

PERSPECTIVES

All living things are diminished:
Breaking the national consensus on the environment

The Honourable Bob Debus AM

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The Honourable Bob Debus AM

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Responsibility for the content of the paper remains with the author. The views expressed in the paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Whitlam Institute or the University of Western Sydney.

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Whitlam Program to public discourse and policy. The Institute exists for all Australians who care about what matters in a fair Australia and aims to improve the quality of life for all Australians.

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Foreword

Bob Debus, author of the Whitlam Institute's latest *Perspectives* paper, has jumped many a hurdle in putting this essay to bed.

Few issues have proved to be so important, so volatile, so vexing as matters environmental. The science is monumental in the depth and the scale of the research and the evidence, though continuing to unfold, is solid. The challenges are real, the debate surreal. The peddled fantasies that defy reason derail informed public debate, corrupt essential policy development and leave us exposed to what one would have thought to be unacceptable environmental and economic risks.

One of the challenges Debus faced is the constantly changing political and public policy landscape. Every day seemed to bring some need for update: decisions on Abbot Point; negotiations with the Palmer United Party; new reviews; another report.

The heart of this essay though is not so dependent on 'the latest'. The paper distils a large body of historical material, policy precedent and political experience to argue that it is not only possible to seriously tackle these most difficult issues but that our own experience over recent decades demonstrates what can be achieved.

The key and the pre-condition for that is a 'substantial degree of national consensus'.

One of the things I like so much about this paper is that Debus doesn't present this as some sort of wishy-washy form of *bonhomie* but as an understanding of consensus that is hard won. It inevitably entails negotiation and compromise. It demands that tough choices be made. It does though require a modicum of good faith.

The essay benefits from Bob Debus's rare combination of knowledge and experience: lawyer and broadcaster; NGO leader; a long-serving politician in the NSW and Federal Parliaments which saw him with ministerial responsibilities across a series of major portfolios including several directly relevant to this paper such as Environment, Attorney General and Emergency Services; and his post-parliamentary appointments as Chair of the Advisory Group to draft the *National Wildlife Corridors Plan: A framework for Landscape-Scale Conservation* (adopted by Federal Cabinet in 2012) and academic positions.

This is an important essay and I have no doubt that you will find *All Living Things are Diminished* well worth a little of your time to read.

Eric Sidoti
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All living things are diminished: Breaking the national consensus on the environment

“When the earth is spoiled, humanity and all living things are diminished. We have taken too much from the earth and given back too little. It’s time to say enough is enough”.

These were the words of Prime Minister Bob Hawke launching Landcare in July 1989. He was standing, not coincidentally, at the town of Wentworth near the borders of three states at the confluence of the Murray and Darling Rivers.

Landcare was an innovation formed in the aftermath of a massive dust storm that enveloped Melbourne in 1983, through an alliance promoted by Rick Farley of the National Farmers Federation and Phillip Toyne of the Australian Conservation Foundation and built upon an initiative of the future premier of Victoria, Minister for Conservation Joan Kirner and earlier joint Commonwealth-State soil science work.

Its method was to bring together volunteer community groups, supported by all levels of government, to work for the conservation and restoration of natural resources in their local environment. Its success in shifting attitudes and practices at local level over the succeeding years has attracted interest and replication around the world.¹

Hawke’s speech was not calibrated for a tactical political purpose. It was a confident, practical and strategic account of the mainstream conservation policies of the ALP. He spoke of real and urgent issues: the acute problem of soil degradation and salinity; the need to protect endangered species; the importance of the Government’s policy to shift timber production away from native forest to plantations; the need for government and the community to cooperate to repair the damaged environment; and the global dimension of environmental problems like the significant increase in the world’s temperature.

But we are fortunate in some ways, he said: “We have many magnificent environmental treasures – the Great Barrier Reef, the Queensland Rainforest, the Tasmanian forests...The Franklin runs free. Our World Heritage sites are a source of national pride. Greenhouse research is being funded. We are phasing out chlorofluorocarbons.”

Bob Hawke’s capacity for negotiation and consensual solution fitted exactly with the creative breakthrough idea of Landcare. It also allowed him actually to take political advantage of the great protest to save the Franklin River and to establish the World Heritage Southwest Tasmanian Wilderness. It allowed him to talk inclusively to the community about the future of the environment.

At the launch of Landcare he also spoke of the need for Australia to strengthen its role in international negotiations over issues such as ‘the greenhouse problem,’ symbolically announcing the appointment of former High Court Judge and Governor General Sir Ninian Stephen as Ambassador for the Environment. The Brundtland Report, ‘Our Common Future’ had been published by the UN Commission on Environment and Development in 1987, introducing the irrepensible idea of ‘sustainable development’ to the world. The Earth Summit, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was to take place in Rio in 1992 and the Australian Government was already working on its then world-leading ecologically sustainable development strategy (ESD). The International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) had been set up by the United Nations in 1988.

