



State of Affairs

When it comes to the environment, the state government has two key responsibilities:

- 1) to protect our existing natural environment
- 2) to create a sustainable future through investment in renewable energy

In the eight months that the Coalition government have been in power in NSW, their ability to uphold these responsibilities has been questionable.

One of the most obvious impediments to the Coalition government being able to make good environmental policy is their need to keep the Shooters and Fishers Party happy as they, with the Christian Democrats, hold the balance of power in the upper house. The Shooters and Fishers Party largely caters to the interests of people who enjoy recreational hunting and fishing. The interests of their

members are often at odds with the interests of those working for environmental conservation.

The personal opinions of Premier Barry O'Farrell may also come into play, as he has indicated a preference against renewable energy sources such as wind farms.

Many important environmental issues are currently playing out across NSW. From protecting native species and marine parks, to determining the impact of coal seam gas extraction, to laying out a plan for a renewable energy future, NSW is at a crossroads.

Which way our state heads may be determined by a number of complex factors, including the political games that often prevent our leaders from making decisions that have long-term benefits, rather than short-term pay-offs.

In this issue of **Watermark**, we look at a couple of the important environmental issues that are affecting our state, and what outcomes might occur.

Protection versus politics

The first indication of the NSW government's approach to environmental issues came shortly after it was elected, when Barry O'Farrell announced his new cabinet. The Environment Department was broken up, with part of its responsibilities delegated to the Department of Premier and others to the Department of Primary Industries. While this move was justified by O'Farrell as giving environmental issues more direct attention, many environmental groups such as the Nature Conservation Council, criticised the shift as "putting the fox in charge of the henhouse".

Indeed, it is concerning that the Department of Primary Industries, whose main obligation is to represent industries that *use* the environment, would also be charged with *conserving* the environment. Many have expressed doubts about how much bias could be involved in the environmental decisions made by this department.

Bias is a crucial issue when it comes to the government's environmental practices. Before the election, the Coalition indicated that they would conduct a scientific enquiry into the marine parks in NSW. This move was questioned, with some worrying that the enquiry would be used as an excuse to appease the Shooters and Fishers Party and scale back the number of protected marine areas in NSW. The enquiry, now underway, has been promoted by the government as a means of placing science before politics in their environmental decision-making. While conservationists are happy to support a scientific enquiry into marine parks in NSW, they are keen to determine that the science is not biased.

Fears that the findings of this enquiry will be dictated by politics, not science, were heightened in June, when the government supported a moratorium of up to 5 years on any new marine parks or sanctuaries being created in NSW. The National Parks

Association of NSW condemned this move. Currently only 6.5% of NSW's waters are protected marine sanctuaries, when international consensus supports a figure of 20%.

Marine parks are a crucial means of balancing commercial and recreational fishing with species protection and regeneration. Those who enjoy recreational fishing ultimately benefit from greater marine protections, as it ensures fish will be there for them to catch in the future.



Critically endangered species such as the Grey Nurse Shark need better protection.

Now is an important time to assess the needs of Australia's unique marine life. Disease, pollution and overfishing are all harmful to our aquatic species, but it is also crucial to have up-to-date information on how climate change and ocean temperature rise is affecting marine life.

This is also a crucial time for decisions regarding marine parks, as the alliance between the Coalition and the Shooters and Fishers Party means that it would be all too easy for politics, not science, to prevail.

The results of the marine parks enquiry are expected in the coming months.

Re[New]able South Wales?

With the federal government's Clean Energy Future legislation package passed through the senate in November, a sustainable future is looking more like a reality. However enthusiasm for a renewable future is a little harder to come by at the state level.

Premier O'Farrell has said that if it were up to him there would be no new wind farms approved in NSW. After making those comments he later clarified that this was only a personal preference, and not official party policy. Nevertheless, this attitude is worrying considering the potential benefits of increased wind energy in NSW, along with other renewable schemes.

