A GREEN TO DISAGREE

Has the recession sunk Australians’ newfound commitment to the environment? EUM PAPADAKIS thinks not. But he argues that the green movement of the next decade will have a very different, more policy-minded face.

Green interest groups and social movements face a crisis of identity. Over the past two decades in Australia, as in many other countries, these groups and movements have succeeded beyond their wildest dreams in contributing to the rise in awareness of the dangers of environmental destruction. Nowadays, everyone, including business, industry and labour, is ‘green’.

For organisations like the Wilderness Society and Greenpeace this has meant a shift in tactics. Whereas in the past they emphasised the fundamental conflict between environmental protection and economic development, they are now either thinking about or actually collaborating with established institutions in trying to develop viable policies for environmental protection and economic development. Last September, Paul Gilding, the new international director of Greenpeace, announced that the organisation would switch its tactics from confrontation to co-operation with government and industry. This is not to say that the Greens have abandoned confrontation. Rather, I would argue that they have become much more involved in the political process and that this reflects major changes in attitudes and some changes in patterns of behaviour among groups that have in the past been mainly concerned about economic growth and development.

An important force driving the Greens to collaborate with ‘the enemy’ (meaning business, industry, labour and the established political parties) is their acute awareness of the dangers involved in delaying the implementation of new policies, notably over issues like the protection of the ozone layer. Furthermore, by refusing to collaborate they are in danger of being marginalised in debate about policy implementation.

All this is not to suggest that established institutions have uniformly accepted or have a shared understanding of environmentalism. Different (and often conflicting) strategies have been developed to tackle the problem of environmental degradation. Different (and often conflicting) interpretations have been presented of the significance of environmentalism. Individuals and social actors like political parties, bureaucracies and interest groups have expressed concern about the environment for a variety of reasons. Established organisations have been highly selective in plundering the green agenda. Moreover, they have been extremely cautious about embracing aspects of environmentalism that may undermine economic imperatives and electoral considerations. Commitment to environmentalism can also be expressed with different levels of intensity and in a variety of ways. Radical environmentalism, for instance, may include the preoccupation by ‘deep ecologists’ with a non-anthropocentric perspective as well as militant opposition to established institutions by groups like Greenpeace.

Though environmentalism can mean different things to different people, there are some common preoccupations and patterns of behaviour. The latter are distinctive enough to suggest that environmental issues will feature strongly on the political agenda in the 1990s. This argument may appear less plausible in the current economic situation, where people are concerned about issues like unemployment, the goods and services tax and the prospects for economic growth. However, there is indi-
rect support for my argument from a recent study, commissioned by the Secretariat of the Ecologically Sustainable Development Working Groups. The study, conducted during the worst recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s, asked people to rank which issues were among the most important now and which would be the most important in ten years' time. In rank order the most important current issues were unemployment, followed by the environment and education. Most people felt that in ten years' time the most important issue would be the environment, followed by unemployment and pensions and care for the aged.

The dangers of trying to predict political change are well-known. However, the evidence suggests that the preoccupation with environmental issues is unlikely to diminish. Furthermore, though the survey noted only modest changes in behaviour by consumers and a lack of emphasis on fundamental issues like reducing the use of domestic appliances and of motor vehicles, key social actors have become aware of the need to modify behaviour through a variety of means, including both state intervention and market mechanisms.

Media reportage has often portrayed the relationship between environmentalism and development as one of fundamental conflict and division. It is easy to contrast the warnings of catastrophists like David Suzuki (who posit a fundamental conflict between the pursuit of profit and power and the destruction of nature) with the prognosis of cornucopians like Hugh Morgan from the Western
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Mining Corporation (who regard environmentalism as a means to an end for ambitious, power seeking revolutionaries aiming to undermine private property).

However, these characterisations, though partially accurate, are too inflexible and fail to account for the impact of more consensual studies like the Brundtland Report presented by the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development on business and environmental groups. Though fraught with difficulties, initiatives like the ecologically sustainable working groups and the Resource Assessment Commission have led to a dialogue between catastrophists and cornucopians which has led many of them to abandon entrenched positions and much of their ideological baggage. Many business groups have recognised, reluctantly, that some form of statutory intervention is necessary to address many environmental problems and that, whether they like it or not, they have to become more socially responsible (for instance, in rehabilitating landscapes after they have been mined). Even more striking has been the acknowledgment by environmentalists that market mechanisms may have an important role to play in contributing to environmental protection and that there are many ways in which economic activity is independent of the consumption of energy and of resources, for instance, through recycling of products and through ‘closed loop’ production processes (as in the design of cars and other goods so that all their components can easily be recycled). Moreover, although structural imperatives like the need for economic growth in capitalist society and the struggles for electoral power between political parties may make it difficult to introduce radical reforms in environmental policy, these forces can be challenged and subjected to considerable modification.

But is the challenge of environmentalism to established practices novel or more ordinary? The arguments for novelty are based largely on an idealist tradition that emphasises the role of ideas in bringing about social change. According to this view there has been a shift, particularly among certain social groups, from materialist to postmaterialist values, from a way of thinking which is primarily guided by the aim of economic growth through exploitation of resources to one which values the environment for its aesthetic, spiritual and other qualities.

Arguments for the ordinariness of the challenge derive mainly from a realist tradition that emphasises interests and power. Despite their rhetoric, it is obvious that neither environmental groups nor political parties are simply motivated by idealism. They are also preoccupied by their own survival as organisations and are acutely aware of their own interests as well as of the need to appeal to particular groups and to engage in struggles for power and influence. Moreover, the success of a social movement can often best be gauged by the extent to which its ideals have been incorporated by established groups or by its inclusion in regular processes of negotiation and intermediation. There is no necessary conflict between the promotion by a social movement of certain ideas and its maturity as an organisation.

