

The Big Picture

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"News to use & amuse"

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Variation is the killer

Life form and communities have major problems trying to withstand large and unpredictable variations in living conditions. That we can find ways to deal with extreme conditions is shown by the Eskimo and Toureg peoples of the world, but both would have major problems if they had to suffer both hot and cold extremes at random.

One very serious effect of climate change is the [variations of climate](#) that it brings. In Australia we have firestorms in the South and floods in the North – both threatening lives, communities, food and water supplies.

At the same time as we struggle with this variation, our system of government is designed to deal with stability. It expects people and the environment to remain relatively predictable and for any change to be relatively slow.

What we don't need is faux statesmanship by politicians seeking a Churchillian mantle by emotional speeches to the effect that government will rebuild towns destroyed by fire "brick by brick" when temperature changes already in the pipeline as a result of the recent build-up in greenhouse gases will increase the probability of future extreme climatic events, leading to even more frequent firestorms like the one that occurred last Saturday. [Age](#)

Our politicians and their parties are organised around ideas of stability and constancy – stable economy, constant growth, stable weather patterns, stable world trade patterns etc. We can see this when Tasmania's Premier Bartlett doesn't want to explore new bushfire policies until the results of the Vic Royal Commission are obtained (Examiner 12/2/09). Everything moves sedately, as if there's all the time in the world. Look at Rudd's ETS – low targets for 2020 – no sweat.

Do we have that time? Concerned firefighters write in [TheAge](#)

Research by the CSIRO, Climate Institute and the Bushfire Council found that a "low global warming scenario" will see catastrophic fire events happen in parts of regional Victoria every five to seven years by 2020, and every three to four years by 2050, with up to 50 per cent more extreme danger fire days. However, under a "high global warming scenario", catastrophic events are predicted to occur every year in Mildura, and firefighters have been warned to expect up to a 230 per cent increase in extreme danger fire days in Bendigo. And in Canberra, the site of devastating fires in 2003, we are being asked to prepare for a massive increase of up to 221 per cent in extreme fire days by 2050, with catastrophic events predicted as often as every eight years. Given the Federal Government's dismal greenhouse gas emissions cut of 5 per cent, the science suggests we are well on the way to guaranteeing that somewhere in the country there will be an almost annual repeat of the recent disaster and more frequent extreme weather events.

Victoria's rapid move to establish a Royal Commission goes a long way to demonstrate the government's total lack of faith in the systems that they already have in place. Of course a Royal Commission is organised around legal determinations that are hardly relevant to our climate. Sensible comment again from the firefighters...

The real question now must be whether the nation as a whole is devoting the resources it needs to fire prevention and suppression. We are gravely concerned that the royal

commission to be set up in Victoria will have a narrow brief to investigate a geographically specific disaster. It cannot have the scope needed to provide an overview of Australia's fire readiness. Further, we want to ensure that it is not a whitewash, with narrow terms of reference designed to ensure political cover for the Victorian Government. The proposed Victorian royal commission should be folded into a broader national inquiry into the nature of Australia's fire risk and our preparedness to meet that risk.

The simple fact is that Australia's system of government is designed for circumstances that no longer exist, and our methods of government are about as appropriate as the quill pen. The result is a cumbersome, mistake prone system with almost no real accountability when our circumstances and the crises we face demand virtually the opposite characteristics.

Attempts to create a national emergency warning system were defeated by interstate bickering ([Australian](#)) so that, because phone numbers are managed nationally by Telstra, emergency services couldn't contact households at risk because they couldn't find the relevant phone numbers.

That's how our system 'works' at the moment. Households at risk because of interstate 'bickering'.

Our nation needs to apply the lessons of the 21st century to our systems of government – we need high capability and readiness, rapid and accurate responses, low error rates, transparency and high quality communications – all in desperately short supply in our system.

A system designed for stability simply cannot cope with rapid and unpredictable variation. Shifting our systems to capable, rapid response systems is now a matter of highest priority.

Our next indicator of government competence will be how effectively the Victorian government can manage its water crisis. ([TheAge](#)) If there is rain in Melbourne's catchment's before plants have time to regrow, then toxic fire retardants will be washed into water storage areas rendering water unfit for drinking, and possibly other uses.

That variation could arrive quickly and within a few months. Victoria appears totally unready to deal with such a problem and waiting for a Royal Commission will be much too late.

How the Lib/Lab 35 million ha of tree plantations is going to fit into the new climate scenario is anyone's guess. The amount of water needed, the times to grow trees of any size, the costs of planting and the fire risks that they'll present are all massive issues that appear to be left entirely from consideration.

