
COMMENTARY

The Last Lap

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Abstract

What do responsible environmental behaviour and practice look like, especially for those of us who despair of effective policies being enacted by the current generation of political elites? This paper provides a personal response to the ethical and policy dilemma of our times. I attempt to explain what may seem like – and possibly is – entirely self-indulgent behaviour on the basis that I can make absolutely no difference at the sort of macro level that is needed to ‘save the planet’. In the process I try to explain why thousands of others have made similar choices and why cooperation even amongst well-intentioned and informed individuals is so hard and unlikely to succeed.

Keywords: environmental politics; leadership; progress; cooperation; values

One of the final rites of passage in my adopted homeland is driving round it. An army of ‘grey nomads’ constantly circles Australia, frequently driving preposterously large vehicles that contribute disproportionately to the environmental problems that threaten the very continuation of life; or its continuation in anything like a ‘civilised’ fashion, at least. As the driest continent on the planet, Australia is likely to suffer the ravages of climate change more than most. And yet many of its citizens remain blithely unaware of, or indifferent to, the rapidly approaching, increasingly undeniable, catastrophic impacts of

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global warming. Despite the fact that I do know something about the alarming state of the planet, I am about to embark on the 'big lap' around Australia.

With or without my monstrous new vehicle, my contribution to global environmental degradation is negligible. Rather deflatingly, however, so is my ability to address the problems that the IPCC, amongst others, has been highlighting for decades (IPCC, 2022). In the grand scheme of things, it really won't make any difference whether I undertake a farewell tour of Australia; or it won't to anyone but me and the friends I'll reconnect with on my travels. I recognise that this self-serving logic is uncomfortably similar to the sort of argument the Australian government makes to justify continuing to export coal: it's not that bad in the overall scheme of things and anyway, if we don't do it someone else will (Morton, 2021).

But even the most cloddish, self-absorbed resource minister, mining executive, or ageing academic for that matter, may experience bouts of disconcerting cognitive dissonance as a consequence of the overwhelming, inescapable evidence of environmental destruction that confronts us every day. Having to watch our collective home either going up in flames or disappear beneath the 'once in a century flood events' that have become such regular features of quotidian reality makes it hard not to connect the dots. Little surprise that the young in particular suffer from an epidemic of anxiety about their future and not unreasonably question whether they actually have one (Thompson, 2021). The real surprise, perhaps, is that the young aren't more unhappy and unhinged than they already are.

Anyone reading a journal such as this won't need me to rehearse the all-too-familiar catalogue of woe that constitutes our best understanding of what may lie ahead of us in the increasingly likely event that we fail to address the drivers of climate change and environmental degradation. You will be relieved to hear, dear reader, that I have no intention of telling you what I suspect you already know. Nor do I wish to demonstrate my own deflating scientific ignorance, or my rather humbling reliance on the work of others. This attempt at shameless ingratiation and self-deprecation notwithstanding, I fear you will ultimately still come to consider me a selfish hypocrite of the first order. Rightly or wrongly, I have come to the conclusion that the planet is also on its last lap, and there's

nothing I can do to stop it. To be sure, life will go on in some form, but would you want to be part of something that Thomas Hobbes might have described as 'nasty, brutish and short'?

What follows, I'm afraid, is not especially scholarly and certainly not very uplifting. Indeed, it's a subjective, deeply pessimistic reflection on what it's like to be a human being confronted with the end of the world; or a world worth living in, at least. I should add that I am an over-privileged white man living in what turns out to be just about the safest place on the planet (Perth, Australia). I'm nearly 70, too; if the world can't hang together for the rest of my lifespan, we're in more trouble than I thought. This is not a flippant point: where you are in the life cycle profoundly influences the way you think about what could or should be done at both the personal and the collective level (Funk, 2021). Perhaps it always has; it certainly seems to now. By the time Greta Thunberg is my age it will be 2070 and, if we haven't made profound changes to that way we live, discussions such as this will be of even less interest and relevance than they already are. Young people may be forgiven for not sharing or sympathising with my rather insouciant attitude to my own fate and that of the planet, but it's the only consolation of the ageing process I've discovered so far.