The Consensus

If the history of nature conservation in Australia has been punctuated by a succession of famous community-led mass protest movements, it has until now also been characterised by a series of collaborative, long-term national and State conservation programs lasting through several changes of Government.

The community-based natural resource management program begun with Landcare continued through the Howard Government’s National Heritage Trust Program of 1996, with a funding injection from the privatisation of Telstra, and the Rudd Government’s Caring for Country Program of 2007, with a funding injection from the carbon tax after 2011. National Resource Management Organisations (NRMs) were established in the mid-1990s to provide coordination at the local level.

The Regional Forest Agreement procedure, begun in the early 1990s and informed by the then internationally remarkable but short-lived Resource Assessment Commission, conserved significant areas of remaining old growth forest.

The National Reserve System, another Hawke Government initiative, was established in 1992. Supported by significant scientific research and including government land reserves, Aboriginal lands, philanthropic land trusts and private owners, it is not yet comprehensive but has expanded to include 16% of Australia’s land surface in line with international commitments. The innovative system of Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs), in which traditional owners manage their own land, has expanded rapidly since the later 1990s.

In late 2012 the Gillard Government announced 'the world's largest marine reserve network.' Covering 3 million square kilometres in territorial waters around the entire continent and owing much to the Howard Government's Oceans Policy, the new system was praised around the world.²

The Howard Government's internationally recognised National Water Initiative was introduced in 2004: partly through the use of water pricing it has operated to improve efficiency of use and return water to the environment. The Water Act of 2007 was introduced with bipartisan support and led to the introduction, after great difficulty, of the landmark Murray Darling Basin Plan 2012.

When land use changes occurred, economic justice was generally achieved by the compensation or redeployment of workers and operators in a restructured industry. Difficult as the settlements have sometimes been to reach, they have been accepted by the parties and by succeeding governments – although the Tasmanian forest conflicts continue.

It is easy to forget that the issue of climate change too was, at an earlier time, addressed at the domestic level with a degree of bipartisanship. The Coalition Opposition under Andrew Peacock (1989) and John Hewson (1993) possessed substantial greenhouse gas reduction targets.³ More recently, climate change politics in Australia has become confused and strife-torn. While the end game is some time off, the influence of the coal export lobby and the electricity industry are presently in the ascendancy.⁴

In New South Wales, the State with which I am most familiar, a broad suite of measures to increase the efficiency of energy use in buildings and transport was first introduced without noticeable opposition in the early 2000s. After more strenuous negotiation Bob Carr's Government also introduced legislation controlling the clearing of native vegetation. Coupled with similar legislation in Queensland, it allowed Australia to meet the modest Kyoto emissions reduction target accepted by the Howard Government.

Carr established one of the first mandatory greenhouse gas emissions trading schemes anywhere in the world, beginning on 1 January 2003. Without particular controversy it imposed obligations on electricity retailers to reduce a portion of their emissions.

It worked satisfactorily for ten years, achieved approximately 144 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent abatement and closed only when a national carbon-pricing scheme within the Clean Energy Package was legislated by the Gillard Government in 2012.

It is of course an everyday reality that members of a Cabinet of either major political party in Australia support a range of contending interests and adhere to a sometimes quite wide spectrum of views about natural resource exploitation and environmental protection. Conflicts within a Cabinet have often been more intense than those within a Parliament. Events and rivalries interrupt and alter the implementation of policy.

While Bob Hawke was Prime Minister the Australian Government not only discussed cuts to emissions but, more prominently at the time, engaged in an elaborate consultation over the introduction of a national ESD framework. Later, Paul Keating distanced himself from these initiatives.⁵ In response to a surge of public anxiety about the 'millennial' drought and Kevin Rudd's successful advocacy, John Howard, in spite of his publicly acknowledged climate scepticism, committed to an emission-trading scheme in 2007.⁶

The tendency of national environmental policy, whatever its often considerable shortcomings and despite the occurrence of sharp difference and intermittent conflict, was for forty years to move closer to a broadly held consensus. At some level it has been understood that environmental problems in the landscape have emerged incrementally and solutions must be achieved over long periods of time – periods far longer than the normal political cycle.

It is evident also that the ALP has prospered when it has found a way to reconcile environmental issues and economic issues, to appeal at once to constituencies concerned with jobs and conservation. Whitlam, Hawke and Rudd did so on the three occasions when Labor has won office since 1949. Bob Carr served a record period in office doing so.

