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Profile

Western Australia's short-lived 'sustainability revolution'

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Introduction

Successive governments in Western Australia (WA), and in Australia as a whole, have traditionally pursued economic development. In 2001, however, the Labor Party came into office with a professed commitment to sustainable development and seemed to promise a departure from, and alternative to, economic developmentalism. However, despite a series of government initiatives, the initial euphoria dissipated, the government failed to deliver a lasting break with the developmentalist policy agenda, and the state returned to its traditional path of resource-based economic expansion. The dramatic rise and fall of sustainability in WA is addressed here.

Labor's taste for sustainability 2001 - 2005

From 2001, the Labor government under Premier Geoff Gallop moved quickly, keen to promote its commitment to sustainability and will to operationalise the concept at government level and across the state. Labor highlighted three flagship initiatives: ending old-growth forest logging; protection of Ningaloo Reef; and the State Sustainability Strategy.

Logging was effectively banned in 99 percent of remaining old-growth forests, new areas of old-growth forest were identified and 30 new national parks were established for biodiversity protection. The resultant reduced availability of timber

for industry and the concomitant social fallout were offset by an industry restructuring package and worker assistance programme. With this seemingly 'heroic' policy intervention, Labor helped quell public disquiet over forestry issues, which had contributed to the demise of the previous conservative government (Brueckner 2007).

In 2003, the government's decision to 'Save Ningaloo' helped cement the party's environmental credentials. Ningaloo is an almost pristine 230 km long part fringing and part barrier reef 1132 km north of Perth. Remote and relatively uninhabited, the area has experienced rapid growth in visitor numbers, which has increased the economic profile of the region but has also increased pressures on the fragile reef ecosystem. Against this background, Coral Coast Marina Development sought approval for the development of a 2,500-bed resort-style marina at Maud's Landing, 3 km north of the existing township adjacent to the Ningaloo Marine Park. Despite heated debate and public agitation, the project was tipped to go ahead in light of two existing approvals by the state's Environmental Protection Authority. Yet, in response to national, international and celebrity intervention as well as environmental concerns raised by the independent Appeals Committee, in July 2003, Gallop announced that the development at Maud's Landing would not proceed. Subsequently, a regional plan was developed for Ningaloo, which provided the basis for legislative requirements to protect the area (Pforr et al. 2007).

Arguably, Labor's most widely applauded sustainability initiative was the development of Australia's first State Sustainability Strategy, intended to form an integral part of a larger sustainable development governance framework. The Strategy was launched in September 2003 (more than a decade after the National

Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development) and hailed as a ‘trail-blazing blueprint’ and an exemplar for other states and countries. The Strategy was developed in partnership between the state government and local universities and provided numerous avenues for public input. The process, overseen by the Sustainability Policy Unit in the Department of Premier and Cabinet established in 2001, purported to be participatory and premised on newly developed guidelines for community engagement, marking a shift towards more collaborative policy-making and negotiated policy outcomes. Widely supported by environmentalists, politicians and business leaders nationally and internationally, the strategy placed WA centre stage in the global sustainability arena.

A change of direction after the 2005 election

Compared to 2001, far less attention was paid to environmental issues during the 2005 state election (Rootes 2005), perhaps due to the absence of iconic issues like Ningaloo or old growth forests. Overall, the sustainability agenda had seemingly lost momentum in the context of a largely muted environmental debate nationally, falling behind issues such as health, education and the economy. On election day, while the Green vote fell, the Labor government was re-endorsed despite have being labelled the highest taxing and least popular government in the country and trailing in the polls in the lead-up to the election.

In January 2006, Premier Gallop resigned suddenly on health grounds, and was replaced by Development Minister Alan Carpenter. Days later, Environment Minister Judy Edwards resigned, which set in train a series of ministerial appointments to the environmental portfolio between 2006 and 2008. These years were marked by growing criticism of the state’s environmental policy-making, which

had changed from visionary to reluctant and reactive. Overall, Labor's environmental credentials became increasingly eroded.

One example was a lead pollution incident in Esperance on WA's south coast in early 2007, in which dust escaping during loading of Magellan Metals products resulted in the mass die-off of birds. Subsequent testing revealed elevated levels of lead in the blood of some Esperance residents, including children. An inquiry conducted by the Legislative Assembly's Standing Committee on Education and Health uncovered major failings and shortcomings in industry regulation by the Department of Environment and Conservation and other agencies, which led to the exposure of workers and the community to unacceptable and avoidable health and environmental risks. The Esperance incident fuelled perceptions of a growing inability of government and its agencies to adequately monitor and control industrial activities, perceptions the government sought to counter by increasing the number of environment department staff.

