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THE POLITICS OF POLLUTION

By Andrew Peacock *

One of the most remarkable results of the “environmental crisis” and recent discoveries about the extent of pollution is that we have been forced to look at the world in a completely different way—through smog-tinted spectacles, as it were.

As a result, many people are now thinking about their immediate surroundings in more critical terms: they are beginning to question assumptions and dogmas that they have never thought twice about before. There is a growing scepticism directed towards the once unchallenged doctrine of growth—the idea that our economy should be based on an unlimited expansion in the production of goods and services.

We are suddenly starting to wonder whether the by-products of this infinite wave of Production and Consumption are really worth the trouble. The unwelcome side effects of unplanned economic expansion are pollution, waste disposal problems, traffic chaos, sprawl, strangling city centres and the increasing disfigurement of our urban surroundings. Awareness of these problems has led to a slow, hardly perceptible changing of priorities over the last year.

Historically speaking, this doctrine of endless economic growth and affluence has been part of our mental outlook since the Second World War.

Like the huge multi-story department stores in all our capital cities, we have been moving unthinkingly up the escalator a floor at a time expecting greater riches and new products the higher we go. But now the escalator is reaching the top floor and instead of finding a storehouse of abundance, we are discovering filth, waste, smog and ugliness.

It is no wonder that the instinctive reactions of some people is to say, “Stop the escalator, I want to get off” and for others—mainly the radical young—to want to tear the whole building down and start again.

But both these reactions are born of despair. Although there is now widespread concern about the environment and pollution, these problems—like all man-made problems—are solvable by the use of intelligent planning, enlightened legislation and goodwill.

In this article, in which I am expressing my personal views, I would like to outline firstly, how, with the aid of the mass media, we have become aware of the world environmental crisis over the last few years. Secondly,

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to look at the way in which awareness of environmental issues has already affected Australian politics and must continue to do so. And lastly, to outline some of the political and practical problems that may arise out of the new directions which our politics seem to be taking.

* * *

World wide concern about pollution and our deteriorating environment is slowly causing one of those historic realignments of attitudes after which things never appear the same. It has, as we are frequently reminded, precipitated a new wave of thinking based on premises of quality rather than quantity, of aesthetics rather than utility. People are now, for the first time, making value judgments about a host of things once unquestioned. They are now asking:—"Do we really want an expanding economy that is always predicated on more people, greater dependence on material things, built-in obsolescence and more rapid per capita use of resources and power?"—What is the use of more cars if it means clogged highways, chaos and traffic jams?

The mass media and the example of America has largely sparked off this wave of questioning in Australia. This is because international communications are becoming more widespread and instantaneous every year. Not only is the world now in Marshall McLuhan's phrase a global village but it appears to be turning into an increasingly filthy one.

Several years ago the world seemed a less polluted place; not because there was necessarily less waste poured into rivers, sea and air, but because we were not aware of it and did not look for it.

But now we are looking for it and finding it everywhere. All over the world evidences of pollution and degradation of the environment are becoming more and more frequent.

I should like to digress shortly to give two instances of how alarmingly widespread environmental degradation is globally. Each of these two instances illustrate two dimensions of the pollution problem which are relevant to Australia. Firstly, pollution is always someone else's doing—it is the result of innumerable careless or selfish acts. Secondly, in order to co-ordinate and control these acts—co-operative measures and policing on the widest possible scale are needed.

Item I: Recent research has shown that the insecticide DDT has now polluted every part of the world. DDT has been used only since the 40s. It is now believed to have deleterious effects on the reproductivity of animal species at the top of food chains—particularly birds. It has been discovered in the fatty tissue of Antarctic penguins, and among other places, in the eggshells of a rare species of petrel found in Bermuda, which is declining as a result. DDT residues have recently been discovered in marine plankton in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans—thousands of miles from the nearest land. DDT has a slowing-up effect on the ability of both plankton and land plants to photosynthesise. It has been banned in Sweden and is near-banned in many other countries.