In my defence, I've done what I can. Academics write books and articles, and hope they have an impact, contribute to the debate or are read, at least. My last effort (Beeson, 2021) hasn't even been reviewed, much less changed the world. Consequently, I've come to the not unreasonable conclusion that I can do nothing to influence the future or the outcome of the concatenation of contemporary geopolitical, geoeconomic or environmental crises that threaten to engulf us. The rest of this discussion is, therefore, a transparently self-serving justification for my imminent accession into the ranks of the nomadians.

Lost illusions

I promised not to try the reader's patience with a lengthy inventory of the world's burgeoning problems, and I won't. But it's impossible not to say something, or my abnegation of responsibility is hard to understand, let alone justify. The first point to reiterate is that I have made a rather modest contribution to the mess we're in. I don't have children, (I think) I've given up flying, and I'm eating fewer of our fellow creatures. Nevertheless, Australians generally contribute more to the

drivers of global warming on a per capita basis than just about anyone else on the planet (SBS, 2021). But not many people think about their relationship to the environment that way; or not enough of them to make a discernible difference, at least. To be sure, there's quite a bit of recycling going on in Australia, and some praiseworthy individuals have entirely given up eating meat and spend their time picking up other people's rubbish from the nation's beaches and rivers. But I think we know that even the best-intentioned individuals can only do so much.

This is even more of a problem when we also know that many people in wealthy countries are not just indifferent about the fate of the environment in the part of the world they are fortunate enough to inhabit, but are positively hostile toward those living in more challenging natural and social situations. Exhibit A in support of this thesis is the increasingly unsympathetic, even brutal, attitudes taken by governments around the world toward asylum seekers (Khanna, 2021). Australian governments have been at the forefront of this policy innovation. There is no doubt that what is euphemistically known as the 'off-shore processing' of would-be migrants has been very successful, at least when viewed from the perspective of electoral popularity. Indeed, one of the few promises Australia's Liberal-National Party coalition government can actually claim to have kept is 'stopping the boats' (Munro and Oliver, 2019).

The rise of populist politics and a rancid form of jingoistic nationalism around the world may not be solely attributable to unwanted waves of migration, but it's not unconnected either. Some of my more cosmopolitan-minded colleagues may not want to concede this, but xenophobia, revanchism and breath-taking ignorance about the past and – even more alarmingly – the present are not only increasing, but make the idea of international cooperation, much less world government, almost comically unlikely. It is becoming increasingly clear that sustaining national democracy in troubled times is difficult and far from guaranteed – even in its supposed democratic heartlands. Not only has the election of Joe Biden done next to nothing to shore up the surprisingly fragile foundations of the light on the hill, but the current attitude toward unwanted migrants from Mexico looks strikingly similar to his predecessor's (Barros, 2021).

The point here is not to lambast the United States for its litany of domestic and foreign policy failures – although that is something I could expand on if asked – but

to make the relatively uncontroversial point that, however we might define 'good governance', it is unlikely to occur without high levels of support, participation and effective leadership (Beeson, 2019). None of these is a given. Indeed, try to think of a country where the government is effective, the people are happy and the future looks bright. For many of us on 'the Left', if there is such a thing anymore, Sweden used to be the benchmark for enlightened public policy. And yet its remarkably generous offer to take in the victims of the Iraq war – a conflict they had no part in, let's not forget – created a domestic backlash, social unrest and ghettoisation (CBS, 2019). Even the best of intentions can have disastrous, unforeseen consequences in today's world, it seems.

Leadership and cooperation

If doing good is difficult domestically, it's all but impossible internationally. I make this rather bold claim on the basis of my alleged area of expertise: international relations. Anyone who knows anything about IR, as we aficionados know it, would have to admit that much of what passes for theory is either a bit abstract and of limited obvious relevance, to put it delicately, or designed to give intellectual comfort and practical policy advice to the likes of Vladimir Putin. 'Realists' are notorious for their relentlessly gloomy, power-oriented view of the world. Any ambitious defence minister or run-of-the-mill megalomaniac keen to either make a name for themselves or justify ever more spending on guns and bombs can be sure to find a willing chorus of strategic experts who will be only too happy to endorse wasting scarce resources on weapons of war. Nothing comes before the national interest, it seems, even if its actual definition is assumed, rather than demonstrated, by a handful of modestly credentialled powerholders.