Another example is the ongoing debate over the protection of banded ironstone formation ranges. In response to growing pressure from conservationists and its own departments, the Carpenter government commissioned a report into the biodiversity conservation requirements in the banded ironstone formation ranges of the Yilgarn Craton in the state's Midwest and Goldfields regions. The ranges, part of an isolated ancient landscape rich in minerals, are earmarked for future mining activity. The 2007 interim report by the Department of Environment and Conservation highlighted the significant biodiversity values of the region, recommended that up to 60 percent of the ranges be preserved and strongly recommended establishing 'A class' reserves and national parks to protect flora and

fauna against development. The Department warned in its interim report that without a strategic approach to resource utilisation and biodiversity conservation, the government would find it difficult to address environmental impacts should mining proceed. Despite these warnings and in the context of a growing number of mining proposals, the Carpenter government did not progress the proposed preservation of the area. This in turn gave rise to concerns about the government's seeming protection of short-term resource interests over internationally unique landscapes and biodiversity values.

Finally, the release of WA's third State of the Environment (SoE) report provided a good opportunity for the Carpenter government to mark the progress made thus far. The importance of environmental monitoring and reporting were highlighted in the State Sustainability Strategy. Surprisingly, the launch of the report was left to the EPA, and no formal response to the report was given by government nor were the EPA recommendations implemented. This raised doubts over the government's commitment to the SoE reporting process, which in earlier years purported to be a cornerstone of Labor's environmental policy and the key mechanism for reporting on the state's environmental condition.

In the lead-up to the 2008 state election, which saw a return of a Liberal-National Coalition government, the environment did not feature as a key issue for the two major parties. Even climate change, a key issue during the 2007 federal election, did not feature prominently. Notably, however, the Greens achieved their best electoral outcome to date.

Environmental policy under Labor: Unfinished business or reversion to developmentalism?

Labor came to power in 2001 with a strong commitment to advance sustainability in the state, showing both leadership and vision. Labor's 2003 Sustainability Strategy proposed over 330 specific actions to be undertaken across the whole of government; agencies were to include sustainability considerations in their planning, policies, and decision-making processes. However, the Strategy remained only a statement of intent. Labor failed to enact sustainability legislation, leaving government agencies without requisite support for the operationalisation of the sustainability principles espoused in the strategy and providing insufficient stimulus for the implementation of sustainability initiatives across government, industry and the wider community.

Despite the development in Labor's first term of a comprehensive sustainability strategy and a range of coordination and implementation mechanisms to facilitate policy integration across all government agencies, these measures ultimately proved to be temporary due to a lack of administrative stability and continuing strong political leadership. Thus, one of the great failures of the Gallop administration was its inability to sustain the initial momentum by adjusting institutional arrangements and introducing legislation. Such measures would have helped to cement the sustainability agenda, to protect the vision and help it withstand future less supportive policy environments, and to overcome the many sources of unsustainability deeply embedded in prevailing policy, institutions and social structures (Ross and Dovers 2008).

While the Gallop government's early years seemed to signal a sincere, albeit populist, attempt at governance for sustainability, its second term saw a reversion by Labor to a policy approach akin to that the party campaigned against in the 2001 election. The change of leadership in 2006 brought a substantial shift in both

rhetoric and policy. The Gallop government, while forced to make political compromises, was overall committed to sustainability. With Gallop's departure, Labor lost its champion for sustainability and with it also stability and continuity in Cabinet. Labor's new pro-development Premier not only dropped his predecessor's sustainability agenda but also undid a series of policy measures implemented under Gallop. Because the changes introduced during Labor's first term in office were not institutionalised, much of the progress made could be stopped, even reversed, by the Carpenter government, allowing for a return to development and growth orientated policy prescriptions.

Conclusion

Many of WA's environmental conflicts in recent decades were based on public reaction to, and rejection of the developmentalist agenda of successive state governments. Despite increasing environmental stakes, however, environmental issues have routinely been relegated to the political backburner during the state's resources boom. Social problems, experienced most by the vulnerable communities in WA's regions, are also on the rise. The state's triple-bottom-line is increasingly unbalanced, bringing into question the appropriateness and long-term sustainability of WA's development path. There are no visible signs of change in direction despite the EPA's persistent warnings about the unsustainability of the state's growing population and development-driven environmental impacts. In April 2010, in light of the state's new resources boom, calls were made to increase the state's population by 70,000 people per annum so as to meet projected demands for labour.

Labor, under Gallop's leadership, seemed the state's best hope to achieve the harmonisation of economic development with social and environmental health. For

the time being, the return to developmentalism in WA seems complete. A new political heroism may be needed to reverse that.

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