Item II: Oil pollution is now nearly global. On completing his voyage across the Atlantic in a papyrus boat *Ra II*, Thor Heyerdahl reported the Atlantic was so polluted by oil that at various times it was impossible to swim. It has been reckoned that the 55,000 tons of oil spilt when the tanker the *Torrey Canyon* broke up off the Cornish coast in 1967, was but a mere 2% of all the oil emptied into the ocean that year. Most of this comes from tankers flushing out their tanks in that part of the ocean over which no country can claim jurisdiction.

These two isolated but related items give a good example of how widespread pollution is becoming throughout the world; and as evidence accrues every year so international concern grows.

Australia, as a less industrialised and more sparsely populated country, is in many ways in a more favourable position than many Northern nations. Even so, there is already alarming evidence of water, air and environmental pollution in Australian cities. The Senate Select Committee on Water Pollution has called for the urgent implementation of a national water policy. It has also recommended a national body consisting of Commonwealth and State representatives to co-ordinate the development of cohesive policies toward the use and abuse of water resources.

It is the international mass media which has played a decisive part in alerting us to the dangers of pollution in our own country. So much so that pollution in Australia has become news, and news tends to create news. Evidence of this can be seen in the fact that several major Australian newspapers have employed "environmental writers" within the last year. This increase in public awareness has meant "the environment" is becoming a more potent political issue in Australian politics all the time. One reason for this is that the news media is playing a more influential part in the political life of this country every year. Another is that astute politicians realise that this issue has immense popular appeal. Already, we have seen Sir Henry Bolte conduct a "Quality of Life" State Election campaign.

On the Federal front we have seen Senate Select Committees on water pollution, aircraft noise and air pollution established. On 14 May this year a Select Committee was formed to look into Wild Life Conservation. The terms of reference of this Committee will include looking at the effects of pesticides on wild life population. The Commonwealth Government, in co-operation with the Queensland Government, has recently given financial assistance aimed at investigating the effects of oil drilling on the Barrier Reef. It is also looking into the threat of the Crown of Thorns Starfish. The N.S.W. Cabinet on 28 July decided to set up a State Pollution Control Authority along with a Metropolitan Regional Waste Disposal Authority. Mr. Askin has promised to strengthen the provisions of the Water Pollution Bill. In addition, the Executive of the CSIRO has formed an Environmental Quality Committee to assist in planning the Organisation's future research. The CSIRO is examining the possi-

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bility of launching a research project to study the effects on Australian wildlife species of the poison "1080". But in this as in so many other areas, the question of statutory controls over insecticides remains the responsibility of the State concerned.

All these measures are excellent in their own ways. But there is, as the Senate Committee on water pollution reported, a need to think in national overall terms when considering corrective measures.

It seems clear that pollution is as much a national as a State problem. It is a problem calling for the urgent and continued surveillance by the National Parliament for wide ranging Federal legislation. There is also a need for co-ordination of efforts by governments, local bodies, industry and individuals.

In all the abovementioned instances we are bedevilled by the difficulty that most occurrences of pollution are within State areas of responsibility. The U.S. Federal Government has provided an example that the Australian Government could well emulate. The American Federal system is broadly similar to that which obtains in Australia and the U.S. Federal Government on many environmental issues now acts as a co-ordinator by putting forth a series of "suggested legislations".

As far back as 1950 the United States Federal authorities developed a "suggested state water pollution act". By 1965 when a revision was issued 75% of all States had enacted State laws based on the suggested Federal law. This Federal law combines a recognition of States' rights combined with the assurance that the Federal Government maintains an overall national viewpoint. This American example is one which could well be considered and emulated by the Australian Parliament.

We are now at the stage where several State Governments are drawing up or tightening legislation to cover water, air and industrial pollution.