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In case you missed it

Financial mess

Big spending on fast track [TheAustralian](#)

US Taxpayer trillions fuel monster mess [TheAge](#)

Governance

Rudd allows \$3 bn stamp duty in deal for states [SMH](#)

We need experts at getting outcomes [TheAustralian](#)

Brisbane CEO payrise triggers outcry [CourierMail](#)

Rudd to call early election this year? [DailyTelegraph](#)

Firefighters plead for politicians to face climate change [TheAge](#)

Some answers in the ashes [TheAge](#)

Bungling prevented national warning system [TheAustralian](#)

Bushfire locals blast system [ABC](#)

Chinalco to share Rio Tinto assets [HeraldSun](#)

Canberra's castles in the air [TheAustralian](#)

Centrelink forced to apologise [TheAustralian](#)

Serious failures in \$3.8 bn early warning system [TheAustralian](#)

Environment/food/water/forestry

Sea Shepherd runs for safety [TheAge](#)

Undrinkable water is next problem [TheAge](#)

Effluent study won't stop Gunns [Mercury](#)

Climate

► Fires result of climate change [TheAge](#)

Rudd denies ETS retreat [TheAustralian](#)

US energy chief flags carbon tax [TheAge](#)

A red ring around Canberra [NewMatilda](#)

Scientists to hold emergency climate talks [TheAge](#)

The end of certainty [SMH](#)

Social/shelter

Don't gape at us [TheAge](#)

Workers sacked while saving lives [HeraldSun](#)

Why not create real jobs? [SMH](#)

Communications/transport/energy

Early warning system failure cover up [TheAustralian](#)

Fire communication failures need answers [TheAge](#)

Media's role in bushfire reporting [TheAge](#)

World

The fight to get aboard Lifeboat UK: Lovelock [TheTimes](#)

The poison of torture still courses [TheAge](#)

► Bubble economy 2.0 [GlobalResearch](#)

Security

There's been a series of government ads on TV about some National Security Hotline that people can call anonymously if they fear something 'insecure' might be happening.

In one of the main examples given, a female calls in to report...

'I think I heard them planning something'...

It's interesting that hearing someone planning something should be seen as a reason to call such a service! What does it mean?

Perhaps the government believes that planning anything is *de facto* proof of some kind of illicit activity, after all they don't seem to do much of it themselves.

There can be no security when our politicians try to fight nature and defy the laws of physics and chemistry. For too long, politicians have interfered in affairs that really require independent scientific analysis and recommendations.

This week we feature a story from New Matilda by **Pablo Brait** that clarifies the issue and also shows how politicians could play a useful role – if they were creative, skilled and focussed.

Finally an essay from Tasmanian writer **Peter Henning** who describes how the decision making processes of the Tasmanian polity are dysfunctional and denialist. This editor would argue that much of what Peter says about Tasmania, applies equally well to Australia as a whole.

Why are the people so compliant? Try this from [Global Research](#)

As Mr. Greenspan observed in testimony before Congress, a major reason why US wages have not risen is that workers are afraid to strike or even to complain about being worked harder and harder for longer and longer hours ("raising productivity"), because they are one paycheck away from missing their mortgage payment – or, if renters, one paycheck or two away from homelessness.

We used to call it debt bondage. It's certainly not freedom.

ID

[Reports](#) have stated that Centrelink has been demanding 'bank statements' and similar proofs of ID prior to offering relief funds to desperate bushfire survivors.

With some 5,000 people rendered homeless, the task of sorting out all of the problems is hardly one for a bureaucracy like Centrelink.

Who knows who will claim to be disadvantaged by the fires? Who can assure that there are suitable systems in place to deal with so many disadvantaged people?

"The Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has ordered that Centrelink be lenient on bushfire victims who have no ID, but today we discovered a Centrelink computer system was sending these letters out automatically," Senator Ludwig said. [TheAustralian](#)

Lenient means 'not harsh or strict' which implies that normally Centrelink is expected to be 'harsh or strict' in its dealings with Australians – our public services and governments are letting us down badly in just about every domain yet are expected to treat our citizens 'harshly or strictly'.

In WWII, when I was very young, hundreds were killed in the UK every day by massive bombing raids. Robust systems were needed to help assure that people could get help in a timely way.

One of these were clear national priorities and broadcast instructions about what to do and how to do it.

Yet our governments [failed to provide](#) a useful communications system, apparently arguing about the \$20 million cost, even though taxpayers would pick up the whole tab. The failure was reportedly due to 'internal bickering' – another massive failure of leadership under John Howard.

At least there are [reports](#) that a special effort will be made to deal with the problems created by the fires, with Vic Chief Police Commissioner Christine Nixon set to head up a recovery Authority.

Doubtless we'll soon see how well our governments can do if they focus on meeting community needs.

Stuff

FORMER premier Paul Lennon missed out on Tasmania's top racing job after new Premier David Bartlett blocked the move.

Despite Mr Lennon having the support of the three racing codes, Mr Bartlett decided appointing him as chairman of the new Tasmanian Racing Board would be seen as "jobs for the boys". [Mercury](#)

So he does have some discriminatory skills!