Tony Abbott has consistently followed the inverse strategy, seeking to attract the votes of recreational fishers angry about marine park zonings, resentful rural workers in Tasmania angry about restrictions on logging or anybody worried about the consequences of a decline in the coal industry.

The Abbott Opposition and then the Abbott Government, supported to differing degrees by first term conservative governments elected in the eastern States, have decisively interrupted the consensus.

The Crusade

It is undeniable that Australia's significant dependence on coal exports has confronted all recent Governments and the nation with knotted economic, political and ethical difficulties that were barely discussed at the turn of the century. The industry's prospects are uncertain, threatened by changing market conditions and ethical divestment campaigns by respectable institutions.

Tony Abbott has not sought to plan any economic transition or to find a national consensus. He has promoted the coal industry while touring the world. The approach has been described by a leading advisor to the conservative chancellor of Germany as an economic 'suicide strategy.'⁷

Far from strengthening Australia's participation in international climate negotiations, the Prime Minister has deliberately avoided them. In June 2013 he held a high profile meeting with Canadian Prime Minister

Stephen Harper, who has withdrawn Canada from the Kyoto Protocol, to declare the depth of his fellow feeling. Both men agreed that they would put their respective economies ahead of action on climate change: the priority would be to extend the future of the fossil fuel industries.

China, Japan and the USA seek ever more actively to reduce greenhouse emissions and more than 60 countries, including Germany, call for a total phase out of fossil fuels by 2050. The Australian Government has by contrast, relentlessly undermined the renewable energy industry and approved a number of exceptionally large new coalmines in Queensland's Galilee Basin. The Newman Government in Queensland has substantially weakened the legislation limiting land clearing.

The ferocious campaign against Julia Gillard's 2012 clean energy package alleged swingeing rises in carbon tax induced prices and job losses that proved, unsurprisingly, to be almost wholly untrue.

Government Ministers routinely downplay the significance of climate change, reluctant ever to acknowledge that it is in reality occurring, on the best evidence available, at the highest predicted rates.⁸ When prominent commentators close to Government question the professional competence of the Bureau of Meteorology⁹ or suggest that the Liberal Governments of Victoria and New South Wales are weakly caving in to green socialists who oppose coal seam gas drilling,¹⁰ then serious debate about critical issues is frustrated.

Adopting the 'cut through' technique of contemporary political practice, the Prime Minister famously mocked the emissions trading scheme "as a so-called market in the non-delivery of an invisible substance to no one."¹¹ Some voters were presumably confirmed in their opposition to the scheme as intended, but this is not an argument made in good faith. In truth the scheme was similar to that proposed by John Howard, a market instrument of a kind exactly advocated by Milton Friedman, the patron saint of neoliberal economics: he preferred a trading scheme to government regulation.¹²

The great national conservation programs of the past are stalled or reversed. In December 2013 the new Government announced suspension of management plans for the new marine national reserve system. Fisheries Minister Colbeck suggested there had been insufficient consultation and that the decision was "not based on science." Marine scientists disagreed; pointing out also that the consultation had attracted 750,000 submissions and engaged in 350 stakeholder meetings.¹³

It was announced in the May 2014 Budget that The National Water Commission, established to guide and audit the progress of the internationally admired National Water Initiative is to be abolished. This caused the Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists to observe that "Australian Governments are walking away from water reform at the very time when we should be preparing for the next inevitable drought."¹⁴ This concern was reinforced

when Agriculture Minister Joyce announced a new program of dam building in October 2014.

Before coming to office the Liberal Party published a 40-page document setting out its 2030 Vision for Developing Northern Australia.¹⁵ It was speaking about a place of especial beauty, spiritually important to most Australians, let alone its Aboriginal inhabitants; the world's largest ecologically intact tropical savannah with one of the largest networks of free flowing rivers left anywhere. Over the last fifty years a succession of scientific and official reports has advised that opportunities for development are quite restricted.¹⁶ There is belligerence in the failure of the vision document even once to mention the environment or its conservation.

At the same time the eastern State Governments have weakened National Parks Services with budget demands and organisational restructures that reduce the staff and resources available for threat management and environmental protection. They have deliberately challenged the ecological integrity of National Parks. Livestock grazing, logging, tourist development and recreational fishing in sanctuary zones have been permitted or proposed in various Parks across the jurisdictions.¹⁷

Where Does It Come From?

In any Parliament there will be a certain number of conservative MPs – mostly older, mostly but not exclusively from bush electorates – who are cranky about any restriction on their habitual approach to the exploitation of the land. They will take any opportunity to do the greenies in the eye but their motivation is visceral rather than intellectual.

