

Greens and sustainable development

A presentation by Alan Oxley to the 2012 AEF Annual Conference October 20th 2012

Has the time of the Rational Environmentalist Arrived?

We are at a political point of time in Australia where the time has arrived.

There are two reasons for this. The first is that in Australia the public have finally associated high cost with the extreme propositions about what needs to be done to stop climate change.

As well, in significant part of the community the wildly unsubstantiated claims about the threat of climate change have also lost credibility. That has been very important.

So while we are now at a point in the Australian political cycle where a more rational discussion about the nature of climate change and what can practically be done about it can occur.

But I regret to say that we are not at that point when it comes to discussion about sustainable development and management of the environment a large.

Consider the situation in Tasmania. The forest industry is on the verge of seizure for no rational reason. The native forest industry is on the verge of collapse, yet the amount of native forest set aside is vastly in excess of any rational assessment of what is necessary to protect forest biodiversity.

There is talk now in Tasmania that it is reverting to a state where house prices are falling, people are moving interstate once again and unemployment is rising. Does the locking up of more forest make that condition "sustainable development".

Of course here we face another problem in even how we discuss managing the environment. The term sustainable development was coined in the UN and it was intended as an outcome of actions which preserved environmental values, at the same time as sustaining economic growth.

The Greens or the hard line ecologists never accepted this. Their philosophical premises were anti-consumerist, if not Marxist - I was reminded of this reading the WWF assessment of the state of the global economy before the recent sustainable development Summit in Rio de Janeiro.

WWF warned that the rate of consumption of resources was one and a half times the available supply and therefore both production and consumption has to be curbed. This was straight out the Communist Manifesto produced by Marx and Engels in the nineteenth century.

The apparently less ideological cousin is the concept which permeates Green thinking, that people are the real threat to the environment through consumerism.

Then there is the anti-humanist philosophy. People are the threat to the environment. You still occasionally see ecological philosophers veering into Robert Ehrlich's neo-eugenicist outlook that birth control is necessary to protect the environment.

Ironically it looks like the saviour might be prosperity, the very thing Greens consider threatens the environment. There are signs now in India that as prosperity increases, family sizes shrink. Children are no longer a form of social security.

It is blindingly obvious that without prosperity the environment cannot be managed. It has always struck me as interesting that the greatest environmental disasters have occurred in countries where poverty is prevalent and in countries where there is no democracy.

Communist development strategy wrecked the Aral Sea. People living under communism knew the Soviet model of industrial development was harming the environment. There was no avenue to express those sentiments.

The Kuznets curve is now out of fashion. It was a simple way of explaining that a minimum level of prosperity was necessary to manage adverse environmental effects of human activity. Now 'ecological economists' argue that the full costs of ensuring environmental protection are not met in market economies because the externalities are not accounted for.

What they are really objecting to is that the rest of society does not share their view of what is the environmental public good.

This is why the cap and trade system for reducing carbon emissions became a paragon to ecologists. Many paraded it around to demonstrate they supported a market instrument. This made them seem the free marketeers they were not. The "cap" was the key tool. It was a command and control by which all economic activity would be managed, not to create prosperity, but to protect the environment. It still surprises me today that so many self-professed free marketeers so casually advocate the cap and trade model.

If anything demonstrated the need for a more rational approach to addressing an environmental, that was it.

The only way in which rigid Greens or ecologists can advance their case is irrationally, if not deceptively. How else can ideology be advanced.

The truly staggering thing is how misrepresentation of facts and science has become so prevalent among Green organisations. There is no need to rehearse here the more notorious instances of how technical facts to illustrate climate change have been concocted.

For five years, World Growth, a global development NGO which I chair has been charting the global forestry debate. It is not different to climate change. It is surprising how endemic it is. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is an exemplar.

People expect Greenpeace to fabricate facts and effects. It has turned this into an art form. Greenpeace regularly produces reports with big blocks of text, hundreds of footnotes and pages of references to leave an impression of scholarly endeavour. We have found WWF, which now describes itself as a "science-based" organization is no better.

As Bjorn Lomborg illustrated in the *Skeptical Environmentalist*, WWF has been doing this for at least two decades. Globally, WWF turns over around US\$ 400 million a year. It represents itself as a body which practices conservation. Most of its activity is political. Perhaps its shoddiest activity is one of its mainstays - arguing for protection of biodiversity. Raising alarm about loss of species is one of its specialities.

As well all know, there are no reference points. Sometimes there are flashes of reality. Greenpeace used to argue that the primal forests of Papua New Guinea were being wiped, by logging of course. This was not true, evidenced by the fact they never located an iconic species which was endangered. There are few PNG species on the IUCN list. And last year, WWF UK commissioned a report on the state of species in PNG and decided to report that it had found 50 new species. PNG had to be protected, not because species were being lost, but because there we so many.

I can't leave this subject without noting that as part of the promotion of Tim Flannery's book "The Weather Makers", the website set up to support the marketing proudly reported that he had found more species than Charles Darwin - in Papua New Guinea, of course.

My favourite part of the Weather Makers was where he posited that the physical processes of the Earth were governed by telekinesis, presumably because climate change "science" does not accord with the basic principle in physics of cause and effect, and cited for the non-technical reader how Uri Geller bent spoons using telekinesis. This point disappeared in the second edition.

The book incidentally was financed by the foundation set up by the President of WWF Australia.

But here I want to make the point that the advent of the era of rationalism about sustainable development will not be achieved by exposing the intellectual weaknesses, the ideological ugliness or the technical chicanery of supporting evidence, but by action by people genuinely concerned to improve management of the environment to produce superior policies themselves.

The Labor Party, or at least its right wing, is moaning that the Greens are having a free run. Well, it is they who are giving it to them. It was State Labor Governments by and large who allowed Greens to undermine the system of Regional Forest Agreements.

It was the Howard Government that accepted Green premises about Climate Change and concocted within a few weeks a piece of policy nonsense on how to apply a cap and trade system in Australia. And we should not forget it established the Greenhouse office for nearly a decade, spending tens of millions of dollars a year financing pro-climate change research.

We are seeing exactly the same process now in the work done over the last three or four years in the Federal Environment Department on the state of marine resources. That material is now being used to declare new marine national parks. The technical assessments on which most of that work rests are appalling. It is simply provided a veneer of technical credibility to what are essentially political declarations. There is little science of environmental management here - what is being applied is crude political biodiversity stratagems.