MIS forestry & Ag credit

Among other things, MARIUS CUMING 13/02/2009 of [The Land](#) reports that forestry MIS schemes are falling apart...

FORESTRY managed investment schemes (MIS) are under a financial cloud and questions remain about the future of the 500,000 hectares planted to blue gums across Australia.

The port of Portland in Victoria has announced more than \$16 million of woodchip orders have been cancelled by Japanese interests since November, and timber giant, Gunns, also confirmed a reduction in woodchip demand from Japan.

Some timber companies now have numerous properties on the market, with Timbercorp in the process of selling half its 100,000 hectare estate under blue gums.

And LUCY SKUTHORP in [The Land](#) tells us...

While the food crisis and strong long-term demand for food was seen last year as a good buffer for agriculture, it seems businesses further up the supply chain are finding it tougher to get the money they need to keep operating at their usual levels.

"The area where there is a problem with accessing credit is more in terms of those people farmers are selling on to," Mr Carroll said. "So in the secondary industries – the processing, manufacturing, value-adding industries.

"They are having problems making sure they do have enough credit available to continue to operate at the sorts of levels they previously have."

Interesting snippets like this tell us that there could be many more problems still to come along supply chains.

Mission Creep Reaches U.S. Newsrooms

Source: Associated Press, February 5, 2009

"Over the past five years, the money the [U.S.] military spends on winning hearts and minds at home and abroad has grown by 63 percent, to at least \$4.7 billion this year," reports the Associated Press. "That's almost as much as it spent on body armor for troops in [Iraq](#) and [Afghanistan](#) between 2004 and 2006. ... This year, the Pentagon will employ 27,000 people just for recruitment, advertising and public relations -- almost as many as the total 30,000-person work force in the [State Department](#)." The Texas-based Joint Hometown News Service offers "glowing stories written by Pentagon staff," accredited to the authors without their military titles.

"In 2009, Hometown news plans to put out 5,400 press releases, 3,000 television releases" -- presumably, [video news releases](#) -- "and 1,600 radio interviews" -- presumably, [audio news releases](#). The military operation's [website](#) lists participating newspaper, radio and television outlets, in all 50 U.S. states.

An interesting test

[New Matilda](#) has an interesting idea – apply the rules of the NT intervention to a white guy living in Sydney.

Over the coming fortnight [newmatilda.com](#) journalist Scott Mitchell will be going gonzo to find out what it's like to have half your income "quarantined" by the government (or in this case, the [newmatilda.com](#) Department of Social Intervention). We'll be publishing Scott's daily diary over the next week.

This could be very interesting - we'll keep you posted.

Twigg's [reports](#) on A\$

The Aussie dollar is consolidating in a narrow band between \$0.66 and \$0.65 on the intra-day chart, indicating that the downswing is likely to continue. Breakout below \$0.65 would signal a test of \$0.6250. Reversal above \$0.66 is less likely, but would indicate another test of \$0.6850. In the longer term, the primary trend is down and failure of \$0.6250 would offer a target of \$0.5650; calculated as $0.6250 - (0.6850 - 0.6250)$.



Now Is Not The Time For Politics

Whether he's setting "politically reasonable" emissions targets or hammering together a stimulus package, Rudd needs to stop thinking of climate scientists as just another lobby group,

writes **Pablo Brait** © [NewMatilda](#)

"And I'm sure when this is delivered ... we'll get attacked from the left, from the right." Kevin Rudd, [7.30 Report](#), 11 December 2008.

[Questioned](#) about the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme on the ABC's *7.30 Report* in December, Kevin Rudd gave us a neat summary of his Government's climate change policy-making philosophy and demonstrated how we ended up with a completely inadequate emissions reduction target of 5 to 15 per cent by 2020, massive giveaways to big business at the expense of the Australian public and a position that can only help to derail international negotiations on a global emissions reduction deal.

It comes down to basic political algebra. The ALP, in the absence of a clear ideological position on an issue, aims to make policy by seeking a "balance" between the left and right of the political spectrum, and arriving at some middle ground. On climate change they are claiming to have done just this — they have consulted with big business, unions and environmentalists and come out with a policy that they claim "gets the balance right" between these competing forces. While this process can be considered flawed at the best of times, its application to climate change is downright dangerous.

Why? Because no matter how skilled a negotiator you are, it's impossible to strike a deal with the laws of physics and chemistry — which leads to our first question for the PM: "Where are the scientists?" The climate change problem is not the same as an ideological battle on industrial relations or the privatisation of essential services.

At its heart, climate change is an issue based in the physical sciences — heat is being trapped in our atmosphere and changing the climate cycles of the planet. No amount of consultation with stakeholder groups and interested parties will change that. Lobby groups, whether they represent business, welfare or environmental interests, have no place determining what Australia's and the world's greenhouse gas emissions targets should be. Where they do have a very important role to play, is in determining what actions are taken or how targets are met. But targets must be decided by scientists.