The conventional wisdom notwithstanding, turning swords into ploughshares still sounds like a good idea, even if it's a metaphor in need of a makeover. The reality, of course, is that we're heading in precisely the opposite direction: the 'peace dividend' that the – entirely unexpected and bloodless – end of the Cold War was supposed to inaugurate failed to materialise. Of course, things might have been different if George W. Bush hadn't been elected President in highly contentious circumstances and surrounded himself with a coterie of neoconservative zealots bent on remaking the world in America's entirely fictitious image (Mann, 2004). Not only did some of the victims of this entirely unnecessary war of choice end up wrecking Sweden's admirable social compact, but it destabilised the entire

Middle East, wasted scarce resources and helped to enshrine the idea that powerful sovereign states have a right to try and remake the world if they have the will and capacity to do so. One might be forgiven for thinking the youthful Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin took copious notes.

The rather sobering reality is that we really don't have many convincing examples of effective long-term, institutionalised international organisations and agreements of a sort that look indispensable if we're really going to do anything about growing international tensions, not to mention climate change. In fact, the problems created by accelerating and destructive climate change are actually making cooperation even more difficult – and unlikely. Indeed, in my – no doubt dated, male and 'Western' – view we've only had one example of effective international cooperation worthy of the name and that's the European Union. Even suggesting such a thing will no doubt induce apoplexy among woke readers, but the evidence seems reasonably uncontentious. The EU has been responsible for pacifying what was formerly the most violent part of the planet for hundreds, if not thousands of years, laying the foundations for unprecedented economic development and – most importantly, perhaps – transforming the attitudes many Europeans had about themselves, their neighbours and the prospects for their future.

And yet, despite the EU's unprecedented successes – not least in giving the lie to the claims of policymakers and grand strategists who said such things were impossible – it's not obvious the EU has the will or capacity to remain the flag bearer of human progress. Even suggesting such a thing as progress is actually possible, especially when it emanates from some of the world's most notorious former colonial powers, may also raise the blood pressures of more sensitive readers. No doubt the Europeans deserve to be held accountable for their historical misdeeds, their rather self-satisfied view of their own achievements and a sometimes-condescending attitude to what used to be described as the 'developing world'. Whatever you think of the latter as a collective signifier, though, it's uncontroversial to say that the bulk of humanity has not achieved European levels of economic or political development. With the exception of a handful of frequently corrupt and brutal autocrats who have siphoned off resource wealth for personal gain, the vast majority of people in the South are *never* going to enjoy the sorts of lives and living standards most readers of this article take for

granted, not least because of environmentally generated problems such as Covid (Beaumont, 2021). Even more troublingly, it's now not even obvious that's entirely a bad thing.

The paradoxes of progress

Of the many paradoxes and puzzles that are part of the human condition none seems more confounding than this: at the very moment when we collectively seem to have figured out how to lift millions of people out of poverty, we are forced to confront the reality that doing so will inevitably contribute to already catastrophic climate change, at least in the short-term, because of the correlation between rising incomes and greenhouse gas emissions (Bruckner et al., 2022). And as Keynes helpfully pointed out, of course, in the long-term we're all dead.

If you're the plucky optimistic type you may be comforted by the idea that some technological wonder or other will come along and save the day, transform the way we produce and consume things and allow business as usual. To be fair, the world is already awash with wonders that have had transformative effects. But many of them are dedicated to encouraging the already privileged to consume even more than they do, in ways that look not just inherently unsustainable, but like glaring, unjustifiable examples of gross inequality and indifference to the fate of strangers. The inescapable flipside of conspicuous consumption seems to be insufficiently conspicuous immiseration. Perhaps there's no inevitable causal relationship between the two, but the symbolism and *deliberate* wastefulness of the 'fast fashion industry', for example, captures part of this inequitable global zeitgeist (Monroe, 2021). This was a problem even when the world wasn't as interconnected as it is now. But when the poor are often painfully conscious of their relative depredation, it must surely engender resentment, envy, possibly even conflict.

