



From Our House to Greenhouse

For some years there has been extensive media discussion, as well as a lot of media hype, about the greenhouse effect and the heating of the atmosphere. This year, with the unseasonably warm winter, it has become a commonplace of dinner party (or beach party) chit-chat.

But the effect has been known about in scientific circles for many years. Briefly, it refers to the fact that one gas in the earth's atmosphere, carbon dioxide, plays a major role in maintaining a particular global temperature and hence a particular quality of environment by trapping heat radiated from earth after it has been warmed by the sun's rays. Water vapour and now a few human-made gases play a similar role.

Examples of extreme conditions due to this effect often quoted are the very hot planet Venus with its large quantities of atmospheric carbon dioxide, and freezing Mars with practically none. However, in the current discussion, the term greenhouse effect usually refers to a warming-up process.

Unlike other greenhouse gases,

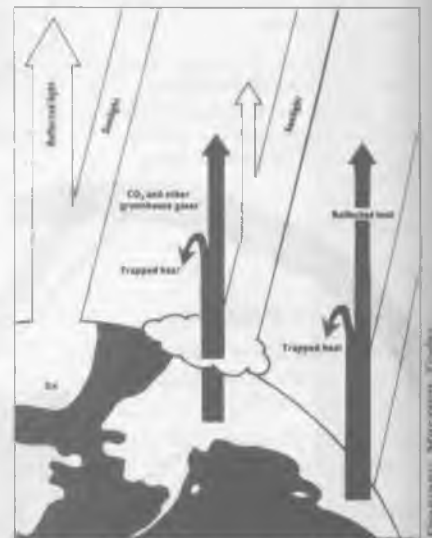
carbon dioxide is constantly moving in and out of plants (the carbon cycle) as well as entering into their structure and being trapped permanently if the plant material is somehow buried and preserved.

This took place on a grand scale in swamps and shallow seas in hot steamy conditions in the northern hemisphere about 300 million years ago, and in the southern hemisphere (including Australia) a bit over 200 million years ago. The weight of all this material pushed the underlying strata into hollows and over subsequent millions of years great pressure and deep burial converted it into coal (from which oil and natural gas are also derived). A large part of the carbon in the carbon cycle has opted out, as it were — gone underground — and some is left in existing living things and circulating in and out of the atmosphere as carbon dioxide. So, in the popular sense, a negative greenhouse effect has taken place over millions of years and we now have, as a result of long gradual environmental change and biological evolution, a cooler, calmer world to live in.

But the introduction of coal-burning industry over the last two centuries has begun to reverse this process. Since the industrial revolution got into its stride the amount of atmospheric carbon dioxide has crept up (it was 300 parts per million in 1900, 345 in 1984). It is quite clear that the cause of the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide is the burning of fossil fuel, helped along by wood burning and massive tropical deforestation.

In *The Age* Graeme O'Neill put it this way: "the world's industrial nations have been on an energy binge for more than a century, burning vast quantities of oil and coal" — a nice comment on the relentless dynamic of capitalism hotly pursued by the socialist countries. According to a US Department of Energy report, world energy consumption in 1900 was equivalent to 770 million tons of coal; in 1984 it was 9,000 million. And now the industrial giant, the People's Republic of China, with its vast coal resources, is just getting into its stride.

Some climatologists assert that, as a result, the world has warmed up in the last few decades — but only by a fraction of a degree centigrade. The main view among climatologists, however, appears to be that short-term fluctuations in world temperatures for other reasons make it impossible at present to be sure, but that the long-term probability is high, even allowing for counter-vailing effects. So the threat of widespread environmental change cannot be dismissed.



How The Greenhouse Effect Works

Proponents of change predict the following possibilities next century:

- Rising sea levels due to thermal expansion of seawater and later on due to glacial retreat and melting of the antarctic ice cap. This poses problems for people living at near to sea level: which is a challenge for us all. Half the territory of Bangladesh could disappear, for instance, and some Pacific islands completely.
- World wide alterations of climatic patterns, with some regions becoming hotter and drier and some hotter and wetter, resulting in widespread disruption of food production.

