

## Coronation Hill and Conservation

*John Hyde*

The natural environment itself will be one of three great losers from the Greens' election-year win over mining in and around the Kakadu National Park. The other, more obvious, losers will be the economy and the credibility, both at home and abroad, of the word of Australian Governments.

Most environmentalists are genuine in the fears they express for the ecosystem. However, it seems to me that their fears for the natural environment are exaggerated, that they understate the consequences of lost economic growth, and that the combination of mysticism and political control has a dreadful historical record. In short, from my perspective they are dangerously wrong. Like them, I am sincere in my expressed views, and like them I will continue to argue. Nevertheless, let us assume that they are more right than I am---that the natural environment is in imminent pervasive danger. (More modest claims by environmentalists are not at issue here. I, with most Australians, accept that it is advisable to protect several species and places of beauty.)

Following our assumption: those who have perceived the environmental dangers have a considerable and vital task ahead of them. But, unless they are prepared to set democracy aside, their ability to undertake the task will depend upon the popular support they have and can hold. I say 'and can hold' because the sorts of changes they seek to prevent are irreversible or reversible only very slowly. For good or evil, what is done to the natural environment during the periods of minimum environmentalist influence will tend to stay done.

Before an election, a tightly held block of votes can be very influential. The Hawke Government has made almost no attempt to pretend that the Greens' victory was won on other than political grounds. It was the purchase of that 2% of the national vote which under democratic rules determines elections.

After the poll, however, the government, of whichever party, will be taken up with economic matters. The International Monetary Fund will not yet be knocking on its

door but the spectre of economic crisis---devaluation, default and sharply falling living standards---will attend every cabinet meeting. The Green victory is likely to be short lived.

Even before the election, the votes Labor will get from environmentalists, must, at least in part, be offset by having to explain to those voters who are concerned for the economy why there is not a significant new mining development under way or in immediate prospect.

More generally, the Greens must have noticed that it is in the countries such as Poland, with chronic payments problems and declining living standards, that the environment gets least consideration. This is rational behaviour on the part of the Poles; environmental protection comes at a price we can afford and they cannot.

When Mr Keating's soft-landing comes along, unemployment will rise and living standards fall. Then the contribution of environmental policies to the balance of payments problems, which made the credit squeeze necessary, will not go unremarked. There will be a backlash against Greenism in which Coronation Hill and Wesley Vale will feature largely. In this climate, environmentalism is likely to be blamed for more than its due. Given that the Greens are felt by their opponents to have been prone to exaggeration, there will be people who will pay them out in like coin. That will be a pity, because if serious environmentalists are discredited there will be no one with sufficient influence to stand up for those rare and lovely things which are common property and therefore have no owner to protect them.

If, on the other hand, the landing is not soft....

The Greens are laying a credibility problem in store for the environmentalist cause. On three counts the attempts by some ill-advised Green spokesmen to present tourism and mining as alternatives at Kakadu were not honest. In the first place the mine is only one square kilometre among 2500 of what really is clapped-out buffalo country, three hours drive from the nearest current tourist attraction. In the second, tourists will do far more to change the Kakadu environment than will a mine and treatment plant set three kilometres back from the river. In the third, the mine will both be a tourist attraction in its own right and help to provide the facilities without which tourism is confined to the few people who undertake safaris. Slatant misuse of argument will eventually call into question even the soundest environmentalist arguments.

For all of the above reasons the Green victory at Coronation Hill will prove to have been Pyrrhic.

Tactically the genuine environmentalists were unwise. They had a far better course open to them. They should have accepted a mine and treatment plant which had already passed all the environmental impact assessments. It is important that

these procedures are not discredited. They could, moreover, have encouraged a grateful BHP to assist with the care of the Kakadu National Park. BHP is almost pathetic in its desire to be appreciated; it would have been extremely generous, providing resources for park management which would have been substantial and additional to those provided by taxpayers and charges paid by tourists.

Miners are ordinary men and women who, for the most part, love nature. They could not have resisted parading their cooperation with responsible environmentalism---accompanied by pictures of beautiful Kakadu---in BHP's advertising. Environmentalists could have had a remarkably green BHP devoting considerable resources to their cause.

Instead they were badly led. They have needlessly given those of us who believe that Australia is paying too high a price for irresponsible environmentalism a stick with which to beat them.

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