Neither Kevin Rudd nor Penny Wong mentioned scientists in their spruiking of the atrocious Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS). Not one prominent climate scientist has come out in support of the scheme; in fact many have [denounced](#) it. What Kevin Rudd refers to as "the left" actually includes a majority of the world's scientists. Without a basis in science the CPRS is a joke.

Currently, a precautionary scientific consensus is emerging around the need to stabilise atmospheric carbon dioxide levels at well below 350 parts per million (ppm), probably closer to 300ppm to avoid runaway climate change. (These figures are carbon dioxide only, not carbon dioxide [equivalent](#).) Our current levels are around 390ppm, and Rudd's recently announced targets, if adopted by the rest of the world, would have us stabilising at around 450ppm — resulting in hundreds of

millions, if not billions of human deaths over the next 100 years.

Our second question for Rudd is perhaps more of a tired groan. Yet again in justifying bad climate change policy the archaic dichotomy is trotted out: environment or economy? How many times does it have to be said? Without healthy ecosystems that enable us to breathe clean air, drink unpolluted water, grow sufficient food and live relatively disease, drought and fire-free, there is no economy, society or human civilisation.

It is unclear whether Rudd and his ministers actually believe in this dichotomy, or just use it when convenient. The proposed economic stimulus package, which includes a \$507 million increase in the solar hot water rebate and \$3.3 billion for ceiling insulation, shows that the government can put forward initiatives that benefit both the economy and energy efficiency. It's a good start but this piecemeal approach is far from sufficient as an emissions reduction policy. Furthermore, a lot more money has been allocated for counter-productive measures like the \$12.7 billion worth of electoral bribes to taxpayers, which encourage consumption and thereby will probably increase emissions.

A climate change policy-making process that would actually give us a chance to get it right would involve scientists deciding on emissions targets for 2020 and 2050 and planning a trajectory to meet them. Then, a thorough, participatory process with the general public and business could be held to determine how these targets are to be met. The Federal Government would take these policies and processes to international negotiations and would actually be setting a good example rather than destroying the goodwill extended to Australia following its ratification of the Kyoto Protocol.

In the meantime, while Rudd is busy congratulating himself on his politically laudable balancing act, Australians are left to ponder when climate science will be given appropriate credence in policy making and when the outdated and destructive environment-economy divide will finally stop being spouted in political rhetoric.

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Tasmania: Now is the time

By **Peter Henning**

We Tasmanians are on the horns of a dilemma, a dilemma worsening by the day and recognized by many, but needed to be understood more widely and more quickly.

There is a clear and massive disjuncture between the whole focus and direction of Tasmanian Labor-Liberal accord policy, and local, national and global realities and imperatives.

The dilemma is profound, and cannot be resolved by the current level of political debate in Tasmania. The reasons for this are so plain that it almost embarrassing to state them. Outside Tasmania, in Australia and in the wider world, things are changing rapidly, more rapidly than has occurred before in living memory – at least the living memory of post-1945 generations of Australians (excluding the experiences of those who have already lived through their own hells on earth, in failed states elsewhere in the world).

Unchanging worldviews

It is blindingly obvious that the raft of problems confronting us now, and which will continue to do so in the near future and in the longer term, are being ignored at the State political level. There is a kind of Mameluke-like disaster unfolding in Tasmania.

The Mamelukes were a political-military class (originally soldier-slaves), powerful in Egypt from the 13th century, (the only military power which defeated the Mongol invasions, and responsible for ending the crusader occupation of the Holy Land in the 1290s), until finally defeated by Napoleon in 1798. Not just defeated, but irrevocably obliterated. The Mamelukes had based their military success for hundreds of years on their professionalism, their dedication to mastery of set battles. They were superior to adversaries with the same military technology, but doomed by their adamant refusal to change while the world outside (even immediately adjacent) was changing rapidly.

The Mamelukes' years of preparation, pride in their idiosyncratic skills and professionalism, were blasted to pieces in a couple of hours. Exquisite horsemanship and rapidly executed archery were redundant in the face of artillery and mass volleys of musketry. The Mamelukes had ignored what was happening next door. They were trapped in their own incapacity to reform. Their departure was abrupt and permanent.

None of the really important issues of significance in the world at large are considered relevant to the Tasmanian Labor-Liberal accord. And the reason for that is clear enough too. The prevailing political culture is trapped, like a rabbit in a spotlight, unable to move. Its priorities (long ago corrupted from the public interest to the partisan and personal) are out of time, out of place, out of usefulness, and downright dangerous to all of us. They are so blinded by the orthodoxies of their own Mameluke culture, and of their conviction that they can always capture over 70% of the vote in State elections, that they think that they don't need to consider issues beyond the extension of their own parliamentary careers.

The current Labor-Liberal accord is wrecking Tasmania. It has no answers to the current problems, whatever they are. Water, land use, agriculture, fishing, tourism, health, forestry, environment, infrastructure, climate change – there is no integrated policy in these areas.