The provisions of these State Acts should obviously be as similar and as closely co-ordinated as possible—especially regarding standards of permissible pollution, methods of detection and penalties. The N.S.W. Government has indicated it will adopt a \$500 and a \$50 licence system for water pollution in N.S.W. This is considerably less than recent Canadian legislation which has placed penalties of \$500 a day on proven water polluters. But will the N.S.W. penalties be copied in the pollution legislation being prepared by other States?

There is a need for some sort of co-ordination and conformity if for no other reason than that many big companies which can be classified as potential polluters are nationally based. Most large companies and corporations are aware of the need for pollution control measures and many have already spent large sums of money on anti-pollution measures out of their conception of the public interest. There is still, nonetheless, a need for co-operative discussions by all Governments concerned so that reasonably uniform provisions may be hammered out.

It is obvious that the Commonwealth will be drawn into "quality of

life" issues more and more. Not only has the Commonwealth a national co-ordinating capability that State Governments lack, but it also has access to the necessary growth tax resources to enable the money to be put rapidly where the need is.

Co-operation between industry and government on the prevention of pollution poses a series of problems which have not yet been analysed in a consistent manner and which I will only raise in question form at the moment.

For example: To what extent should the Federal Government subsidise pollution control measures by taxation relief? Should it be by the carrot or by the stick—by incentives or sanctions: or a combination of both?

If taxation concessions are the appropriate device, should they be in the form of depreciation allowances for the cost of anti-pollution plant or, should they be in the form of increased investment allowance? One formula for depreciation allowance would be to allow new plant to depreciate at, say, 120% at cost over a three year time span.

Leaving incentives and dealing with sanctions: how should proven polluters be dealt with? Should their fines be published by Government agencies? Or again, should concessions similar to export concessions be given to those firms which have acted in the public interest by installing costly pollution-suppression equipment.

A further problem arises. Most large companies (which are, after all, the greatest actual and potential polluters) are anxious to do something and many, such as ICI and BHP, already have. But more than 70% of Australia's factories employ less than 50 people. Because these small businesses exist on a narrower capital structure it is often more difficult and costly for them to instal anti-pollution plant. Here, taxation incentives would provide the most effective and probably the only impetus.

These are some of the practical and legislative problems to which, at present, little thought has been given. Overall, however, it is apparent the Commonwealth will be drawn more and more into these issues.

Another reason for increased Commonwealth participation is, of course, the size and diversity of the problem. In the same way that the world "environmental crisis" has shown us that life systems are part of an ecological whole and cannot be considered in isolation, so, politically, we are beginning to realise that what once seemed disparate and unrelated political and social problems are all related to a macro-political whole. It is this expanding outwards, this sense of the inter-relatedness of many social and political problems, that is one of the most encouraging products of the "environmental crisis". An excellent example of this is the recent realisation that our immigration policy may be related to the quality of our urban life. Following the review announced by the Immigration Minister, Mr. Lynch, the worth of the immigration programme will be judged by a panel of consultants using both environmental and economic criteria.

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But there are, of course, dangers inherent in this realignment of social and political attitudes. One is that pollution control and "The Environment" might become simply hollow slogans—A Good Thing which is safe for all parties to pay lip service to—a fashionable theme for newspaper editorials, for presidential addresses at annual meetings of professional institutes and, it might be added, for politicians to write about! Certainly the environment is one of the best political issues to have appeared since the war since all sections of society are in favour of it and it has no admitted enemies.

In fact, the environment and "quality of life" have become vogue phrases, almost cliches. But they go far deeper than just air and water and conservation of native flora and fauna.

The fact that we are slowly becoming more aware of our environment means, in its largest sense, that we are becoming more aware of the world and looking at it in a more observant and critical way.

Personally I welcome the fact that all aspects of the environment are becoming political issues. The problems of inadequate environment and pollution are immediate, tangible problems that call for systematic, considered solutions.

If this means both major political parties will become more attuned to intelligent problem-solving and to the offering of concrete solutions, rather than the ritualistic, ideological name-calling that has often characterised past election campaigns, then we should all be grateful.