

The GREEN Rollercoaster

Last March the environment was an electoral panacea. Since then it's been pushed steadily to the political wings. Kitty Eggerking spoke to the ACF's Phillip Toyne about the rapid change of fortune.

Recently various criticisms have been levelled at you. The environment movement has been called latter-day jeremiahs, the newest threat to social stability and is said to lack intellectual rigour. How do you respond to such claims?

Unfortunately, more and more of those statements have been coming from the ALP — certainly senior economic ministers in the government. They belie the facts. We have consistently applied intellectual rigour to the positions we put so that even our critics in normal circumstances have been prepared to acknowledge that the document we put to the government on sustainable development was the only serious submission to grapple sufficiently with economic and ecological issues. The government's own discussion paper showed an abysmal understanding of the ecological imperatives that really need to underpin the question of how this country is going to earn its wealth without ongoing environmental degradation.

The attacks are politically motivated, by and large. We are seeing economic ministers who believe they have previously been rolled over by green issues now using the economic downturn as a good excuse for a backlash. Nobody who looks at the political debate of the last five

years can argue that the greens have won so overwhelmingly that we are the major contributors to the economic problems. It would be flattering to think that we'd had that degree of influence but unfortunately the facts don't bear it out. I suspect John Elliott, Alan Bond and Holmes à Court have had significantly greater impact on the economy.

So, to answer those critics, do you have an economic blueprint — a greenprint — for the future of Australia?

We've got a pretty good philosophical outline for the process of working towards an economic blueprint, and it's unrealistic, I believe, to expect more at this stage. We've very vividly and professionally identified the level of environmental degradation. We've used economists to help us evaluate the current economic system and its accounting and show how they lead to an ongoing perpetuation of those problems. For instance, we don't take into account the loss of our natural capital when looking at profit and loss equations in the national accounts. Nowhere in those accounts is found the fact that an average of 200 tonnes of soil is lost per hectare per annum. We have not depreciated the paddocks in the account books to have a clear understanding of what the production of our wheat crop, say, is costing us, as opposed to earning us. We're very good at knowing what the profit lines are, but we're not very good at realistically spelling out the cost.

We've gone to great lengths to try and understand the economics of the situation, to see where it works and where it doesn't; we've tried to evaluate the economics of various industries, like forestry, which comes in with surprisingly awful economic returns on top of the environmental costs.

Can you be more specific on that point?

We're seeing a forest industry that's moving very dramatically from being a saw-log industry to a woodchip one because most of the pulpwood is for export — the lowest value end-use of the forest product, say \$60 a tonne. We're now importing papers from between \$1500 and \$5000 a tonne, and it therefore comes as no surprise that we've got a \$1.7 billion a year deficit in forest products. Even if you evaluate the issue on the industry's own terms — that is, with a myopic economic agenda — you come to a negative conclusion. But add the environmental costs on top of that, then there's reason for concern.

Do you have an alternative economic model for industry and the future of this country?

Certainly we've been suggesting for some time that the national accounts ought to be expanded so that environmental degradation is built in as a component of the accounts. The Dutch are doing that; so are some of the Scandinavian countries and the Japanese are even factoring in some of those accounts now. Clearly we have to. We can't use our capital as income without eventually becoming bankrupt, both biologically and economically.

Our document also establishes 13 principles, which we believe are fundamental to the redesign of a biological and economic system that will see us through in a permanently sustainable sense rather than the short-term one we're running at present...

Is there any evidence of an Australian industry sector adopting new ways of thinking and behaving?

Not on a broad sector-wide basis. There is no industry that's currently gearing up to a sustainable strategy, but there are some very encouraging indications within sectors that people are doing something. Twelve months ago there would have been roughly 50 land-care farmers' groups around Australia; the number is now closer to 500. That's exciting because even if the farmer is coming at the issue from an economic self-interest point of view he can see that ongoing substantial soil loss and increasing salinity are no good for his economic outlook. Farmers are therefore breaking new ground in their dealings with the conservation movement in a way that, say, the mining industry clearly isn't. The Australian Mining Industry Council [AMIC] represents what I would consider the last bastion of the defensive, bunker mentality that has characterised the industry over the last two centuries. There is no indication that government or industry has resolved to move swiftly to new directions. If anything there is now a temporary backlash, a greenie-bashing exercise, which is meant to indicate that we've had our way too long, that the balance has swung too far in favour of the environment, that we now have to return to moderation, which means

more economic activity unconstrained by environmental controls. There are more fragile farm lands being cleared and we know there will be soil loss as a consequence. There are more industrial processes in train that will result in pollution. For industry to suggest that everybody now wants a sustainable society and that everybody is environmentally aware, but then to match that with actions that amount to more of the same, is to make a nonsense of what's being said about the greens at the moment.

You've pointed out in your submission that it's no longer possible to take just an economics or an environment approach to planning, but rather that the two must go together.