The implications for the coal industry are obvious, and we may also see all over the world quite new political and economic tensions and changes flowing from the problems thrown up. Already the US Department of Energy has set up a

Carbon Dioxide Research Division which has published reports on the effects of increasing atmospheric carbon dioxide on glaciers, ice sheets, sea level, vegetation, water resources, agriculture, fisheries, forests and human health.

This raises the question: should we immediately start taking action or should we wait and see? If we wait another decade or so then it will be that much too late; for even if it were possible to hold fossil fuel consumption to present levels it is estimated that the postulated rise in average world temperature would not level out for another thirty years at a peak that has not been reached in the last 6,000 years. We are talking about a possible temperature rise of only two or three degrees centigrade but this is enough, apparently, to cause far-reaching changes.

Probably the best first step would be to work for the utmost efficiency in fossil fuel use. It has been calculated that "a dollar invested in making electrical appliances more effective displaces 50 kilowatts of coal-fired electricity". (*New Scientist*, 8 September, 1988). Some are advocating a switch to nuclear power, but this is quite unacceptable, given its intractable hazards.

A vast international reforestation program which, similarly to

China's, aimed at soaking up and fixing as wood some of the offending carbon dioxide, would be of some help, but at present that seems implausible, in view of the speed with which tropical forests are being gutted. Temperate zone forests are in better shape but are threatened, particularly in northern Europe, by fossil fuel initiated pollution (acid rain).

The other line of attack is to develop renewable energy resources. The USA produces about a fifth of the world's greenhouse gases, but government reaction to this has been slow — apart from producing reports. However, there is now a private bill before Congress to spend \$US450 million over 1991/92 on development of alternative renewable energy resources. Senator Norm Sanders, recently returned from the USA, was impressed by California's 17,000 windmills which, he says, produce as much power as Tasmania's hydroelectric system.

Alternative renewable energy resources here will remain marginal unless there is a large switch in research investment, deflecting the trend of growth-at-any-cost which has become a fundamental motor of socialist and capitalist economies alike over the last century.

Mal Andrews

Terry's Lessons

Since August, when the biggest rally seen in Sydney since the days of the Vietnam War signalled the breadth of opposition to the new government's education policies, the education debate in NSW has calmed down a little. This is probably good for the heart condition of NSW Education Minister Terry Metherell, who has been for some months undoubtedly the best-hated public figure in the state.

It is probably good news, too, for the government itself, since its new radical right moral agenda

stretches far wider than simply education — and much of it seemed immobilised for the course of the protracted dispute. It may, however, have given Mr Greiner and his ministers cause to reflect on the riddle of political life which could turn what seemed the new government's strongest point of attack, the education system, into its greatest liability.

If there is a lesson to be learned from this unexpected turn of events, it is probably that the nature of the radical conservatism of today is a complex one, and also that the

ideological terrain on which it wages its battles is a more uneven, contested one than we often realise.

Terry Metherell may well become a scapegoat for the problems of the all-out assault by the new NSW government in its first hundred days: it is rumoured that he may be reshuffled (and any reshuffle will undoubtedly be read as a demotion) by Premier Greiner as early as Christmas, or as late as next May. Yet it would be a mistake to think of the new education minister's spectacular misadventures as simply a symptom of (to borrow a Whitlamesque analogy) too much too soon. Quite probably a more circumspect education minister could have avoided the spectre of fifty thousand parents and teachers marching in defence of a state education system which, until recently, was assumed to be highly unpopular. But Dr Metherell's malaise is also symptomatic of some of the wider risks run by the new radical right agenda.

Put briefly, Dr Metherell's problem was that a populist appeal on education was followed by a highly directive, as well as technocratic, new education policy. Before the March elections (where Labor was decimated) the then opposition pledged itself to a "back to the three Rs" education policy, highlighting the perceived failures of the liberal educational regime of the past two decades. Immediately after the elections Dr Metherell began to construct a new education policy which entailed increasing the workloads of teachers and narrowing the range of the curriculum. Traded off against this was, among other things, an ambitious program of computer training in schools, designed to aid the increased vocationalisation of education.

