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TITLE: A trump card in the nuclear power play

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PUBLICATION: The Sydney Morning Herald

PUBLICATION DATE: 08/08/06

With its strongly pro-business orientation, the Howard Government has found it difficult to gain credibility for its environmental policies. It has nevertheless made considerable headway through the use of a clever and aggressive strategy of dividing the environment movement by cultivating friendly organisations and individuals and punishing those that refuse to fall into line.

WWF (formerly the World Wide Fund for Nature) is the foremost of the friendly organisations. It is close to the Government, providing a stream of favourable commentary on its policies and bestowing several awards for the Government's environmental achievements, including three "Gift to the Earth" awards, which the Environment Minister, Ian Campbell, displays in his office. In return, the Government has been generous, sending tens of millions to the fund for various programs.

The force behind the emergence of the organisation as the leading group backing the Government's environment policy is the businessman Robert Purves. He has made a very large donation to WWF and is now its president.

Purves has drawn Tim Flannery into the orbit of conservative environmentalism by funding the preparation of Flannery's book on climate change, *The Weather Makers*. Flannery, who came late to the climate change debate, has eloquently summarised the work of hundreds of climate scientists and his book has undoubtedly raised public awareness and understanding of the threats posed by global warming. Purves is said to have spent \$1 million promoting Flannery's book, including costly backlit billboards outside Qantas Club lounges around the country.

But isn't there an inconsistency here? Why would Purves, sympathetic to the Government, spend large sums funding and promoting a book that rings alarm bells about climate change, which can only make life more difficult for the Government?

The answer is that Flannery's book does not make life harder for the Government, but sends the sort of message the Government wants us to hear.

Flannery is an advocate of individual consumer action as the answer to environmental problems. Instead of being understood as a set of problems endemic to our economic

and social structures, we are told we each have to take personal responsibility for our contribution to every problem.

Flannery concludes his book by arguing that "there is no need to wait for government action" - voluntary action by well-meaning consumers is the only way to save the planet.

"It is my firm belief that all the efforts of government and industry will come to naught unless the good citizen and consumer takes the initiative, and in tackling climate change the consumer is in a most fortunate position."

He then lists 11 things concerned citizens can do to reduce their own greenhouse gas emissions, urging each of us to "do the right thing" in the belief that these noble appeals will transform the market: "If enough of us buy green power, solar panels, solar hot water systems and hybrid vehicles, the cost of these items will plummet."

This is music to the Government's ears. The assignment of individual responsibility is consistent with the economic rationalist view of the world, which wants everything left to the market, even when the market manifestly fails.

Yet it is at best a naive, and at worst a reckless, approach to the looming catastrophe of climate change. The world did not eliminate the production of ozone-depleting substances by relying on the good sense of consumers in buying CFC-free fridges. We insisted governments negotiate an international treaty that banned CFCs. We did not invite car buyers to pay more to install catalytic converters, the greatest factor in reducing urban air pollution. We called on government to legislate to require all car makers to include them.

When pressed, Flannery will call on government to act, too, but his consistent headline message is an appeal to consumers. Thus, when accepting a prize for his book recently, he gave a four-word acceptance speech: "Install a solar panel."

Green consumerism such as that advocated by Flannery privatises responsibility for environmental decline, shifting blame from elected governments and industry onto the shoulders of individual citizens. The cause of climate change becomes the responsibility of "all of us", which, in effect, means nobody. It is obvious why a government that wants to do nothing finds such an approach appealing: it can pretend to be concerned while protecting powerful business interests.

Flannery's "firm belief" that we can be saved only if consumers take the initiative is one he shares with the ideologues of the right-wing think tanks who argue that environmental problems should be left to the unfettered market. If consumers don't make green choices then it is obvious they don't care much about the environment.

But it is not just his advocacy of do-nothing green consumerism that endears Flannery to the Government. Alone among Australian environmental advocates, he has declared his support for the development of a nuclear industry. The Prime Minister, John Howard, now regularly buttresses his nuclear push by saying that even some environmentalists "like Tim Flannery" support nuclear power.

Even Howard knows it would be folly to build nuclear power plants in Australia, a fact that his nuclear inquiry will conveniently affirm. The Prime Minister's game is to provide cover for his plan to expand uranium mining and get an enrichment industry established.

Flannery is now part of the climate change debate, and whether he likes it or not, has become a trump card in Howard's hand.

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