One of the big talking points around the time of the state election was how the previous Labor government had left a "\$2 billion hole" in the state budget thanks to the unexpected success of the Solar Bonus Scheme, which delivered a 60 cents per kilowatt-hour tariff to those who installed solar panels under the scheme. The scheme had to be reduced to a tariff of 20c/kWh and has now been closed to new applicants.

While the blow-out of the Solar Bonus Scheme was a legitimate problem, and was poorly handled by the previous government, it is a shame that the public enthusiasm for renewable energy demonstrated by this scheme's popularity was turned into a negative.

The solar energy industry, which was booming thanks to the government scheme, has taken a hit due to the scaling back of the scheme, at a time when renewable energy industries should be helped to flourish.

Another discouraging move by the current state government is that of shifting planning decisions for new wind farms to local governments, as opposed to making them the responsibility of the planning minister. This means that local support for a wind farm must be unanimous - a restriction that is not applied to other planning developments. This is clearly feeding into the political nature of renewable energy, when it should be a matter of the state providing the necessary

infrastructure for its citizens to have a viable future.

On the other side of the energy debate, coal seam gas (CSG) has become a very controversial issue across the state. Originally heralded as a cleaner alternative to burning coal as a means of producing energy, its "green" credentials have since been disproven.



Not only are people concerned about the greenhouse gas emissions involved in the extraction of CSG extraction, but also about its impact on our food and water sources.

Many of the sites where companies are interested in drilling for CSG are located on farmland. Converting land from agricultural to mining land not only decreases our state's ability to produce its own food, but the act of CSG mining itself is a further threat. The process of fracturing rock to access the CSG ("fracking") involves the pumping of hundreds of litres of water and chemicals into the ground. This has a two-part impact: 1) depleting fresh water aquifers otherwise used for drinking and irrigation, and 2) potential contamination of farmland and water sources from the saline (and chemical-laden) water that comes out once the rock is fractured.

The NSW government has placed a moratorium on CSG fracking until 31 December 2011. They have also banned certain chemicals used in fracking, and introduced some restrictions to water-use by CSG companies. But this is only the beginning. If we are truly to have the clean energy future that the federal government is trying to spearhead, NSW must prioritise renewable industries - such as wind and solar - and leave dangerous alternatives such as CSG in the past.

Reflection

Our creation stories emphasise the goodness of each of God's creations, from the sun and seas, to each of the birds and animals of the earth.

As one of God's loved creations, humans were given the responsibility to care for the rest. The complexities of our modern lives and our modern problems can be reduced back to that fundamental truth: God's creation is good, and we need to look after it.

Like our political leaders, we too have a duty to make decisions about the future of our natural environment. By contributing to the political process, we can help to remind those in power about their responsibility to protect our most precious gifts - God's creations.

Prayer

Loving God,

In the course of our busy lives, help us to look beyond our built environment.

Help us to see the beauty and wonder of the world that you created.

Fill us with the humility to accept our task as stewards of creation, and to carry it out with joyful hearts.

Fill us with the courage to speak out when we see that your creation is being harmed.

Amen



Cut and place under your CLRI(NSW) fridge magnet

The CLRI(NSW) Social Justice Committee would like to wish all readers and their loved ones a happy and peaceful Christmas and New Year.

Web Links



Clean Energy Future

Read more about the this federal scheme, now that it has been passed through the senate.

<http://www.cleanenergyfuture.gov.au/>

Movement against CSG

The 'Lock The Gate Alliance' is determined to protect Australia from the harmful impacts of CSG extraction. Learn more about the movement and read fact sheets.

<http://lockthegate.org.au/csg-facts/>

NSW Nature Conservation Council

Keep your finger on the pulse of all the environmental issues that are affecting our state - from marine parks to mining.

<http://www.nccnsw.org.au/>

National Parks Association NSW

Find out about bushwalks in your area, and get involved in protecting our natural environment in the process!

<http://www.npansw.org.au/>

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