A number of other MPs, from both major parties, may have loyalty to particular industries whose values they embrace and defend. However these interests and attitudes are not new.

In an opinion piece published on the Liberal Party website to mark its own 70th Anniversary, Tony Abbott says that more 'freedom' is the central pillar of his Party's concern. It inherits both the "liberal and conservative traditions" but it is not ideological in its practice. "We assess ourselves," he says, "not against ideology but against common sense". However the evidence for the last proposition is not strong.

The attitude of the Republican Party in the United States toward environment policy altered dramatically with the rise of the neo-conservative movement. President Richard Nixon signed landmark Threatened Species and Clean Air Legislation into law and established the US Environment Protection Authority. The administration of President Ronald Regan attacked EPA regulations and undermined the National Parks administration. By the time George Bush was campaigning against Al Gore in the mid-1990s, the Cold War had ended and the "green scare" had replaced the "red scare." The ideas of Brundtland and the Earth Summit were swept from public discourse.

Neo conservative politicians and think tanks in North America and Australia have since debated climate change science as if it was a question of political opinion and embraced the fossil fuel industry. Environmental regulation, like taxes, came to be characterised as a constraint on the market and upon personal liberty.

Amidst much publicity Tony Abbott attended an anniversary dinner, along with Rupert Murdoch, at Australia's oldest and most influential think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), in April 2013. A flagship review article published earlier in the year by the Institute had been entitled *Be Like Gough: 75 Radical Ideas to Transform Australia*, and it suggested that there is a threat to 'our liberty' posed by what they call the 'culture of government.' The danger, it said, was not only to be found in the studios of the ABC or among publicly funded and well-connected academics. There is a wider question. The essential problem is the generally 'spiralling growth of bureaucracies and regulators'.

The Review Article proposed that Tony Abbott needed to make deep changes in his first year in office if he really wanted to alter Australian society – as Whitlam had so decisively done. For this purpose five of the first six 'ideas' on their long list were: to repeal the carbon tax, abolish the Department of Climate Change, abolish the Clean Energy Fund – both now done – to repeal section 18c of the Racial Discrimination Act and repeal the Renewable Energy Target.¹⁸

The Government's announced abandonment of an attempt to change the *Racial Discrimination Act* in August 2014 – in the face of a powerful backlash among angry ethnic communities that common sense might easily have predicted – so disturbed the IPA in its messianic purpose that it took out supporter-funded advertisements attacking the Prime Minister.

The idea that environmental regulation is an attack upon individual liberty does not pass a 'common sense' test. Contemporary environmental laws seek to prevent pollution and to restrain practices of land use that are not sustainable. The public interest purpose is to protect and conserve the environment upon which the health and prosperity of the community ultimately depends. The degree of risk to the environment is judged by biological, not legal criteria.

Of course environmental laws or the procedures for their implementation may in particular circumstances be unreasonable. But they are in principle no more an attack on 'freedom' than the rules of road safety or John Howard's rules to control the possession of firearms. They are not inconsistent with the conservative political tradition, the social democratic tradition or the liberal tradition that both major parties arguably share. They do however appear to be inconsistent with the ideas of neo-conservatism.

Nevertheless, these appear to be the attitudes that influence the Prime Minister and prominent Ministers around him.

The IPA authors single out the "cottage industry of consultancies and grants handed out by the public service to environmental groups" as a particularly egregious example of the "cult of government" – a disdainful characterisation of community-based natural resource management that fails the 'common sense' test in several ways.

The 'environmental groups' concerned consist mostly of volunteers, many of them landholders, who contribute their own resources and share in the strong conservative tradition of caring for the land. As a practical matter there is no other way for the nation to effectively repair and maintain the natural value of the land at a local level. The community environment-based organisations will be a vital element in any effective national system of environmental management.

Government support for community-based environment groups is similar to the arrangements supporting volunteer bushfire brigades. In that case a State government agency provides a permanent organisation, very expensive fire-fighting equipment, training and insurance and the volunteers provide indispensable emergency services that cannot be afforded in any other way. The market cannot explain their behaviour: community solidarity can.

Irreplaceable Genetic Loss

Most discussion in the contemporary media is conducted as if climate change alone defines the present human-caused environmental crisis. In fact, the loss and fragmentation of habitat, wildlife disease, invasion of feral animals and hunting of native species has so far caused far more ecological damage than climate change.

The evidence that species extinctions are occurring at massively higher rates that could be explained by natural disturbance is undeniable.¹⁹ Australia is one of the more biologically diverse nations in the world. It is estimated that 10 per cent of all the species on Earth occur on this continent. Several hundred million years of isolation, stable geology and variable climate have had the consequence that most of our mammals, flowering plants, reptiles and frogs are found nowhere else.

