



Evaluating National Environmental Policy

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This paper was originally prepared for inclusion in a kit of briefing papers circulated in the Uniting Church by the Assembly, prior to the 1998 Federal Election. The issues raised are, however, of continuing relevance.

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The basis of the Uniting Church's approach

1. Uniting Church beliefs and commitments

The Uniting Church in Australia at its 6th Assembly (1991), adopted a statement on the Rights of Future Generations and the Rights of Nature. This is part of its commitment to justice, peace, and integrity of creation. The 7th Assembly (1994) called for action to reduce unemployment, but recognised that this must be in the context of an ecologically sustainable economy.

The Uniting Church therefore views with concern the following comment from the scientific report *State of the Environment Australia 1996*.

Overall, economic planning appears to take little account of environmental impacts. It is assumed that the first priority should be a healthy economy, and that problems can always be solved using the wealth created. The economy is a subset of human society, which, in turn, is part of the environment. Progress towards sustainability requires recognition of this fundamental truth, and a willingness to build environmental thinking into our

economic planning. (*State of the Environment Australia 1996*, page ES9)

Australians need a healthy environment. They need clean air to breathe, clean water to drink, and unpolluted soil and water in which to grow crops for Australia and other nations. They need the web of life, the complex processes by which nature maintains and sustains all life on earth.

No generation has the right to destroy the biodiversity of species and ecosystems. They are the heritage - both gift and responsibility - of all human beings in all generations.

These are both Christian principles, and fundamental principles of international agreements.

2. Scientific evaluation of environmental problems

State of the Environment Australia 1996 indicates that:

"Australia has a beautiful, diverse and often unique environment which is a priceless heritage".

Australia does well in some areas of environmental management.

"In many areas it is not possible to decide whether environmental management is adequate".

There is need for more research before we can adequately manage the environment.

"Australia has some very serious environmental problems. If we are to achieve our goal of ecological sustainability, these problems need to be dealt with immediately". (page ES 4)

Sustainable development requires the maintenance of three key components of the environment:

- *biodiversity*: the variety of species, populations, habitats and ecosystems
- *ecological integrity*: the general health and resilience of natural life-support systems, including their ability to assimilate wastes and withstand stresses such as climate change and ozone depletion
- *natural capital*: the stock of productive soil, fresh water, forests, clean air, ocean and other renewable resources that underpin the survival, health and prosperity of human communities. (ES 5)

Australia is not able to manage the environment adequately, because it "is continually hamstrung by structural problems between different areas of government. Standards vary from State to State, and State and Commonwealth governments frequently battle over environmental issues". (ES 9)

3 Our responsibility as citizens and a nation

The Australian people can only fulfil their responsibilities to themselves, to other nations with whom we share this planet, and to other forms of life on earth, if we have responsible environmental policy as a nation. That is first and foremost the responsibility of the national government.

The Uniting Church in Australia encourages its members and all Australians citizens to consider responsible environmental policy as fundamental to our future as a nation.

Policies proposed by political parties need to be carefully assessed by all Australian citizens.

There are at least two fundamental aspects to sound environmental policy. The most obvious is the content of a party's "environmental policy". But this alone is not enough. Too often, in practice, environmental policy is ignored or undermined by economic development policies. The real question is the extent to which a future government will require economists, treasury and business to come to terms with the biological world. How committed is their economic policy to ecologically sustainable development? How willing are they to accept that Australians should be responsible global citizens?

Elements of a responsible national environmental policy

A responsible national environmental policy will recognise the Commonwealth Government's responsibility for the following:

Protect, preserve and repair the Australian environment, including all three crucial components identified in *State of the environment Australia 1996*: biodiversity, ecological integrity, and natural capital.

Take urgent action to deal with the threats to sustainability related to human settlements, biodiversity, atmosphere, land resources, inland waters, estuaries and the sea, and natural and cultural heritage.

Build effectively on those areas of environmental management where Australia has in past received international recognition.

Provide national leadership and an integrated approach to environmental issues, especially the fulfilment of international environmental agreements.

Use to the full the powers available to the Commonwealth Government to fulfil its international obligations for environmental responsibility. In international law, federal structures are no excuse for failing to fulfil international agreements.

Provide adequate institutional mechanisms to achieve the above, through legislation and a strong national

Environmental Protection Authority that has effective powers of regulation, monitoring and enforcing compliance.

Require that economic policies pay adequate attention to environmental realities.

Provide for significant public and scientific consultation and input before decisions are made. This applies to both environmental policy generally, and to the EIS process for specific projects. At the moment, there is inadequate input in both.

Reduce Australia's per capita effect on the environment to a level that is sustainable for all human beings. (Consumption is identified as an important issue in the NSW EPA's Report on the State of NSW Environment 1997).

Encourage ecologically sustainable industry. For example, by economic measures such as tax concessions that take account of the positive contribution they make to the environment.

Ensure that industries internalise the cost of any harm they cause to the environment. For example, remove tax incentives and subsidies that encourage industry to adopt or maintain practices that are harmful to the environment, such as tax deductions relating to the cost of land clearing. Impose charges for the costs involved in rectifying the harm they cause e.g. taxes on greenhouse gas emissions to provide "sinks" to absorb them.

Promote environmental standards for business in the international arena and ensure that Australian companies behave in an environmentally responsible manner in their overseas operations.

Provide adequate funding for scientific research to provide the understanding of the Australian environment which is essential for responsible environmental management.

Provide adequate funding for management of national parks and World Heritage areas.

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