But where the rhetoric of back-to-educational-basics had "spoken" to the public in the tones of liberation from the perhaps paternalistic liberal model, the government's practice signalled technocracy (computers before children), meanness (cost-cutting before educational standards) and authoritarianism (no consultation with parents or



Photo: Bert Heinemann

schools). In consequence it was not merely teachers who were affronted by Dr Metherell's crusading zeal: the basically conservative parents and citizens associations found themselves, for the first time in their history, backing industrial action by teachers. And many individual parents followed suit.

This highlights two problems inherent in the new radical conservatism. One lies in its contradictory nature as, in Stuart Hall's words, an "authoritarian populism": on the one hand it speaks the language of liberation, and equates this with the workings of the free market: on the other it requires a "strong state" for its own ambitious program of conservative social engineering. The other lies in the nature of that populist appeal itself. Briefly, by going "outside" the traditional parameters of political debate, and by standing at once "in" and "against" the state, the radical conservatism, as it were, ups the ante of political conflict. By unhinging much of the currency of political debate from its traditional moorings, it creates a new volatility in the political landscape which is capable of rebounding on it. And this is precisely what his insistence on the role of the "strong state" did for Dr Metherell.

But what is most significant about the government's setbacks over education policy is that, in creating this volatile political atmosphere, it unleashed — against itself, as it happened — forces which were much wider than those which

usually exhibit themselves in the course of "normal" political debate. Parents who may never have thought of themselves as "political" found themselves participating (or at the least supporting) a "political" demonstration. Labor has had little or no impact on the education debate: it does not even have an official education policy. Rather, Dr Metherell has taken the education out of the ramparts of parliament and into the byways of civil society.

Even if a short-term defeat can be turned to long-term advantage by the new government, the education malaise must surely have dented the myth of an unstoppable radical right agenda, and perhaps highlighted the best form of response to it — a broad alliance with the community as a whole, not a narrow defence based upon the Maginot Line of the labour movement.

David Burchell

The Salad Bowl Upturned

The publication of the report of the Committee to Advise on Australian Immigration Policy (CAAIP) — otherwise known as the FitzGerald Report — has turned out to be the first shot in an undeclared war not only over immigration policy, but over multiculturalism and, indeed, definitions of "Australianness" as well. In the process it has stirred up racist sentiment, perhaps fondly imagined by many to be a thing of the past.

Not since the Blainey debate of 1984 has the immigration issue been so vigorous, passionate and controversial. Ethnic affairs policy, under the rubric of multiculturalism, was strongly criticised by FitzGerald: "Of all the immigration issues," the report argued, "strong feelings about multiculturalism seem to extend most widely ... Its laudable intentions

have become obscured." Multiculturalism is described as "social engineering" which "discriminates against Australians" FitzGerald emphasised that "commitment to Australia" should be a requirement of residence here, with Australian citizenship the benchmark of this commitment, and recommended that non-citizens be refused access to some welfare payments.

The report has been a catalyst for the collapse of the bipartisan immigration consensus, which was an important foundation for the success of the postwar immigration program. Using FitzGerald's critique of multiculturalism as a springboard, federal opposition leader John Howard announced in August 1988 that opposition immigration policy will differ significantly from that of the ALP. Mr Howard "openly questioned the ability of Australians

to adjust to the rapid pace of "Asianisation", and argued that "multiculturalism had left the country facing a 'cultural identity crisis'". In a similar vein, the National Party voted in favour of a decrease in the number of Asian migrants, and an increase in European migrants. The new immigration policy of the opposition Coalition is based on rejecting multiculturalism and introducing the option of reducing Asian immigration if "social cohesion" in Australia is threatened.