Land clearing and the introduction of farming methods adapted to the moist, fertile and geologically recent soils of Europe to a dry land of ancient skeletal soils, along with a menagerie of introduced and invasive plant and animal species, guaranteed that harm would be done quickly. Australia has entirely lost 54 species, including 3 birds, 4 frogs and 27 mammals and local extinctions abound. Over 1,600 species are listed as endangered or vulnerable under the Federal Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. There is evidence to suggest a drastic decline of many mammal species across regions in remote northern Australia at the present time.

This is our share of what zoologists globally have come to call the 6th Great Extinction. The American conservationist and scholar David Johns observes that it took the Earth 10 million years to recover from the Cretaceous extinction caused by an asteroid strike 65 million years ago. Now, he says, "Humans are behaving like an asteroid hitting the Earth in slow motion. We are destroying what we could never create...Is being an asteroid the great purpose of our species...to steal the lives and homes of millions of species and billions of creatures?"²⁰

For many, perhaps most people, this proposition is spiritually troubling. In any event the economic costs of ecosystem decline are massive. I recently came across an example that will have familiarity for Australians: rabbits have cost our agriculture many tens of billions of dollars over the last century but recent research into early records suggests that native fauna, especially quolls, were responsible for the 'widespread failure of rabbits to establish in early Australia'.²¹

It was the extirpation of native animals by early settlers that assisted the spread of rabbits. An effective scientific program to reintroduce native marsupial carnivores would suppress them.

Our World Heritage Sites: embarrassment replaces pride

Nothing has better demonstrated the increasing isolation of Australia in the environmental politics of the world than events at the meeting of the The World Heritage Committee of UNESCO (WHC) in June 2014.

Representatives from twenty-one countries are elected to the Committee by the General Assembly of the United Nations. The Committee is responsible for the implementation of the World Heritage Convention, which was ratified by the Whitlam Government in 1974. It has the final say on which property is inscribed on the World Heritage List and also those inscribed or deleted on the List of World Heritage in Danger. For 40 years Australian environment ministers of all parties have been proud and committed participants in its work.

However, at the Doha Meeting of the WHC in June 2014 the Australian delegation conducted its business in hostile isolation. The WHC sharply criticised Australian Government policy toward two of our nation's most famous World Heritage sites.

The first case concerned Australia's response to rising levels of global concern for the health of the Great Barrier Reef. Following the seminal protest campaign of Judith Wright and her friends, the Whitlam Government had passed legislation in 1973 to prevent the State Government of Queensland from drilling for oil on the Great Barrier Reef and then created the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and an Authority to manage it. This occurred in an atmosphere of some bipartisanship at the federal level and the Howard Government later enlarged the Park.

In 1981 the Reef became the first of 19 Australian sites inscribed on the World Heritage List. Over more recent years it has been deteriorating under the influence of climate change, which is affecting coral reefs everywhere, and local pollution from agricultural runoff and industrial development.

Since 2008 considerable funding has been provided to programs to assist farmers to reduce agricultural runoff. However, in 2012 an expert UNESCO team, noting the continued decline in the overall health of the reef, recommended that Australia should not permit any new port developments along the Queensland coast within the World Heritage area and that it should complete a strategic assessment of the Reef before 2015.

The text of the draft WHC decision in 2014 used strong diplomatic language to note that some recent development approvals had been made in the absence of a completed strategic assessment and particularly sought reconsideration of a decision by the Great Barrier Reef Authority to permit the dumping of 3 million cubic tonnes of dredge spoil into the sea during the development of a new coal terminal at Abbot Point near Bowen.

Attention was drawn in the WHC papers to the lack of a final long-term port development strategy for Queensland. The Federal Government's transfer of environmental approval powers to Queensland, part of a nationwide policy to establish so-called 'one stop shop' development approvals, was described as 'apparently premature'.²²

Queensland Premier Campbell Newman at first reacted with defiance to the UNESCO report: 'We', he said, 'are in the coal business.' However, the Australian and Queensland Governments clearly felt some anxiety when a number of high profile international banks responded to social media campaigns – a sign of the future – by announcing that they would not invest in Abbot Point while the WHC remained unsatisfied.²³

Before the Doha meeting and during its proceedings Australian officials conducted an intense diplomatic campaign seeking to remove critical commentary from the draft WHC decision.

