

COMMENT

“Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose”

Dr Brian Marshall

The epigram loosely translates as *‘the more things change, the more they stay the same’*. In politics, it even more loosely implies that the real position or philosophy doesn't change, despite a plethora of weasel words and 'polly-speak' trying to convince us otherwise; tax cuts for 'big business' spring to mind. The epigram embodies a pessimistic, somewhat jaundiced perception.

In contrast, the 'silly season' from Christmas through to January-end will soon be over. People should be refreshed such that adversarial positions could and should be less blinkered by partisan obduracy, and more inclined to achieve beneficial compromises. This is a more optimistic perception.

Pessimism or optimism, which is preferable? What is the lesson from 2017 and what is the message as the 'pollies' return to office?

The perennial debate about date and concept of Australia Day is filling the media. Some councils have changed the day of citizenship ceremonies, some states ask why the First Fleet landing in NSW should be fundamental to their parts of Australia, and many indigenous people question why invasion of their lands should be a day for all Australians to celebrate. This is inevitably conflated with debates about the flag, republicanism and constitutional recognition of indigenous people. The PM mouths platitudes but seemingly lacks the conviction to lead.

Coal is important to some politicians¹; perhaps that's why people concerned over climate change see them as black hearted!

In 2016 in the Land and Environment Court (L&EC), 4Nature challenged the validity of the development consent for Springvale Mine's Extension. The L&EC rejected the arguments², but in 2017 the Court of Appeal reversed the judgement. Springvale's consent was unlawful, but the NSW government rapidly amended the legislation such that the Court of Appeals' decision was nullified³. The changed legislation validated Springvale's consent and modified the water quality test such that extensions are not required to meet a higher standard than the original development⁴. In effect, the legislation perpetuates the ill-informed standards of yesteryear; pity about polluting Sydney's water supply.

Following 22 years of deliberations, the recently approved Wallarah 2 longwall coalmine places the Central Coast's water supply at risk. In the 2011 State election, the Coalition came to power promising to stop Wallarah 2 and end mining in sensitive drinking water catchments. Now, 6-7 years later, all is forgotten! The Planning Assessment Commission contends that water-supply impacts can be 'acceptably managed' if the Company supplies up to 300 megalitres of treated mine water per year⁵. But what happens if that is insufficient, or the mine closes having irreparably damaged the geohydrologic regime? Once again, the NSW government appeases the coal industry. Intense community opposition and environmental concerns are sacrificed on the altar of jobs, royalties and overseas economic interests.

Prime Minister Turnbull has anointed the Snowy 2.0 scheme. It is said to be technically and financially feasible⁶. Do not be fooled! Technical feasibility means it can be engineered; financial feasibility means it can be funded, but it may not be either the best use of public money, or the best of several schemes in benefit/cost terms. For instance: some dispute the economic viability of Snowy 2.0 and suggest the cost could be around \$8 billion rather than the feasibility study's \$4 billion 'guesstimate'⁷; others favour the similarly-priced Tasmanian pumped-hydro scheme because its discrete projects better suit progressive market needs, whereas Snowy 2.0 unacceptably impacts Kosciuszko National Park and is a single project with a 10-year lead time⁸; and still others emphasise that developing smaller pumped hydro sites in NSW and Victoria could be better tailored to market needs and would have lower development and integration costs than the inflexible Snowy 2.0⁹

Recognition as the father of Snowy 2.0 might appeal to the PM, but profligate use of taxpayers' money to promote a grandiose thought-bubble is precipitate. This is particularly so, as the Australian Energy Market Operator has released a 'fast change' model, as opposed to the Turnbull government's 'business as usual' model, outlining a potential cut of 52% to all electricity-generated greenhouse gas emissions by 2030¹⁰.

Environment Minister Frydenberg, in responding to an editorial (*Dismal record on climate change* - Sydney Morning Herald, 19/01), assured readers that emissions are the lowest for 28 years on a per capita and GDP basis, the 2020 target will be over-achieved and that progress is being made towards the 2030 target¹¹. Such data are pathetic: falling per capita emissions over 28 years owe little to the Abbott and Turnbull governments and are now a function of the rapidly increasing population, whilst the 2020 and 2030 targets are ridiculously unambitious in terms of keeping global warming to 1.5-2.0 °C. Setting emissions-targets well below what they should be is grossly irresponsible.

Now to focus this article. Taking inordinate risks to achieve growth and benefit 'big business' (e.g., not properly addressing global warming, proceeding blindly with the Western Sydney Airport, supporting Adani and the declining coal industry, accepting Barangaroo over-development, and permitting the WestConnex fiasco) would seem to be an unchanging hallmark of Coalition governments. Either government(s) must change their philosophical approach, or they themselves must be changed!

¹http://www.awa.asn.au/AWA_MBRR/Publications/Latest_News/Water_contamination_worries_after_Springvale_coal_mine_approval.aspx

² <http://www.lithgowmercury.com.au/story/4163226/court-rules-in-favour-of-mine/>

³ http://www.edonsw.org.au/springvale_mine_extension

⁴http://www.awa.asn.au/AWA_MBRR/Publications/Latest_News/NSW_water_quality_under_threat_from_loosened_water_pollution_laws.aspx

⁵ <http://www.theherald.com.au/story/5173841/wallahah-2-coal-mine-approved-despite-risk-to-central-coast-water-supply/>

⁶ <https://www.snowyhydro.com.au/our-scheme/snowy20/snowy-2-0-feasibility-study/>

⁷ <http://www.afr.com/opinion/columnists/why-snowy-20-is-a-writeoff-from-the-start-20180104-h0d9z4>

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/turnbull-should-dump-snowy-20-for-clean-coal/news-story/a85049d3928c2666e30a6237a4e0fd5c>

⁸ <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/hopes-for-tasmanias-battery-of-the-nation-dangle-by-a-cable-or-two-20180117-h0jm5j.html>

<http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/warning-of-catastrophic-damage-to-waterways-if-snowy-20-spoils-plan-goes-wrong-experts-and-environmentalists-warn-20180118-h0k8np.html>

⁹ [https://arena.gov.au/blog/andrew-blakers/;](https://arena.gov.au/blog/andrew-blakers/)

<https://arena.gov.au/blog/pumped-hydro/>

¹⁰ <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/australias-energy-operator-proposes-fast-change-scenario-to-cut-emissions-by-52-per-cent-by-2030-20180123-h0mp6x.html>

¹¹ <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/smh-letters/seo-headline-here-20180118-h0k1f4.html>