

THE AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

Speech at the launch of  
*In search of sustainability*

edited by Jenny Goldie, Bob Douglas and Bryan Furnass

NSW Parliament House, Sydney 18 January 2005

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It's a pleasure to be here to help launch this new book on sustainability. I think its publication provides an opportunity to reflect on where we have got to with sustainability. The authors and editors of this new volume are mostly aware, I think, that the idea of sustainability is in fact in danger of turning into a meaningless platitude at a time when the experts are telling us we need it more than ever.

With some honourable exceptions, governments are becoming increasingly reluctant to implement bold policies that will protect the environment, instead attempting to demonstrate their credentials by promoting green consumerism, green procurement and voluntary programs with businesses.

We have witnessed the progressive privatisation of responsibility for environmental degradation. Instead of being understood as a set of problems endemic to our economic and social structures, we are told that we each have to take responsibility for our personal contribution to every problem. Of course, 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.

Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the recent debate over a levy on plastic bags. When the Irish government imposed such a levy it was a raging success, with consumption of plastic bags plummeting. This must have sent a chill through the board rooms of big retailers in Australia, because it would almost certainly bring about an instant drop in plastic bag use by 80 or 90 per cent. Their opposition to the imposition of a plastic bag levy is based partly on the fear that once consumers take their own bags to the shops they will begin to think about their needs rather than graze their way around the aisles succumbing to impulse purchases.

Some environmental organisations play directly to the timidity of governments and the tokenism of business. Clean Up Australia is an example. A media release from Clean Up Australia says:

Shoppers are being asked to 'Say NO to Plastic Bags' and retailers are encouraged to 'Put an End to Plastic Bags. It's in YOUR hands'.<sup>2</sup> ... Ian Kiernan said: "It's great to see Australians starting to move away from plastic bags and towards reusable bags. By following a few simple steps, each and

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cleanup.com.au/main.asp?RequestType=MediaReleaseIn&SubRequestType=Detail&MediaRelID=165> [17 January 2005]

every one of us ... can significantly reduce the number of plastic shopping bags entering our environment”.

By claiming over and over that ‘each and every one of us’ can do our bit to solve the problem, organisations like Clean Up Australia ensure that the problem will not be tackled at source.

Yet Clean Up Australia identifies plastic waste as the number one litter problem, which makes it all the more inexplicable that Ian Kiernan, head of Clean Up Australia, has taken a strong public stance against perhaps the single most effective measure to cut plastic waste in Australia.

As revealed on ABC TV’s *Four Corners* program in September 2003, Clean Up Australia’s ‘Bag Yourself a Better Environment’ program, which called for greater voluntary efforts, was sponsored by Coles and Woolworths. In fact the Clean Up Australia’s ‘Say NO to Plastic Bags’ campaign is supported by Coles Myer, Woolworths, Franklins, IGA, and a number of other retailers.<sup>3</sup>

Governments find it convenient to put the blame and the responsibility on to individuals because they don’t have to confront powerful vested interests. And those vested interests want to avoid any restrictions on their activities.

The Federal Government’s approach to climate change is a classic instance of this blame-shifting. The consequences of climate change for Australia are dire, and every year we do nothing increases the damage we leave for future generations, yet the Howard Government has repeatedly refused to introduce policies that would begin the process of cutting our ballooning emissions. Instead it has retreated behind a veil of PR and appeals to Australians to ‘do the right thing’.

It has been very happy to see the states promoting greenpower schemes in which householders with a concern about climate change can choose to pay more for electricity from renewable sources. When launched in 1997, Energy Australia referred to market research indicating that 65 per cent of its customers had expressed a willingness to pay more for electricity that came from ‘green sources’. Other surveys showed similar levels of enthusiasm.

In practice, less than two per cent of Australian consumers have elected to pay higher prices to purchase electricity from more environmentally friendly sources. Voluntary action simply has not worked. Arguably, it has done more harm than good, because governments that should be doing much more to tackle climate change have been able to hide behind voluntary schemes and say: “Look at the great programs we have supported. But, hey, if consumers don’t feel strongly enough to take it up then that’s not our fault”.