It is reported by a number of those present that the Australian delegation appeared to be shocked by the vehemence of their rejection. The humiliating possibility that the Reef would be placed in the World Heritage in Danger List in 2015 was actually increased: an appalling prospect for a tourist industry employing 136,000 people in Queensland, far more than in mining or agriculture.²⁴

The delegates to WHC are for the most part polite civil servants and diplomats, not rowdy community activists, but their anger was plain to see as they proceeded, later in the Meeting, to discuss a second issue. The Abbott Government had submitted a request for WHC to remove 74,000 hectares of Tasmania's high conservation value tall eucalypt forest from the World Heritage List.

The forest had been inscribed on the List the previous year, supported by a strong scientific case; its nomination was an element in the forestry pact negotiated between Federal and State Labor Governments, industry and unions to end an extraordinarily long running thirty year dispute over the use of timber resources in Tasmania.

The Liberals had promised the delisting submission before the Federal election of 2013 in anticipation of the State election of 2014. It was an element in the Coalition campaign lead by Tasmanian Senators Abetz and Colbeck to unwind the forest 'peace deal' all over again. The Prime Minister confirmed the promise 10 days before the March State election at a timber industry dinner in Canberra: 'We don't support... further lockups,' he proclaimed... 'we have quite enough National Parks'.

The essence of a World Heritage listing is permanence. Only once ever before has any country sought the delisting of a natural site. The Australian submission suggesting that a decision taken by the WHC in 2013 should immediately be reversed self-evidently threatened the purpose of the World Heritage Convention itself.

In the event Germany, Colombia and Portugal spoke briefly, the latter using the undiplomatic word 'feeble' to describe the arguments for delisting and the item was dismissed brusquely, by unanimous vote, in 7 minutes. The delisting proposal was inept and predictably unsuccessful.

It is barely conceivable that the Government was not warned of the almost certain outcome of its submission by the Public Service. Australia's official submission to the WHC depended on a claim that the original listing was mistaken because the forest was degraded: an independent scientific report made it plain that the claim was wrong.

For practical purposes a tendentious, parochial political campaign had been injected into a prominent international forum that seeks, for obvious good reason, to avoid decisions that are politically controversial. This heedless provocation undermined Australia's international standing and credibility.

After Doha

Shortly after the events in Doha, the Federal Government approved the development of the Carmichael Coal Mine in the Galilee Basin, a signal of a clear intention to expand the industry. In the present circumstances of declining coal trade the mine may never proceed but on the other hand it has the potential to become one of the very largest in the world and it would export through Abbot Point.

There were at the same time indications of rising public concern. A Senate Inquiry Report²⁵ called for a temporary ban on seabed spoil dumping and there were media reports showing that the recommendations by the Great Barrier Reef Authority to allow dumping of dredge spoil in the sea had not been supported by its own scientists.²⁶ By September governments and developers were persuaded that they should begin planning after all for an onshore solution for Abbot Point dredging.

However, in October leading scientists suggested that the draft Reef 2050 Long-term Sustainability Plan of the Australian and Queensland Governments 'won't restore the reef, it won't even maintain it in its already diminished state'.²⁷ They drew attention in particular to the cumulative impact of large potential increases in agricultural production, population and dredging within existing ports associated with coal exports. An effective campaign of action to support the Reef will require strengthened independence for the Great Barrier Reef Authority; much increased funding for pollution and runoff control; restored and increased research capacity; and, at least, better management of coal shipping.

In Tasmania new legislation marked the revival of the 'forest war' although it will be in the rational interest of almost nobody. Areas promised for conservation reservation under the former 'peace deal' are to be open to logging after 2020.

The legislation allows for the possible future repudiation of long settled reservation arrangements made under the

Commonwealth-funded Regional Forest Agreement of 1997, an action without precedent that will at the very least create legal ambiguity. It proposes that \$7 million left over from \$20 million allocated by the previous Government to close parts of the industry down, will now be offered to contractors to re-enter it.²⁸

The revenge of a culture war is exacted at the expense of democracy. Creation of new reserves will require an almost impossible two-thirds majority in the State Parliament; extraordinarily harsh legislation has been introduced to punish forest protests²⁹; and the environment movement is excluded from forest policy consultation.

Deliberately intended or not these actions will guarantee that the environmental movement will feel aggrieved and the 'forest war' will continue. In any event the new legislation creates a climate of uncertainty and disruption that will last years into the future and divert Government attention from industries more likely to grow: tourism, IT and specialist food production. There can be no confidence that forestry will be able in the meantime to generate significant new investment, markets or jobs.

A wider agenda

The Abbott Government has attempted to sharply reverse more Howard Government policy by withdrawing the Commonwealth from responsibility for environmental management. The changes systematically benefit the minerals sector.

