

Future Viewed in the Past

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ALASKA is one of the 50 states of the USA. According to the United States Census Bureau, it has an area of 570,641 square miles or 1,477,953 square kilometres, roughly 10 times than that of Bangladesh's. Alaska has vast reserves of oil, natural gas and coal. Alaska was sold to the USA by Russia in 1867 at 7.2 million dollars. Russia was then ruled by Tsar Alexander II. As detailed in the US State Department's Office of the Historian, Russia originally offered to sell Alaska in 1859 but the sale did not materialise at that time due to the looming US civil war. After the end of the civil war, Russia renewed its offer in 1867 and the then US Secretary of State William Seward accepted it and the process of purchase was set in motion. On May 28, 1867, US president Andrew Johnson signed the deal after approval of the Senate and on October 18, 1867, Alaska was formally handed over to the USA. However, the purchase was criticised by the people and the press as waste of money on "Seward's icebox" and "Andrew Johnson's polar bear garden". The 7.2 million dollar price paid for Alaska in 1867 is equivalent to around 145 million dollars today which is not even enough to buy the house of Bill Gates in Washington that has a current price tag of close to 150 million dollars.

Tsar Alexander II did not envisage the future geopolitical importance of Alaska nor did the American people of that time. Imagine how the power balance in the present world would have changed if Russia still had Alaska. Also, being a neighbour of Canada and having a foothold on the same continent as the USA, Russia might have become an ally of these countries and even a member of the old NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement)!

Consider a relatively recent past: 1943. Thomas Watson, the chairman of IBM said, "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers." And in the more recent past - 1977, Ken Olsen, founder and CEO of Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) said, "There is no reason for any individual to have a computer in his home." At that time, DEC was a major player in the global computer industry. Today it is rather difficult to find a home in an educated society that does not have a computer.

It is really interesting to see how the most competent and leading personalities of a time viewed the future in a way that proved quite absurd at a later time.

In 1946, Darryl Zanuck, Head of 20th Century Fox Films, made this comment: "Television won't be able

to hold on to any market it captures after the first six months. People will soon get tired of staring at a plywood box every night."

There are of course many examples of people who could rightly guess how the future will be unfolding and what actions needed to be taken to cope with that. Charles Pearson, a British lawyer and politician, proposed a subway system of transportation for London about 180 years ago in 1843. He had the wisdom and foresight to contemplate a crowded city with a lot of traffic where an underground railway would be the fastest mode of transport. The British parliament took 10 years to accept his idea and authorise the construction of the world's first subway in London which opened in 1863.

news platform, Robert Muggah asserts that climate migration and disaster displacement are quickly becoming a 21st-century crisis. He noted that world temperatures will increase at a greater rate in the next 50 years than they have in the past 6,000 years. Currently, only one percent of the earth's surface is considered to be located in "barely liveable" hot zones. But this percentage could increase to almost twenty percent by the year 2050 and can force 1.2 billion people to flee across borders or be displaced internally. This is yet another dimension of the climate catastrophe the world is heading to.

Along with the above-mentioned clear vision, we also have plans to gradually reverse the course of climate change that is taking place and

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The future we conceive of guides our decisions and actions which in turn shape the future that would come into being. Take the example of climate change. Since the beginning of the industrial revolution around 1760, our material progress is associated with uploading huge amount of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. According to one estimate made by Dr. Simon Evans, a deputy editor and policy editor of Carbon Brief, around 2.5 trillion tons of CO₂ have been pumped into the atmosphere since 1850. The people of those times did not know or did not care about the resulting global warming that would cause persistent droughts, the melting of glaciers, the rise of sea levels and unprecedented weather events in our times.

Unlike our predecessors, we have now a clear vision of the future in terms of climate change. In an article published in December 2022 on Mongabay - a US-based conservation and environmental science

overcome its effects. There is a target of cutting down global carbon emissions by 45% by the year 2030. However, the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres declared on March 21, 2022, that the commitments made by different countries for reduced carbon emissions add up to an increase in global emissions by 14% instead of a decrease by 45%.

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