The idea of 'structural violence' is a rather anodyne abstraction that doesn't adequately capture the manifold, interconnected problems that have an especially pernicious impact on the poor, women and children. The chances of escaping from poverty and persecution were never good in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, for example, but now they are being exacerbated by climate change, warlordism, ethnic conflicts and the sheer number of people trying to scrape a living in the same place – or trying to escape to a part of the world where such problems do

not seem to exist. I know I would in their place. No surprise, then, that Europe and America have become magnets for the energetic, the dissatisfied and the young in Africa, Asia and South America. Unfortunately, these ambitious would-be migrants are not welcome. Even the EU now turns a blind eye to the deployment of razor wire and robust policing on its southern borders (Trilling, 2021). Given the demographic drivers of these population flows, things are unlikely to change for the better in the foreseeable future – which, given rapidly deteriorating social and natural environments, in many poorer countries probably means never.

In a rationally ordered world of a sort that might resonate with Kantian idealists – supposing such people still exist, of course – Europe’s ageing and declining population might be thought to benefit from an influx of highly motivated, entrepreneurial young people. If only life were so simple. As the Swedish experience reminds us, even if all of the aspiring migrants had desirable skills, spoke their host’s language and respected local values, potential supply vastly outweighs demand – and it always will. In any case, actually integrating people into another culture and equipping them with the linguistic and technical skills to become productive members of society is labour-intensive and costly. Moreover, if recipient countries actually cherry-picked migrants on the basis of the host’s preferences rather than the migrant’s needs this would also undermine any idea of a universal right to safety and security.

It is not only cosmopolitans who might be outraged by such policies, however. More to the point, the generosity and understanding of local populations in recipient countries may rapidly erode – as it has in a number of Scandinavian countries. Whatever one thinks of such parochial attitudes, they do beg a fundamental and uncomfortable question: are there limits to the number of souls that ‘developed’ nations are obliged to take in? If so how, and by whom, are fate and fortune to be decided? Even more problematically, how are those excluded from such quotas – and their chance at the good life – to be discouraged, even forcefully rejected? I have no idea what the ‘right’ answer to such questions might be, but I suspect that addressing them will be one of the unending dilemmas confronting policymakers in the broadly conceived wealthy West. In this context, Australia offers a possible response, but it is not necessarily one we might want to see widely adopted.

Guarding good luck

The late Australian public intellectual, Donald Horne (2009), famously described his homeland as 'the lucky country'. He was being ironic: even Australia's mediocre political class could hardly fail to make a decent fist of governing a country that inherited democracy, the rule of law and seemingly endless natural wealth. Even when such wealth is shared highly unevenly, Australia's still smallish population means that things could be worse – much, much worse, in fact. One might think that Australia's people and politicians would recognise their historically contingent, entirely arbitrary good fortune and seek to share it with the world. Sadly not. On the contrary, Australian politicians in particular are possibly best known for implausible and self-serving rationales for continuing massive domestic and international environmental destruction, as well as for developing one of the most callous, even inhuman, policies toward asylum seekers in the world.

And yet it is far from clear on what basis migrant inflows should be determined, much less policed. What is clear, is that there are limits to the numbers of people that countries – especially the demographically smallish variety – can take in without overwhelming their capacity to peacefully and successfully absorb them. Once this is conceded, the policy issues become rather more technical than moral. Consequently, it is all too likely that pragmatism will trump principle, and enjoy widespread public support. One possible theoretical alternative is for the North to help the South to try and make migration less desirable in the first place by helping to stabilise and improve the latter's political, economic and especially environmental prospects. The historical record of even well-intentioned efforts to achieve such things suggests they are often too small and poorly conceived to be effective (Collier, 2007). More fundamentally, of course, even if there was a serious appetite to attempt such things and the implicit transformations in North-South relations they imply, they are likely to take a long time to make a difference and time is one thing climate scientists tell us we absolutely do not have enough of.

One might hope that the sense that time is running out, and that the entire world faces imminent catastrophe in the absence of unprecedented levels of cross-border cooperation, might focus the attention of the 'international community'. Unfortunately, it is becoming ever clearer that there is no such thing; even regional varieties of cooperation are geographically delimited, and generally

unable to act effectively. The EU was the historical exception that proved this rule, but its current panoply of problems suggests that it may not be the benchmark for effective international cooperation much longer, its often laudable efforts to address climate change notwithstanding. The discouraging reality is that the world remains composed of nation states, even the most effective and enlightened of which are constrained by domestic politics, the limitations of their leaders, and sheer material circumstances.