We have rejected out of hand the idea of balance as the appropriate concept, which carries with it the political evaluation of who should get what. The greens win some, industry wins some — that's the classic dispute-resolving mechanism that's always applied to, say, industrial relations, where both sides put up an ambit claim; the conciliator is then forced to produce a middle course on which politicians will then glibly say 'it pleased no one and therefore it must be about right'.

If we endorse that approach for managing our environment, the outlook is disastrous. The challenge is to work out how to generate wealth, to provide an adequate standard of living for people in this community, but to do it in ways that no longer produce an ongoing decline in the quality of our life through declining environmental standards.

It must be enormously frustrating to you that industry keeps doing what it's always done and nothing will convince it to change.

Things do convince it to change. They change if government regulations require them to change. It is equally true that industries change very dramatically when green consumerism comes to bear, and we've seen lots of good examples of this recently. A good negative example is how people's understanding of aerosols contributing to ozone depletion has resulted in a continuing drop in the aerosol market share, despite the fact that aerosols are no longer propelled by CFCs. They've changed the gas, but not people's perception. A positive example is the unbleached toilet paper market which was seen as a curiosity, a novelty niche, when it was first introduced. Now it's grabbed an enormous market share — 20% plus — and suddenly the manufacturers have had to scramble to provide a product that people are clearly demanding. You only have to look at the supermarket shelves to know that manufacturers are cottoning onto the notion that there's money to be made from environmental awareness.

That's still traditional manufacturing. It's not making a leap forward — to look at new technologies, at new techniques, at totally new products.

Yes, and I'd say that it also manifests another ongoing problem: that no one is seriously challenging the appropriateness of expanding consumerism. They're not

saying consume less; they're saying consume something that's less environmentally damaging. I suspect that sooner or later as a community we're going to have to consume substantially less per capita than we are now.

Some people who see themselves as progressive would argue that we have to continue to have economic growth so that all sections of the community can have an equal standard of living. That raises the question of how much we need for a sensible lifestyle.

It also throws up the specious argument that we have to be wealthy to protect the environment, that we have to have growth economies if we're to achieve environmental targets, that we have to be a wealthy nation to have a clean environment. It is, to put it mildly, an extraordinarily self-serving proposition put by industry. There can be no doubt that abject poverty leads to environmental degradation and that overpopulation has got a link with poverty and therefore environmental degradation. There can be no doubt that raising standards of living in big populations has historically produced a slowing of population growth. Those things are well documented. But at the end of the day if these people seriously suggest that the only way that we can meet our environmental problems is — for our current global population, let alone the doubling of it which will occur before the end of the century — to achieve a standard of living that we in the developed world enjoy, they have to be joking. We are clearly talking about an ecological consequence that is too awful to contemplate.

How then do we get an agreed-upon agenda, and quickly? Are the government's sustainable development working parties going to help in that?

There's one major flaw in the process — the government put up an inarticulate discussion paper and received several hundred responses to that. Instead of trying to assimilate the response material into a position paper, the government set up the sectoral working groups. They went immediately into a reductionist exercise of industry by industry discussions, when they'd left aside the question of broad principles that should be applied. What are the national issues? What changes to the economic settings are needed? What should the national accounts reflect? What is the effect of the current federal system on our environmental problems? After much lobbying we have finally got a reference to the National Population Council on an ecologically sustainable population level for Australia, and that is the only thing the federal government is doing to provide the big picture for the time the sectoral working groups are in operation. We're in eight of the nine working groups because we believe we can't afford not to be, in terms of trying to raise the level of ecological understanding. To simply stand aside is politically irresponsible.

I wanted to ask you why the Wilderness Society decided not to participate in the working parties.

It was, of course, a party to our submission, and that was the first time the big four national groups had ever come together for a policy paper. They decided after a lot of

anguishing that they wouldn't be in the working parties. They believe decisions like logging in the south-east and Gippsland forests are pretty clear indications that the government doesn't have an understanding of or a commitment to sustainable development. They believe that their efforts are better directed at community awareness, but I must say that while I respect their decision I think it's ill-conceived because we have made it a pre-condition of the working groups that an extensive community consultation mechanism be built into the process, and we're committed to ensuring it's not mere tokenism. We want to ensure that the government isn't making major policy decisions in a vacuum, with a complete lack of community understanding of sustainable development.

Is it possible to go beyond the old economic summit model, the consensus model, to shift the thinking?

You've very clearly pointed out the different perspectives of the players in the game. The industry groups, the government representatives, see it as a collective bargaining mechanism. Because we're not going to settle for an outcome that's a pale imitation of what the process calls for, we're likely to see a collapse of at least some of those working groups in the same way as the Salamanca agreement fell apart in Tasmania. The world view of the green participants carries with it a great urgency, a great deal of anxiety about what we've done to the planet. We're not talking about whether 2% of some forest goes into a national park or whether Coronation Hill goes ahead or not. We're talking about re-establishing the criteria upon which our economic plans are developed, so that the plans will meet a biological test.

In the last election it pleased people to be seen in your company. Are you anxious about the backlash and what do you do to rebuild that?

