of humanity in the universe, intelligent design, the survival of the human race, Gaia theory and uncertainties over climate change

Tom Levitt: Your new book is focused on the destination of the human race, but what is our role, if indeed we have one?

Michael Meacher: Well 99.9993 per cent of time since the origin of the universe elapsed before we even came on stage. That doesn't say that it took all that time to produce this wonderful human species but it does seem odd and I think it shows that we are part of a cycle which is continuing. Ninety-nine per cent of all species are extinct - I don't think there is any guarantee of our survival especially if we remain as irresponsible and foolish as we are at the moment.

Irrespective of that I would expect the evolution of life forms to continue alongside and possibly surpass us. But we are an important part of it - we are the first species on earth in all that time that has a sense of morality and spirituality. These are very significant features of the human species which mark us out as very special.

I don't think the whole universe is about us and that's where we come to Stephen Hawkins point about us being exceedingly insignificant because we are on earth - just one of 8 planets in a solar system going round a sun which is one star, just an ordinary star, of which there are 200 billion in our galaxy, the Milky Way. And there are about 100 billion galaxies...

When you think of it in these terms, we are totally insignificant and almost invisible. So you have a contrast and paradox that is the size of universe, beyond are imagination and yet at the same time we are a very unique species. There is something very special about us. You have to somehow combine those two facts. How is it that a species in such a minute part of the universe should turn out to be so significant in the evolution of life forms? I don't think there is any obvious answer.

TL: Does that lead us to believe in a creator?

MM: The religious answer is that God created us in His own image but it does seem very odd that we have a universe of vast size to produce us and that it has taken an inordinately long time to reach this stage of life forms. It doesn't mean it is impossible but it does seem very odd unless you take the view that time is immaterial and we are only at the beginning of it and it will revolve for ever.

I don't believe science has invalidated religion and it can't because they are two utterly different paradigms of existence. Science has enormously increased the wonder of the religious message. It doesn't force us to believe in it but it is compatible with it.

TL: What will happen to humans – can we survive?

MM: We have become very clever in our improvements in technology and engineering over the last 100 years and the level of productivity and extent of exploitation has increased rapidly. But while the earth is extremely bountiful, there are limits to how many resources we can extract without replacing them or enabling them to be recycled and to recover.

We have an overdraft with the earth something in excess of 130 per cent. We currently consume something like 30 per cent over and above what we are replacing and rather like an overdraft at a bank that can't go on.

I don't think we have learnt to keep within the limits. They are quite elastic but there is a point beyond which they will break and then you will get a complete and massive change in the climate in which the survival of human species might not be compatible.

I think with the current rate of exploitation and current disregard for sustainability that our economy and our civilisation has, I think we will easily reach that point in the next 200-300 years.

TL: Will we destroy the earth as well as ourselves?

MM: I don't think so. I think James Lovelock's idea – that when an alien virus invades the human body it fights back and usually manages to surround and destroy the alien – is more likely. Earth will do everything it can to survive with us being the virus it is trying to destroy.

Climate change is one way it is doing it. It is changing the climate – the atmosphere, temperature, ocean acidity and sea levels – all massive changes cumulatively saying to us that we cannot go on as we are. And we cannot go on as we are because we will lose the basic resources which are essential to our survival.

TL: Can we reverse this situation and stop ourselves from heading towards extinction?

MM: We can – we are an intelligent species. The question is whether there is the political leadership in countries to act on what the scientists say. It's not perfect – the description of the atmosphere and the interactions between so many parts of the climate is very complex and I don't think the science is 100 per cent there, but it's 80-90 per cent of the way there, and is being refined all the time. We certainly know plenty more than is necessary to apply the precautionary principle.

The issue is whether there is the political leadership to guide people. The knowledge is there for them but it is the difficulty in actually getting that change in way of life which political leaders by and large are unwilling to press. They prefer to win elections: people in the west like their comfort zones and way of life and political leaders are not willing to press very far.

I think that will only really change when the human races begins to suffer some of the extremely severe consequences of climate change which may be some decades ahead.

They will then realise, as we have with the financial crisis, that we are up against the wall and hitting the buffers and we have got to change.

It would be nice if human beings realised those limits and began willingly to act in accordance with them in order to produce more a harmonious relationship with our environment and greater sustainability. But all the evidence is that we are not willing to do this until forced to. So yes we can change but I doubt whether there is yet the political will.

Destination of the Species: The Riddle of Human Existence is published by O Books, price £9.99 in paperback

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