While there has been a strong consensus of opposition from the media to Howard's anti-Asian stance, the editorials of Australia's newspapers have accepted the FitzGerald Committee's critique of multiculturalism, as echoed by John Howard. Their alternative is "One Australia", with nationalism, citizenship and flag waving counterposed to "divisive" multiculturalism.

One key to the FitzGerald Committee's views about multiculturalism lies in the respect accorded to its critics:

The fact that multiculturalism is so linked in the public mind with immigration and that it is also perceived negatively, as sectional and divisive, cannot be ignored in the framing of immigration policies. In the immigration context, therefore, it would seem desirable that the voice of opposition to multiculturalism be taken seriously, not dismissed as simply the voice of extremism, or racism.

There is a major inconsistency in the CAAIP Report's treatment of the implications of public opinion for immigration policy. Where the opposition is to existing levels of immigration at times of high unemployment — and a recent consultancy report of public opinion by Murray Goot concludes that "there has been an unmistakable and quite dramatic rise in the number of people who feel that Australia ought to take no immigrants at all" — the FitzGerald Report overrides public opinion by recommending an increased immigration intake. However, when the issue is public opposition to multiculturalism — by

no means as systematically established as opposition to immigration, but attributed to anonymous "dissenting voices" — the CAAIP Committee recommends a backward step and capitulates to public opinion.

Another problem is the selective way FitzGerald presents the multiculturalism issue. For example, the submission of the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) is quoted in the CAAIP Report to support the view that multiculturalism is divisive. However, the major thrust of OMA's submission to the CAAIP Committee is clearly represented in its conclusion:

Although immigration policy should not be driven by multicultural considerations, it is impractical and counter-productive to follow a non-discriminatory immigration program without a domestic policy of multiculturalism.

This view of OMA is not represented in the CAAIP Report, inviting the criticism that the FitzGerald Committee selectively introduced negative views about multiculturalism.

FitzGerald concluded that multiculturalism "as a concept is not something with which many can identify". However, other than suggesting that this can change if the government affirms that it is "the Australian identity that matters most in Australia", the committee hasn't much to offer on this important issue. There is no alternative to multiculturalism — other than the "mainstreaming" of migrant services — and no guidelines to systematically improve public acceptance of it, other than promoting citizenship.

In order to get public opinion on the side of immigration, the FitzGerald Report suggested that citizenship be encouraged, with the big stick of restricting welfare and other benefits to entice the more than one million eligible non-citizens to formalise their ties to Australia. The report argued that "the social acceptance of immigration is symbolised in citizenship", though little evidence is presented to support this view.

The committee was vague on exactly which services should be denied to non-citizens. The CAAIP Report

discussed the possibility that basic health and welfare benefits and entitlement, such as social security payments and access to Medicare, be denied to people who have become residentially qualified for citizenship but have themselves opted not to acquire it.

Clearly, the committee could not agree on this point, and it is said that earlier versions of the report were more draconian, suggesting that survival, as well as non-survival, benefits be withdrawn from non-citizens.

If the recommendations on citizenship were adopted, Australia would begin to imitate countries such as the United Kingdom and West Germany, where withdrawal of basic rights to migrants underlies an attempt by the state to isolate and marginalise unwanted migrants. This is a step backward from equality towards a system of citizens and the rest.

A corollary to the concerns of citizenship is the unambiguous view permeating the FitzGerald Report that postwar migrants were not sufficiently committed to Australian society. The report argued:

The social dimension requires a compact between immigrants and the country of immigration. It requires a commitment which must be two-way. Finding a proper balance of commitment is the essence of the social dimension.

The implication is that migrants have failed to fulfil their part of the "two-way commitment". This is seen most forcefully in the statements regarding Australian citizenship.

However, any assessment of the "proper balance" of commitment would, on the evidence of four decades of postwar immigration, conclude that it is the Australian-born, and the political institutions of Australian society, who must "lift their game" and carry out their part of the bargain in the commitment to make Australian society tolerant and based on social justice and equitable participation for all.