In December 2013 it weakened public interest advocacy when it followed a number of the new conservative State Governments and peremptorily removed funding from the network of Environmental Defenders Offices.

It also abolished the Standing Ministerial Council on Environment and Water. The Council and its predecessors are the means by which national environmental policies of fundamental importance like *Australia's Biodiversity Strategy 2010/2030* or *Australia's Strategy for the National Reserve System 2009/2030* have been developed collaboratively for the last 40 years.

The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Act* of 1999 established a framework for consistent Commonwealth oversight of a list of nine matters agreed to have national environmental significance – including World Heritage, the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and water resources.

The Business Council of Australia had conducted a vociferous campaign of complaint on behalf of the mining industry, alleging that these arrangements increased costs by duplicating planning requirements. The Gillard Government briefly entertained the idea of using the bilateral agreement procedure available under the legislation to accredit "one stop shop" planning approval procedures, which delegated existing Commonwealth responsibility for major developments back to individual State jurisdictions. The Abbott Government kept an

election promise and signed such agreements with all States by October 2014.

The procedure had been originally conceived to raise the planning standards of the States but that cannot possibly be achieved by the present hasty and politically expedient negotiations.³⁰ It is unclear how the Commonwealth will regard legislation passed without debate by the Queensland Government in September to remove any right of public objection to a mining project if the Coordinator General – the government official responsible for planning large scale infrastructure projects – is satisfied that the environmental impact has been addressed.³¹

Professor Fowler suggests that the claims about costs duplication are exaggerated and the causes for delay in approvals frequently caused by State concerns or the proponents themselves. He points out that the details of agreements are different in each jurisdiction, so that resource companies would anyway be likely to face the self-defeating possibility of dealing not with 'one stop' but an "eight stop shop" and additional legal challenges.³²

An alliance of Green, PUP and ALP Senators announced in early October that they would disallow the new agreements in any event.

The May 2014 budget had meanwhile become unusually divisive. The Treasurer's claim that a crisis of debt justified deep expenditure cuts was not widely accepted by economists.³³ Attention has understandably been paid to the social effects of the expenditure cuts proposed but their consequences for the environment were also severe.

Scientific research, much of it related to the environment was cut by \$420 million. The operating budget of the Department of the Environment was cut by a quarter, causing crippling job losses of 500 in 3 years and a disastrous loss of expertise. The Department and its programs are at their lowest ebb.

Before the budget the Government promised to maintain funding for Landcare and the Caring for Country conservation grant program. There are now 5000 Landcare groups across the country, with a membership of around 500,000 volunteers.

They were astonished to see a headline in *The Land* newspaper saying 'Landcare forsaken for Green Army'.³⁴ The budget had taken \$484 million from Landcare over four years, leaving many groups devastated, and instead provided \$525 million – around one quarter of the natural resource management allocation – to a new short term youth job creation scheme. The Green Army is an employment program. It cannot substitute for the much larger 'army' of trained Landcare volunteers engaged in revegetation or pest management programs at the local level, which by their nature must be sustained over many years.

Around \$28 billion was provided for specific purpose capital payments to the States for roads and other infrastructure – an increase. However, almost none of it was for emissions-saving public transport.³⁵ In August a

global review of land transport efficiency ranked Australia last in the OECD, largely because of an increase in road funding and a withdrawal from urban rail.³⁶

The Government meanwhile set out to obliterate most of Julia Gillard's well-designed Clean Energy Package. Coalition MPs laughed and hugged each other in the Parliament as the carbon price was abolished in July. It was reported later in the month that the New Zealand Southern Alps had lost a third of their ice in recent years.³⁷

Lord Deben, a former Thatcher Government Minister and now head of the UK Committee on Climate Change said, "Mr Abbott is recklessly endangering our future as he is Australia's".³⁸ The *New York Times* said that Australia has chosen to become "an outlier".³⁹ By September it was reported that emissions for the two-month period had risen by the largest amount in 8 years.⁴⁰

Rational promises to keep the bipartisan 20% mandatory Renewable Energy Target (RET) and maintain funding of the grant-making Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA) were broken. An irrational promise to abolish the investment-enhancing Clean Energy Finance Corporation (CEFC) was not. The Government claimed that the Corporation crowded out private finance in the renewable energy sector but the opposite was easily shown to be true. The Senate has refused to agree to the abolition of CEFC.