All these areas are inextricably interconnected. None of them can be isolated from each other, as in separate silos. Not only do they intersect with each other, but they are all also interconnected across the social-environmental-economic spectrum. Policy fails whenever the economic is isolated from the social or the environmental.

It cannot be that there is just an intellectual incapacity to grasp the concept of interconnections, of relationships between the natural world (its resources and its health) and people (their needs and health) and economic activity (its sustainability).

How is it possible, for example, that the Tasmanian Parliament's decision to approve the allocation of 26-40 gigalitres of water to supply Gunns' pulp mill every year into the indefinite future was made, whereby the question of whether this level of water usage would be sustainable, even for one year, let alone an unforeseeable future of anticipated climate change? Surely intellectual incapacity alone cannot explain such moronic decision-making.

Rather, there is a deliberate and conscious cognitive decision to place the economic interest (not necessarily the sustainable economic interest, but the short-term profit-seeking economic interest) above the social and environmental. In other words, to acknowledge that the interconnections exist, but to ignore them. It is therefore possible, for example, that when the Tasmanian Parliament agreed to allow 70 million litres of toxic effluent to be dumped into Bass Strait daily indefinitely into the future, knowing that the effluent contained dioxins (among other poisons), that they were aware that they were potentially jeopardizing the fishing industry, the marine environment, Tasmania's northern Bass Strait coastline, and the habitat of threatened species, but simply chose to ignore it.

It goes further than that. The Labor-Liberal accord is locked into a political mentality of adversarial behaviour, a confused paradigm which promotes avoidance, obfuscation, exaggerated claims and counter-claims, cover-ups, and a mindset which sees the social, environmental and economic as not just separate, but competitive. Everything, on these terms, is judged as a competing interest. In this scenario, political decision-making cannot be visionary at all, but is reduced to a battleground between the various silos for attention. In this sense, for example, it is not possible to have a massive wood-chipping industry, controlling thousands of hectares of native forest and plantations, without having serious adverse impacts on water supplies for all other users. It has to be one or the other. There can be no integrated approach, no alternative to clear-felling, no consideration of the real implications of the destruction of water catchments.

That's just the tip of the iceberg of Tasmania's dilemma. There can be no insulation from wider national and global issues. Those are the realities, and none of them are going away any time soon.

One eyed approach

But there is another aspect of the disconnect between the social-environmental-economic which is most disturbing of all. Tasmania has a modern western political system, closely connected to all sources of information about the local, the national, and the global, and it has a bicameral Parliament, an orderly electoral apparatus, a universal suffrage based on equal electorates and the principle of one person-one vote, without qualifications, such as property rights – in short a political system which has been built, through human struggle, to try to

eliminate autocracy and abuse of power and install and defend democratic rights.

The disconnect, which gives priority to the economic, immediately puts democratic rights at risk, irrespective of the hard-won separation of powers in the institutional structures, and the regular electoral cycle and democratic suffrage.

Throw out integrated policy, informed by social-environmental-economic linkages, and also thrown out are all health considerations, across the board. This is why it is not surprising for us to hear of water contamination across Tasmania, of toxin levels in drinking water exceeding safe levels, or of stories about drift from aircraft spraying in tree plantations onto farmland, people's homes and water supplies, and of people suffering illness as a result.

Why is it not surprising that the event on January 20, 2009, at Weegana, where three people were subject to spray drift from a helicopter spraying a plantation by helicopter, film footage recorded of the spraying occurring close to the Mersey River, and the people subsequently being physically ill, did not register a blip of interest in the mainstream media, and did not prompt a question – not even a question – of whether there is a link between this event and what is happening on a much broader scale in Tasmania.

In Tasmania, none of these things are viewed as in any way abnormal. The political processing of these things are part of the “normal” brief for corporate public relations people, whether in-house or outsourced, government bureaucrats, technocrats and field technicians, the local media and politicians. Public complaint and evidence, corporate denial, bureaucratic obfuscation and inaction, criticism or suspicion of the complainant – in this case direct accusations of lying - and silence from the Labor-Liberal accord are summarized briefly, if at all, on the bottom of page out-of sight. Mustn't scare the horses, they mightn't drink the water. Or worse still, they might wonder what's going on and stop running with the blinkers on.

Blame the victim

But that's not the whole picture is it? There are choices to be made here, by a free press. Or there should be. To borrow from Shakespeare's Hamlet - to be or not to be a free press? Should we push things beyond the comfort zone, be true to the hallowed principles of freedom of the press? If Hamlet's moral dilemma doesn't resonate with the fourth estate, there's little hope they'll think about, let alone identify, any pattern of events in the public domain which point to an undermining of people's rights.