Environmental movements have been highly successful in promoting their ideals. First, they have been able to utilise a rich tradition of ideas about nature and environmental protection. Second, they have drawn on similar social bases and ideas as the protest movements of the 1960s. Though there is no necessary connection between concern about the environment and support for other social movements, the emphasis on economic growth by established parties in western democracies after the second World War provided new movements with a unique chance to mobilise popular support around the issue of environmental protection.

The notions of progress and of harnessing natural resources for economic development gained widespread acceptance in the wake of the first Industrial Revolution. The forces most closely associated with this Great Transformation—labour and business as well as the political parties attempting to represent their interests—have therefore been regarded by many as incapable of dealing with the new emphasis on environmentalism in the late 20th century. Third, environmental movements have been successful in promoting their ideals because they have operated as effective organisations for mobilising people and for raising funds. A further indicator of the influence of environmentalism has been the level of funding allocated by government both to voluntary organisations and to its own environmental agencies even during periods of economic decline.

Paradoxically, the acceptance of their ideas by the mass public and by key groups in society (including many of their opponents in business and industry) has posed a serious difficulty for environmental groups. Their identity as an oppositional force has seriously been compromised. Yet, many environmentalists are realising that it is not simply a question of ‘sleeping with the enemy’. Environmentalists and developers have had to adapt to changing political circumstances and to respond to new insights into the relationship between environmental protection and economic development.

The struggle over the coming decade is likely to be less over whether or not environmentalism becomes an integral part of the political and business culture—that is already well advanced—but over the implementation of radical reforms. Environmental groups will still play a role in placing pressure on established organisations to carry out reforms. However, with the focus on implementation, it is more likely than in the past that the main
struggles will take place at two levels. The first will be between established organisations with experience in the political system and a strategic role in implementing public policy. The second will be between nation states or groups of nation states.

On the first level of conflict, established organisations will continue to differ in the emphasis they place on the implementation of environmental policies. Over the past decade we have witnessed numerous environmental initiatives by the Labor government like the protection of rainforests, the high profile of the Environment portfolio and the funding of the landcare program. The public has also acknowledged the clear difference in emphasis by the major parties on the implementation of environmental policies. Yet while there are indications that a change of regime to a Coalition government led by John Hewson would result in a significant change of emphasis, many of the long-term goals would remain the same. Even in countries led by conservative governments for about a decade or more, such as Germany and Britain, there has been a major shift to incorporate environmental concerns both into political institutions and business practices.

This is not to suggest that the relationship between environmentalists and established institutions will always be characterised by co-operation. Conflicts will persist, particularly over the pace of implementation. However, even during recessions the environment will feature prominently on the political agenda, because it is often compatible with development. In addition, it is widely recognised that problems like the depletion of the ozone layer, soil degradation and the emission of greenhouse gases either have or could have a major effect on economic development.

Some of these issues also relate to the second level of conflict—conflict between nation states. A serious problem of the recent United Nations Conference in Rio de Janeiro was to try to reconcile the divergent perspectives of developed and developing countries. The economic implications of environmental protection are particularly acute for the latter. The agenda in this sphere will be dominated by arguments over who should pay for environmental protection and over what developing countries see as hypocrisy of developed nations that consume a disproportionate share of resources and expect developing countries to take drastic measures to save the environment.

There is also a potential tension between environmentalism in the developed world and the needs for survival and improvement of material conditions in developing nations. The goals of environmentalists in the West may also clash with the policies of particular regimes in developing countries. For instance, environmentalists and trade unionists in Australia have attempted to prevent the trade with countries like Malaysia in rainforest timbers.

Another dimension of international conflicts lies in the different positions adopted by major powers or trading blocs on environmental issues, as illustrated by the divergent positions of the United States and the European Community over the signing of international treaties on the emission of carbon dioxide, over aid programs to developing countries and over the regulation species protection (‘biodiversity’). Over the coming decade there are likely to be greater efforts at the transnational level to tackle the varying commitment by nation states to environmental protection. There is a growing realisation that national governments are not only having great difficulty in dealing with international economic problems but also with environmental ones.

The initial experiments with change are likely to be conducted at the national level, especially where laws and institutional mechanisms are being established to address environmental problems. As I have suggested above, significant progress has been made in Australia in identifying key issues. Furthermore, over certain issues, the patterns of response by established and environmental organisations have been remarkably similar. Finally, the notion that policy decisions, even economic ones, should be informed by an analysis of impacts on the environment has taken hold both of the popular imagination and of the bureaucratic and political culture.

It is no longer a question of whether or not one sleeps with ‘the enemy’. Though they now rub shoulders with the establishment, the Greens have contributed to significant changes within it. They are also well aware of the dangers of becoming marginalised in debates about environmental protection.

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ALR ACRONYMS WINNER

The winner of the ALR Acronyms competition in our December issue was S Cheung of Killara, NSW, for ‘A Little Revisionism’. Among the other highly commended entries were ‘After Lenin Rotted’, ‘Australia’s Left Rationalists’, ‘Australian Left’s Rigormortis’ and ‘Apparatchiks’ Literary Raft’. Definitely no prizes, however, either for ‘A Lovely Read’, or ‘A Load of Rubbish’. A voucher for $300 worth of Pluto Press books is winging its way to S Cheung.