My anxiety does not go to whether we're the flavour of the month in Canberra or whether cabinet thinks we're the good guys. I wish they'd be honest enough to project accurately what our influence on the election was. We did influence the outcome but some people are choosing to lie about it. My anxiety is not nearly as acute as the situation might suggest in the sense that we have to have the longer view. There's absolutely no doubt that changes are sweeping the globe, and we're in the vanguard of these. They are irreversible; demands are being placed on governments and industry to be environmentally responsible. They will continue to exist and continue to be an election issue and at the forefront of community priorities. As far as winning back the battle, I suspect that we can readily get to people. Peter Garrett's going to be a key player. His band commitments, which have kept him out of action for a year, are coming to an end, and he's very keen to be right in there as ACF president over the next year of so. That will produce a dramatic shift. And we're now doing things smarter than previously. The big national organisations combining forces is a clear indication of that response.

Some people would say: you've proved yourselves as lobbyists; when are you going to stand up and become a political party?

ACF never will. I've consistently said that ACF should be non-party political. Peter Garrett shares that view. So did his predecessor, Hal Wootton. That's because ACF has a role and function of its own. It's true that there's a growing disillusionment among environmentalists in the community and they will be looking to any option other than supporting Labor in the next election. Labor has to accept that as a result of the cynicism they've shown since the last election. Whether that translates into the establishment of a green party or an affiliation with some other progressive party or an involvement with the Democrats remains to be seen. The Democrats have certainly been very vigorous in their attempts to attract the environment movement, but that's been resisted. The Democrats are clearly picking up many, many votes from the disaffected in the community.

Some people would also say that there's a fundamental shift coming in politics. Do you share that view?

Environmental issues now occupy the centre place in the progressive agenda to the great disadvantage of Aboriginal, social welfare, social equity, women's and other issues. I suspect that is because environmental concerns strike a chord with everybody. I suspect that other issues will wax and wane, but environmental issues will stay with us. Whether that translates into a long-term viable base for a political party I don't know.

Were you surprised by the fuss that occurred before the government took the decision over emission level targets?

It reflected a couple of things. Industry ministers and industry clearly believed it had the potential to overturn their growth economic agenda. They want Australia to develop, get bigger, do more, produce more and therefore consume more energy and contribute more to greenhouse. What they hadn't done, and displayed a woeful lack of information about, was to look at the studies prepared for the Commonwealth by the likes of Amory Lovins from the United States, and Denny Green from Victoria, which showed that 20% reduction targets could be met on an economically cost-beneficial basis by saving energy. To save 20% is substantially cheaper than to generate another 20%. So the result was heavily conditional; it won't happen if it produces commercial disadvantage. The reason we didn't get steamed up is that we're more than satisfied that they can do it on a commercially advantageous basis. It's fairly clear that once you go beyond 20% to fiercer reductions you begin to get into the area of economic pain.

There's nothing in this whole mechanism that provides the broad overview, the long-term vision. I think the ACF is good at that. We have people who are specifically given the responsibility to maintain the long-term view. Our research and policy analyst is meant to be looking at what things will be like in 20 years time, not after Christmas. As

this decade goes on, we'll be setting more and more of the agenda.

You've been working with trade unions. Has that relationship been fruitful?

With individual unions and Trades Halls, it has. We can always find areas of common interest, especially in areas like occupational health and safety, hazardous chemicals, transport-related issues. We got a joint submission up on the VFT. But when we deal with institutions like the ACTU the relationship is hostile and shows no likelihood of coming good. The union movement ignores the fact that nearly half of all trade unionists are now white collar workers. A huge proportion are teachers or public servants, and they constitute the largest membership group we have, yet their environmental concerns are basically ignored by the ACTU. They have consistently sided with industry on issues like forestry, pulp mills.

They consistently reject environmentalism as a middle-class wank, with nothing to do with the real gutsy workers' issues. They consistently ignore the fact that while their recruiting campaign targets women and young people it is these people that are joining our organisation. They are missing a major community seed change, and that's to their great discredit. Our relations have been quite hostile, and on their part quite vitriolic.

I suspect the ACTU will come around when it has its first woman president, when it has a substantial rethink of its role and constitution. There's absolutely no doubt that it's becoming marginalised. It's essential that we end up with the trade unions on side, where they don't treat economic growth as the underpinning of their objectives to the exclusion of everything else, where they start to address the issues that are relevant to their membership.

And what about other organisations?

We've now expanded our capacity to deal with Aborigines. We've got one Aboriginal woman working with us, and we're likely to have another one based in Queensland shortly. That's a vital link. It's critical if for no other reason than Aboriginal people are now the land owners of some of the most important nature conservation and wilderness areas in Australia. There can be no doubt that we are going to rely on them increasingly as sound managers of their environment.

We've got a clear interest in youth and youth affairs. Our youth delegation to the Ozone Conference in London this year is the high-water mark of my time at ACF. Young people are going to be immeasurably stronger environmentalists than we are.

Linking farmers through the rural liaison positions has been another vital breakthrough. It's given us the capacity to deal with farmers on a much closer basis and, given the conservatism of rural society, that's an essential element of the success.

KITTY EGGERKING is ALR's production editor.