As for the Labor – Liberal accord, they love a gutless and ignorant print media, especially at the regional level. It makes it possible to put events like Weegana January 20 within the frame of a wider set of events and experiences with which the broader community has become familiar and into which it quickly becomes merged. It slips innocuously into a pattern of events in Tasmania which over time can become normalized, in much the same way that people came to accept during the Howard era that children could be incarcerated in detention indefinitely, even though the evidence was overwhelming that their lives were being destroyed.

Nice how easy it is to do that.

The political dilemma we face in Tasmania is serious. What happened at Weegana on January 20, and the response it evoked, most chillingly that the victims were liars, is a classic sign of a hollowed-out shell of political representation, a separation of

interest between those holding the reins of institutional state power and the broader community, a pathology at the centre of the political culture.

Trying to nail the victims as the perpetrators is the oldest human rights crime in the political book stretching right back to our earliest surviving written records of human history. It is also the subject of many a warning from astute and courageous commentators, activists and writers from the same period of extant records. Socrates is possibly the most famous example in European history, condemned to death at the end of fifth-century BCE Athens, for challenging people to question the bases of their prevailing beliefs, the orthodoxies which controlled their lives and behaviours and political beliefs.

Socrates was condemned as a liar, a threat to morality and convention and the authority of the state. Yet his name alone of his generation has been preserved (whether or not we know why) through the vicissitudes of time as well-known within the public domain (as distinct from the academy), and the reason is clear.

Socrates is Joan of Arc and Galileo and Walyer and Sitting Bull and Ghandi and Martin Luther King and Mandela and Salvatore Allende and all those people, less well known and unknown, who are victims of the politically powerful, and the unscrupulous, exploitative profiteers.

I suspect most Tasmanians do know that there is something rotten at the heart of Tasmanian politics, but they have a psychological difficulty in connecting with it, and relating events such as those at Weegana to the broader political landscape. Most Tasmanians now live in urban environments and no doubt find it difficult to think seriously about being affected by aerial spraying.

Water is an essential right

Most Tasmanians are habituated to having “water on tap”, and cannot really envisage contaminated water as their daily fare. For most people living in Hobart, clear felling of native forest in water catchments happens elsewhere. The north east is a foreign country. Launceston is Hicksville. Thousands of Launceston residents would have no idea where their water supply comes from, whether from the north east catchment areas via the North Esk River or the South Esk River.

More significantly, many people of Launceston seem to have no idea what is happening in the catchment areas for their essential water supplies. A large proportion of them have not recently been to the areas around Upper Blessington, the Fingal valley and Ben Lomond to see for themselves what the future holds for water supplies to Launceston. They don't seem to realise how their water catchments are being wrecked, and they give little indication that they could care. Perhaps they think their future water supplies in the future will come via some aqueduct from the west coast. Or from desalination.

Most extraordinary of all, as a particularly well-heeled local logging contractor mentioned to me, the equanimity of the people of the greater Launceston area at the prospect of Gunns using more than the total current regional usage of water for the pulp mill, beggars belief. “They should be the jumping up and down and protesting about this in their tens of thousands, not just their thousands. I can't understand them”.

He is right. Water is much too valuable and useful to be squandered in that way. The absurdity of it even being considered as a public policy option by the Tasmanian

Parliament is beyond question, at least in the sense of “public policy” and what that should mean.

Here lies the difficulty in a failing democratic political system.

Let me repeat, Tasmanians are on the horns of a dilemma because the Labor-Liberal accord is now effectively divorced from the people, and the notion of framing “public policy” in the public interest has more to do with preserving party and personal power than anything else, and does not see a valid political role as representing the interests of the people. But most of the voting population, for a variety of reasons, cannot at this stage accept that this has occurred or acknowledge that the Labor-Liberal accord sees its role as representing sectional interests, usually corporate and private, rather than public. Associated with this unfortunate conundrum is that whole sections of society are fundamentally ill-informed about what is happening around them.

It is in this context that the incident at Weegana and the political and community response reflects, in microcosm, a serious political malaise, an anti-democratic canker that must not be ignored, but challenged. Again, this is not an isolated incident, to be dismissed as a mistake – the attack on the victims and the denials preclude that – but a political mindset which views victims as vexatious, annoying and a hindrance.

Victims are a nuisance. They’re in the way. They need to be dispossessed of that which makes them a nuisance.

We've seen it all before

We’re in a re-run of the 1820s dispossession, when the land grab between Launceston and Hobart and various beckoning off-shoots claimed the Tasmanian Aborigines throughout the region as a nuisance, to be dispossessed of their land permanently. The Black War ensued, the land grants created a pastoral elite of wealth and political power and a subservient convict-emancipist work force, these people at one and the same time the shock troops of the Aboriginal dispossession and the next unwitting victims of the land grab, pushed to the margins as small holders and labourers.