Renewable energy targets exist in over 60 countries and the modelling for a review established in February under the chairmanship of an avowed climate change sceptic showed in September that the Australian RET was achieving its purpose too: cutting emissions at little economic cost.⁴¹

The Review nevertheless recommended that the target should be cut back or scrapped because it disadvantages (oligopolistic) fossil fuel generators in the market. It was not necessary to establish a review to draw this conclusion. While negotiation continued in the Government and the Parliament about the future of the RET it was reported that uncertainty about policy had caused a 70% collapse in investment in renewables.⁴²

Future Response

Plenty of other OECD countries are showing how any future government could engage in good faith with issues of climate change as Hawke, Carr, Hewson and Turnbull began to do in the past.

The publications of Climateworks Australia⁴³ show how a determined program of conversion, using available technology, could achieve dramatic emissions reductions in Australia. In a report coinciding with a UN climate summit avoided by the Prime Minister in September 2014, it demonstrates that Australia could reach a 50% reduction target by 2030, become almost carbon free by 2050 and keep the economy strong.⁴⁴

The outlines of strategy mixing market and non-market measures have become plain: a systematic, sector-by-

sector campaign of practical negotiation, building on previous work with industry representatives at national and state level, to improve energy efficiency; some elements of the previous Clean Energy Package to drive the change to renewable sources of energy and a new engagement in global initiatives to deal with climate change.

It would be a new start: a reminder of the conclusive reinstatement of Medibank after the Fraser Government had demolished substantial parts of it.

Any future Government engaging in good faith with issues of biodiversity protection will need to support and build upon existing administrative structures. It will pay attention to the need for reasonable consistency of policy and the adequacy of funding. Cuts at State level are at present compounding the problems caused by frequent policy changes and fluctuations in funding that have occurred under both political parties at the federal level. It will seek to establish a set of environmental accounts to match our economic accounts.

Although the national conservation programs of the last 40 years have been vital to the protection of the environment they have certainly not been wholly successful. In some areas threats to ecosystems such as invasive species have worsened; new threats emerge; wildlife continues to decline and some habitats continue to fragment. If the losses are to be decisively stemmed and the landscape permanently restored, the effort will have to be more effective – it will require sustained, mainstream funding and some better methods.

One important response has been the development of the idea of 'large landscape conservation.' Building on the insights of biologists like E.O. Wilson and Michael Soule in the United States and Brendan Mackey in Australia, it recognises that the isolation of healthy habitat disrupts the connectivity of ecosystems and reduces the capacity of the environment to function naturally. More effective conservation requires national parks, but it also requires management to enhance conservation values over much wider areas of surrounding and connecting land of all tenures than we have in the past assumed.⁴⁵

The Australian Governments National Wildlife Corridor Plan⁴⁶ brought forward by Minister Tony Burke in 2012 was the first whole of continent framework for the management of large-scale landscape conservation anywhere in the world. New organisations are emerging to establish permanent, closely organised collaborative public /private partnerships working to restore and rehabilitate land, in the case of the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative over the length of the Great Dividing Range.⁴⁷ It is no surprise that Landcare groups are among those who have enthusiastically identified with a number of successful new Australian initiatives.⁴⁸

There exists a widespread assumption among practitioners, reflecting their own experience, that government funding for natural resource management and agricultural extension will inevitably continue to

decline or at least that there 'will never be enough government money' for environment protection. It is also true that Australia's non-government and philanthropic conservation sector holds an increasing conservation estate and is often impressively innovative, while NRM bodies are exploring alternative sources of funding.⁴⁹

These developments are not inconsistent with an increase in government funding. In round figures and leaving aside the Green Army component, the four-yearly federal budget for natural resource management is close to \$1.5 billion, much or perhaps most of it already committed by the previous Federal Government. In recent years the State contribution including National Parks budgets has also been declining but it is probably about an equal sum. The Federal budget is committing perhaps six times more to the diesel fuel subsidy, used mostly by mining companies, than it is to environmental protection.

Australia has an outstanding cohort of scientists and a well-developed NRM structure, an advanced National Reserve System. With the benefit of some administrative reform and six times the present available Federal funding – still a quite modest amount – State, regional and local organisations could make transformative changes over a decade. It is a straight out matter of choice.

In a just published second edition of a publication containing proposals for improvement from more than 50 of Australia's leading environmental thinkers,⁵⁰ Professor Stephen Dovers pleads for some degree of bipartisan agreement on long term issues and directions. The best public policy would be achieved he says, if Australia were to establish a forum for national deliberation upon long-term sustainability and initiate public finance, administrative and research measures to support long-term programs. He suggests that initiatives like the National Water Initiative or Regional Forest Agreements show how to go about the integration of a comprehensive national framework. The policy directions for sustained collaboration, established 25 years ago, should be resumed.

Our history shows that some substantial degree of national political consensus is necessary for the long-term advancement of nature conservation and sustainable production. A government that again follows that path will have the support of the great majority of the Australian people.

Notes

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