If only some of the bleak future scenarios painted by climate scientists prove to be accurate, then the political space in which policymakers act will become ever more unforgiving and constrained. Indeed, one doesn't need to subscribe unquestioningly to James Lovelock's (2006) Gaia hypothesis to think that what's left of the natural world is responding to problems we have created. Covid and its variants are a painful reminder of both our impact on the physical environment and the latter's capacity to harm us when mistreated (Carrington, 2020). Given that global population growth is unlikely to flatten out or reverse in time to make a profound difference to the underlying and destructive relationship between us and the natural world, then we seem likely to face a future of unending environmental calamities of one sort or another as the limits to growth are once more vividly demonstrated.

Are our leaders simply too stupid to save us?

By now we might hope or expect that even the dimmest of policymakers would have grasped the idea that there is a global environmental problem and that only a global response has any chance of doing something about it. To be fair, many of the world's leaders do seem to understand that business as usual is not an option, even if they are often less convinced that business or – more accurately, perhaps – industrial capitalism is a key part of the problem. Advocates of 'degrowth' make the cogent and seemingly incontrovertible point that current patterns of consumption and resource exploitation simply cannot go on; or they cannot go on without undermining the very material basis upon which human and other life forms depend (Hickel, 2020).

If the relative fate of human beings is determined overwhelmingly by a national frame of reference, we might be forgiven for thinking that the future of our fellow creatures would be subject to an even more exacting calculus of concern.

Generally, it is. As we blithely chomp our way through the carcasses of 19 billion chickens, as well as billions of sheep, cows and pigs each year, most of us give little thought to their comfort or – more consequentially from a policy perspective, perhaps – the impact that the mass production of meat has on the natural environment (Milman, 2021). If it is difficult to imagine political leaders taking the needs, possibly even the rights, of foreign human beings seriously, how much more unlikely is it that they would become exercised over the fate of our furry and feathered friends? In yet another paradox, however, the Australian government's neglect of cuddly Koalas and a dying barrier reef generally elicits more concern than its treatment of asylum seekers.

Rather dispiritingly, Australian leaders are far from the worst offenders when it comes to prioritising development over preservation, human over animal welfare, short-term over long-term policies or the parochial over the global. In the face of some very stiff competition, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro probably deserves the title for the most environmentally destructive, short-sighted, stupendously ignorant leader on the planet (Menezes and Barbosa, 2021). It is simply impossible to imagine him taking part in a serious, open-ended discussion with his international counterparts on the best way to save the planet, as opposed to his own interests and obsessions. Even before Vladimir Putin began threatening to unleash a nuclear holocaust, megalomaniacs around the world were busily plotting to further their own interests, right historical wrongs or generally make their national brand great again. The fact that no country can ever be made great again when the environment is collapsing before our eyes seems to have escaped their attention.

One serious question to ask, therefore, is this: is the current generation of international leaders especially stupid, short-sighted, incompetent and incapable of rising to the challenge of climate change in particular, or would any leader from any historical epoch have been equally flummoxed by the contemporary concatenation of crises? In other words, are the problems simply too big and too difficult, and the possible remedies so technically and politically demanding as to render them impossible? Just for the sake of argument, let me run through some possible strategies that the international community might consider, if there actually was such a thing – rather than the increasingly fractious collection of competing states and economic interests that currently approximates 'global

governance'. For all the no doubt well-intentioned COP gatherings and the worthy statements they generate, next to nothing of any significance has actually been done to change the direction of travel thus far.

Saving the planet 101

There are many clever people on the planet, and some of them have good – even plausible! – ideas about what might be done to put Spaceship Earth back on an even keel, if that's still a useful metaphor. Unfortunately, none of them seem to be in positions of power within their own countries, let alone capable of designing and implementing the sorts of global policies we may need if we're to survive. What follows are some well-known and some not-so-well-known (generally my own) ideas about what might be done. Let me say at the outset that I have absolutely no expectation that any of these ideas will be taken seriously, much less implemented, and certainly not in the time available to us. Plans always seem to have 10 points; here are mine:

1. Listen to the experts. Some people know more about what's going on than others. Indeed, it's the very basis of an intellectual division of labour that has provided great achievements and an astonishing level of insight into material reality. The challenge here is to restore the credibility of (some) experts and technocrats when many potentially useful forms of knowledge have been misused and or/discredited.
2. Develop international forums where open-ended Habermasian-style communicative rationality prevails and provides the basis for disinterested problem-solving. (Just because Habermas was a man and a product of the Western Enlightenment doesn't necessarily mean he was wrong).
3. Empower the United Nations and its offshoots. Yes, the UN's track record is patchy, but it's all we've got and we don't have time to start again. Giving the UN its own income stream through a Tobin tax on (generally speculative and unproductive) international capital flows would give it the certainty and independence it needs to be more effective.