Similarly, the Federal Government’s Cool Communities programs try to persuade householders to become more energy efficient. Explicitly, the objective is to transfer responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions from the big polluters, and the car companies, to individuals. As the website says:

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.cleanup.com.au/main.asp?RequestType=MediaReleaseIn&SubRequestType=Detail&MediaRelID=192> [17 January 2005]

Cool Communities has provided people with a unique opportunity to do something positive to make a difference for the environment ...

In fact, the Federal Government has a unique opportunity to do something positive to make a difference for the global environment - ratify the Kyoto Protocol - but resolutely refuses to do so.

But the most outrageous example of greenwashing through voluntary programs is undoubtedly the Greenhouse Challenge Program. Big polluters rushed to join up, and those that didn't had their arms twisted by their industry associations. They drew up and submitted plans that promised to cut emissions. The problem was that nearly all of the promised emission reductions were features of their existing cost-cutting or new investment plans, and therefore would have occurred anyway.

But this did not prevent the Federal Government taking out full-page ads to crow about the huge cuts claimed. In the end it has been an expensive PR exercise that absolved Australia's biggest polluters of any real responsibility while giving the Government the opportunity to claim that it was working with industry to tackle the problem of climate change.

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This trend to individualise environmental problems has far-reaching implications for the nature of democracy as well as environmental progress. When environmental problems become individualised, the nature of public debate is transformed. It's no longer about the institutions that perpetuate and reinforce environmental degradation; it's about our personal behaviour. When citizens concerned about the environment are told to express their concern through their purchasing decisions, social conscience becomes a commodity.<sup>4</sup>

The ethical conversation is also changed: instead of understanding the structural factors that are the cause of and solution to the problem, it becomes a question of personal morality in which each of us is assigned a place on a moral scale, with green purity at one end and environmental irresponsibility at the other.

In this way we are encouraged – nay, shamed – into buying eco-friendly products, insulating our homes and recycling our waste. Some go so far as to calculate their own ecological footprint. While none of these activities are to be criticised in themselves, when they are sold as the solution to environmental decline they actually block the real solutions. Some environmentalists who lead radically simplified lifestyles contribute to the process of individualisation when they project a holier-than-thou attitude which says: if only everyone lived as I do all our problems would be solved.

As the US analyst Michael Maniates has written: 'A privatization and individualization of responsibility for environmental problems shifts blame from state elites and powerful producer groups to more amorphous culprits like "human nature"'

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<sup>4</sup> See Michael Maniates, 'Individualization: Plant a Tree, Buy a Bike, Save the World?' in Thomas Princen, Michael Maniates and Ken Conca (eds), *Confronting Consumption* (MIT Press, Cambridge, 2002).

or “all of us”.<sup>5</sup> The environment becomes depoliticised so that the major parties can share a common vision without getting into a potentially damaging bidding war over who will better look after the environment.

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It is important to stress that the failure of consumers to take up greenpower or recycle everything doesn't mean that they don't care and nothing should be done. This confuses the role of the self-interested consumer with the role of the responsible citizen. Despite attempts to turn us all into *homo economicus*, or rational economic man, consumers are not the same as citizens; supermarket behaviour is different from ballot box behaviour. There is a wealth of evidence to show that people think and act quite differently in the two roles. For example, although few consumers have bought greenpower, there is no doubt that if the Federal Government were to legislate to require a rapid increase in renewable energy involving significantly higher electricity prices it would receive strong voter support. The Prime Minister has privately conceded this.

Australians aren't stupid. Many of them recognise that their water saving or electricity saving strategies have virtually no impact on the big picture. And they want a system that is fair: even the most responsible citizens would be reluctant to pay their taxes if there were no obligation on everyone else to pay theirs. Just because they will not participate in tokenism doesn't mean that they wouldn't support visionary leadership. They know that some problems demand collective solutions.

I think we must now concede that there are very distinct limits to the appeal to green guilt as the path to sustainability. In fact we are beginning to see an anti-environment backlash from people tired of having guilt trips laid on them. The other day I saw a Range Rover in Sydney's eastern suburbs with a bumper sticker that read: 'Doing my bit for greenhouse'... not everyone feels guilty. I suspect that soon it will be cool in some social groups to say 'screw the environment', and sticking it up greenies will become a sport.

The fact is that we are not personally responsible for the ecological dangers we face. The structure of our society is responsible and we are responsible as citizens for our failure to insist that the necessary measures are taken. In the end we cannot consume our way to sustainability.

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<sup>5</sup> Maniates, op. cit., p. 57