That’s not good enough. We don’t want another re-run of the 1820s. The land grab has to be stopped. MIS schemes are ripping the heart out of rural Tasmania, dispossessing whole communities. Timber plantations and large-scale agri-business schemes have gone far enough. The experience of such ventures in the Murray-Darling, with their gross distortions of the market, destruction of diversity, family farms and communities, and their huge demand on natural resources, to mention just some of the massive deleterious effects, shows they have no viable future.

The age-old argument of branding the victim follows a familiar pattern. Consider the well-publicised Windshuttle justification for the dispossession of Tasmanian Aborigines, a justification timeless in its application by invaders, expropriators, looters, subjugators and perpetrators of mass murder and genocide – they deserved to be dispossessed.

Dispossession is multi-faceted. It takes many forms. But it all begins with an assumption of some right to dispossess, whether it be a notion like “terra nullius”, or “queue jumpers”, or “progress”, or dismissal of rights through legislation, regulation, bureaucratic obfuscation, or simply by coercion, the application of “might is right”.

Dispossession without clear avenues of recourse to redress is oppression.

Oppression is here

The longest serving US Supreme Court judge, the idiosyncratic William Douglas, appointed by Franklin Roosevelt in 1939, and through his career until 1975 the bane of conservative federal administrations and the conscientious defender of liberal democratic rights, had this to say of what is now nascent in Tasmania:

“As nightfall does not come all at once, neither does oppression. In both instances, there is a twilight when everything remains seemingly unchanged. And it is in such a twilight that we all must be most aware of change in the air – however slight – lest we become unwitting victims of the darkness.”

That change is in the air, and has been for some time. It has been fed by the notion that dissent is “extremist”, alternative economic and social models, incorporating community participation, diversity and discussion, are ignored, especially if they are at odds with or competitive with corporatism, and the increasing control of the key resources of land, forestry, water and other resources by a select group of corporate interests. The whole weight of State power and authority in Tasmania has been directed towards this end, including the use of police action, indoctrination and training programs, the use of the legal system (SLAPP suits are commonplace as a means to stifle public discussion and dissent, with the active support of the Labor-Liberal accord), the undemocratic legislative program enshrined in the PMAA-PMP laws, the corruption, lies and cover-ups of the Labor-Liberal accord and the character assassination of all critics, whether in the political arena, the public service, the academy, the professions or the general community.

The people sprayed at Weegana on January 20 were acting as good stewards on our behalf, and they deserve to be applauded for the evidence they collected about what happened on that day. But the political culture of Tasmania is one which abhors pluralism, diversity, difference and debate, and thrives on hierarchical notions of tribal and doctrinaire conformism.

The most fundamental aspects of stewardship are moribund in Tasmania. Cicero’s premise that “the welfare of the people is the ultimate law” does not apply in the Tasmanian polity. There is one notion of stewardship, which is applicable to the circumstances of many third-world countries, and shared with Tasmania, (which although it is not a third-world economy, has third-world attitudes towards resource development and corporate-government relationships), and it is one which denies the notion of stewardship altogether.

A way forward

There is a way forward, but it is not within the competence of the Labor-Liberal accord to make the decisions necessary for that to occur.

It is a way forward which promotes development of industries and enterprises that all of us can support, and which doesn’t degrade or destroy our capacity for a healthy and purposeful future, and which is not established for the economic benefit of a small number of corporate and political “squatters”, who see the rest of the population as a compliant labour market or a nuisance.

In 1995, Japanese management consultant guru Kenichi Ohmae (a strong supporter of regional economic cooperation within the framework of globalised markets – no left wing ideologue by a long shot), wrote that “government typically responds to the backward-looking demands of hard-pressed industries by

providing subsidies. Through trade, capital market, and regulatory policy, it responds to them by providing protection. Together, subsidies and protection neither create incentives for healthy, if deliberately paced, change, nor work to build a constituency in favour of such incentives. The only thing they do is buy off current political opposition, and they do so at an horrendous cost – in money, lost employment, and potential for future growth – that must be absorbed by all citizens in their roles as workers and consumers.”

In a nutshell the Tasmanian Labor-Liberal accord is moribund and stagnant. It is leading Tasmania... no, leading is the wrong word. It is taking Tasmania to disaster.

We must seek another way. It is well past time for a new coalition of political forces in Tasmania to be formed, a coalition which supports an integrated vision for Tasmania's future, based on an understanding of the essential and inextricable social-environmental-economic connections which needs must inform policy decision-making if Tasmania is to have a worthwhile future.

Turner's turn of phrase

In 1976 Ian Turner's wonderful little book, In Union Is Strength, a history of trade unionism in Australia from the convict era until 1974, was published. In the penultimate chapter, which focused on the Whitlam years, and which he called “Today and Tomorrow”, he referred to a community debate about whether unions had the right to get involved in matters of public policy, as was occurring with greater frequency in the early 1970s, mentioning their interference in “the sending of war materials to Vietnam, the destruction of historic buildings (and) the construction of an industry which threatens atmospheric pollution”.