4. Allow the UN to create a permanent security force with which to guarantee the sovereignty of individual states. The UN should be the repository of a handful of nuclear weapons (with which to discourage megalomaniac opportunists), with all other states rapidly moving to outlaw them. (States are both part of the problem and possible solutions; they're not unproblematic, but we are where we are. They remain potentially effective actors, but need to focus on *collective* security not just their own.)
5. Immediately ban international arms sales and discourage the pointless expenditure on new weapons systems by individual governments. The US and China should jointly sponsor this initiative and demonstrate its potential efficacy by negotiating an arms reduction treaty and using all the money saved to restructure their domestic economies along sustainable lines. (They could also give some to countries that really need assistance, too, of course).
6. Initiate a massive redistribution of wealth both within and especially between states. Unless the security and even the relative prosperity of the South is also addressed, there is little chance truly global accords will be reached. The success of the Marshall Plan in reconstructing post-war Europe and institutionalising cooperation suggests such schemes could actually work.
7. Discourage over-consumption and tax self-indulgence within and between countries. Wealth, inheritance and especially carbon taxes should be rapidly implemented. Travel should be rationed, with every citizen of voting age getting the same allocation the world over, allowing the poor to sell their share to the rich who simply 'must' fly around the world.
8. Demand that countries such as Australia immediately close down polluting industries (like coal) and help poorer states to rapidly transition to sustainable forms of energy.

9. Prioritise efforts to limit human population growth through education (especially for women and girls) and incentives. Bribing people not to have children may be one of the least-worst options left to us.

10. Cultivate an unprecedented change in human consciousness, especially among leaders, as they finally recognise that they have no other choice than to cooperate if they want to survive. Put our plight in perspective: the fate of this planet means diddly-squat to the cosmos, but it does to us.

It's hard to say which of these is the most unlikely to be acted on, or least likely to cause outrage about possible eurocentrism, elitism, authoritarianism or the supposed perils of world government. At one level it really doesn't matter: it is difficult to imagine the circumstances in which any of them might be enacted. That is precisely why I have added the most unlikely of all: a change of human consciousness about ourselves and our collective fate. One thing does seem clear, however: without some sort of frankly unimaginable change in values, behaviour, identity and ideas about leadership, nothing will change; or nothing will change for the better, at least. In the absence of an unprecedented paradigmatic shift in the way we think about ourselves as a species, our needs and wants and our relationships with each other and the natural world, all we can be confident about is that things will get worse, possibly much worse, and much more quickly than we might have believed possible. Indeed, in yet another ironic paradox, climate scientists are now being accused of having been too cautious in their predictions about our collective fate. Ho hum.

My personal mantra these days is 'do what you can, where you can'. Neither overly ambitious nor terribly original, perhaps, but turning up and taking part is mildly therapeutic, even if you're just cleaning up someone else's shit. Identifying your tribe is the thing; just recognising that there's one out there that you could interact with at all is not nothing. 'Only connect', as E.M. Forster famously said; the challenge now is to make that happen across borders. The response of other Europeans to the crisis in Ukraine is, at the time of writing, a hopeful sign, even if it's also a reminder that no such solidarity has been shown to Syrian victims of Russian brutality. Tribal identities have their limits, too, it seems.

I don't know if the grey nomads will prove to be my tribe, but given that I – and possibly the planet – may be on the last laps, my other motto is: see it before it disappears. It's not much of a defence for planet-destroying self-indulgence, I know. But if/when I get back, I'll sell the vehicle and donate the proceeds to Médecins Sans Frontières. Turns out you can even outsource your responsibility for saving the planet to someone who knows something useful and might actually make a difference. Not everything and everyone is stuffed up – or not yet, at least.

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