The centerpiece of this debate was the highly effective action taken by the Builders Labourers' Federation (led by Jack Munday), in concert with resident action groups, in a “green ban” against the redevelopment of Sydney's historic Rocks area.

Turner then has this to say:

“But the fundamental question goes much further than this. Ecologists have predicted a possible run-down of natural resources. The ideology of capitalism has centred on progress, defined in terms of continuing technological sophistication and an ever-increasing productivity. The structure of capitalism requires the continuing re-investment of profit. The ideology of the working-class movement has also assumed progress; its quarrel with capitalism has been about who controls the productive apparatus, and how the product is distributed. Recent trade union policies on conservation, however, imply a reconsideration of these imperatives, and the green ban movement has opened up new areas of common purpose between the unions and the urban middle class... (But) the working class, in Australia as in other advanced industrial societies, has been the prisoner of the ideology of progress and the goals of material satisfaction set by consumer society.”

The essentials of Turner's analysis differ little now from when he wrote over 30 years ago. But his hope for a strengthening of “common purpose” between the labour movement and the “urban middle class”, implicitly optimistic about a social-environmental-economic connection of coherence, was not to eventuate.

Commodification

The opposite occurred, and occurred exponentially since the

1970s. The environment in its entirety was commodified more systematically and more thoroughly in the last 30 years than was thought possible at any other time in human history. Air, water, land and all the planet's resources and life met one agenda – economic growth. The social-environmental was eliminated from the equation.

It has been a calamity for Australia that what Jack Munday and others started in the 1970s was allowed to fall apart, for there should be a natural alignment between the preservation of the environment and the interests of the labour movement.

The point is – here and now – that there must be a revival of linkages between political forces that focus on holistic connections, rather than on competitive interests.

There are incipient signs that the window of opportunity for reconnection is starting to occur. In the wake of the Victorian bushfire catastrophe, the national secretary of the United Firefighters Union of Australia (UFUA) Peter Marshall, has written an open letter to the Prime Minister and the Premier of Victoria expressing grave concern that “current federal and state government policies seem destined to ensure a repeat of the recent tragic events”. Marshall emphasizes that research by the CSIRO, Climate Institute and Bushfire Council found that climate change, even a “low global warming scenario, will see catastrophic fire events happen” repeatedly. (The Age, 12/2/09).

At the same time, Kenneth Davidson is warning Victorians of the need for “an understanding of impact of fires on the (water) catchment areas – specifically, the ash and fire retardant chemicals left in the wake of the firestorm that will be washed into the dams after the first big rainfall, as happened in Canberra after the 2003 bushfires”.

Tasmania's water catchments are increasingly imperilled on a wider scale than Victoria's by clearfelling and the establishment of highly fire sensitive mono-cultural plantations. Members of the UFUA come from a broad spectrum of society and political perspectives, but like Jack Munday's BLF of the 1970s, UFUA leadership is seeking a broad consensus for action across interlocking policy areas for “state and federal governments to follow scientific advice and keep firefighters and the community safe by halving the country's greenhouse gas emissions by 2020”.

Reshaping the agenda

Tasmanians have an opportunity in 2009 to reshape the political landscape, to refashion the direction that Tasmania is going. We are the stewards. We cannot disavow that. We can ignore it. We can dismiss it. But we do so at our peril, because dispossession can come by our own actions, our own stupidity, our own ignorance. It has happened in the past, again and again. We can choose to be good stewards or bad stewards. But we are still the stewards.

Now is the time for us to break the shackles of a political system, which, in the words of Tony Powell (the inaugural chairman of the of the Darwin Reconstruction Commission of 1975) is encumbered by “the ever-present politicization of public administration that bedevils the work of state and federal public services generally, fed by an evil army of ministerial advisers whose purpose is to divert, disrupt and channel public service outputs to best serve the interests of ministers, political parties, selected private sector interests of money and influence, and always to the detriment of the public interest”.

Now is the time to actively develop a new coalition of political forces across the social spectrum. A coalition which will support the election of people to the Legislative Council in May this year who will fight for the public interest, for the long-term interest of a healthy future for Tasmania and Tasmanians. A coalition which will fight for the removal of the Liberal-Labor accord from the corridors of power in Tasmania in 2010, which will restore basic legal rights to the people, which will remove statute bars preventing access to common law, which will fight to remove the toxic silos which enshrine corporate economic interest above the social-environmental imperatives.

A coalition which can approach our future from the perspective of a holistic interpretation of the way forward, which doesn't see water and air as sacrificial commodities to fat bonuses for corporate executives at the expense of the public interest, here and now and into the foreseeable future.

Now is the time for a coalition of forces which sees the inextricable interconnections between a healthy fishing industry, a vibrant and diverse farming sector, tourism, business and industry, clean air and water, climate change, a healthy ecosystem, the protection and nourishment of non-human life – the entwined social-environmental-economic - for we might not have that opportunity again in our lifetimes.

Now is the time.

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