

# RIGHT WING THINK TANKS AND THE 'ENVIRONMENTAL DEBATE'

*The current political climate in Australia is having an increasingly negative impact on the country's environment.* After being in the political wilderness during most of the eighties, the Liberal and National Party had to regroup, which they did during their 'lean years', increasingly relying on think tanks to provide them with some sort of direction. With the views of the right now firmly established in Canberra and Melbourne, the Liberals have not surprisingly embarked on the wholesale revamping of the environmental agenda throughout the country. Key players inside think tanks such as the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), are being promoted by conservative governments into positions of "environmental responsibility." It should come as no surprise that although they claim to be independent, these groups are usually propped up by the financial might of corporations who in turn rely on massive government subsidies for their economic security (take the woodchipping industry as an example).

## THE INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS

The IPA was started in 1943 by Charles Kemp who wanted to develop a group that would fight against the nationalisation of banks. Ideas promoted by the IPA were adopted by Robert Menzies in the formation of the Liberal party. (Interestingly two of Charles Kemp's sons, Rod and David, are now federal Liberal politicians and both have played very active roles in the IPA - how ironic that both now rely on the government for their livelihoods!).

Much of the IPA's ideology is based on the economic theories of Frederick Hayek and the concept of "economic liberty". (Charles Kemp writing in the IPA Review in Spring 86 said "F.A. Hayek is one of the greatest minds in the western world... I consider him the greatest economist I have ever had the privilege of knowing"). Very basically, 'economic liberty' means that an economy must be free of impediments in order to operate. Neo-Liberalisation (economic rationalism) according to Frederick Hayek, requires a new moral system;

*"A free society requires certain moral values which ultimately are reduced to the maintenance of life; not all life because it may be necessary to sacrifice individual lives in order to preserve major numbers of lives. Therefore the only moral rules can be those which provide for the 'computation of lives' determined by private property and its contract."*

Compare this with the words of Cecilia Rodreguiz, an Indigenous activist from Mexico, speaking at the Native Forest Network Conference in Missoula, Montana, in November 1994:

*"... the evidence of the last quarter century speaks for itself; indigenous communities, industrial workers and women represent disposable lives, so the "structural adjustment" which has taken place has found it necessary to eliminate their livelihood, all for the "greater good" of course. Under such a set of morals, for example, you can justify the dumping of nuclear waste on Indigenous people's land. What do a few million lives mean when balanced with the importance of profits?"*

Disciples of economic liberty also believe that government intervention (such as environmental regulation) in an economy is a barrier to free trade (this is stated in the GATT Agreement). Therefore regulation is best carried out by the corporations or private land holders, with government either playing a minor role or doing nothing at all. Recent job losses throughout the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources are testament to this belief by the Kennett Government.

## THE CORMACK FOUNDATION

The IPA boasts that it has 3500 members, including 500 companies including powerbrokers such as Rupert Murdoch of NewsCorp. Their membership list reads like a who's who of some of the largest companies in Australia. (Also of note is the role of members of the IPA in the secretive Cormack Foundation which has been amongst the top 2-3 donors to the Victorian Branch of the Liberal Party since 1993. Cormack donated \$1.5 million to the Liberals in 1995-96 raised from a massive portfolio of shares in companies such as Amcor, CRA, CSR and NewsCorp, as well as donating to the IPA, the Centre for Independent Studies and Institute for Private Enterprise. Directors of the Cormack Foundation include Hugh Morgan, Charles Goode and Rupert Murdoch's brother in law John Calvert-Jones).

## RECENT IPA PROMOTIONS IN VICTORIA

The current Minister for Conservation and Natural Resources, Marie Tehan, has been very active in promoting IPA members to key environmental positions. In December 1996 Mrs Tehan scrapped the Environment Council of the Environment Protection Agency (EPA). The Council comprised of 12 members of the public who represented a broad cross section of the community. The Council was replaced by the Environment Protection Board which consists of 3 people who advise the minister and chairman of the EPA on broad strategic management issues. Tehan placed Dr Michael Deeley as Board President. Mr Deeley was a councillor for the IPA in 1991 and is Chairman of North Ltd, the largest hardwood woodchippers on the planet and also the major shareholder of ERA, who want to mine Uranium at Jabiluka. Mr Deeley is President of Greening Australia and has recently been promoted by Mrs Tehan to the senior position for Parks Victoria.

Mr Deeley is also a director of the National Bank, whose National Nominees are the third largest shareholder in North Ltd and the third largest investor of woodchipping companies. Eight directors of the National Bank are directors of woodchip and paper packaging companies. IPA contacts within National Bank directors include both Mark Rayner and Sir Bruce Watson, who also are directors of Boral (Australia's second largest woodchippers) and Brian Loton, a director of Amcor.

In 1997 Mrs Tehan replaced the Land Conservation Council (LCC) with the Environment Conservation Council. The LCC was established in the early 70's to give independent advice to the State government about public land throughout Victoria. The ECC advises the government, through the Minister, on the balanced use or development of public land. Mrs Tehan appointed Eda Ritchie as the Chairman of the ECC. Mrs Ritchie is Deputy Chairman of the IPA and has been a member since 1989. She was also state President of the Liberal Party 1984-87, Chief Commissioner for Moyné Shire 1994-96 (council restructuring throughout Victoria was organised by Roger Hallam, based on a report done for the IPA by economist Des Moore called Project 93) and is Chairman of the West Coast Regional Coastal Board since 1996.

### ANZ BANK INTERESTS

Not surprisingly, bank representatives rank highly amongst the IPA ranks. For example, Charles Goode was President of the IPA from 1984 to 1993. Mr Goode is now Chairman of the ANZ Banking Group, who through their ANZ Nominees have about \$1.2 billion dollars tied up in woodchip company investments and are the second largest investors of North Ltd (after Westpac). Mr Goode is also a director of the Queensland Investment Corporation (a company that manages public servants and building workers superannuation in Queensland. QIC are heavy investors in North Ltd) as well as a director of CSR, currently suffering from a community boycott of their products due to a toxic waste dump the company wants to build near Werribee. Mr Goode's predecessor as Chairman of ANZ Bank, John Gough, has also been a director of the IPA and a director of CSR. Two other directors of the ANZ Bank heavily involved with the IPA include John Dahlsen and Colin Harper, who is also a director of North Ltd.

### HUGH MORGAN'S ROLE

Perhaps the champion of right wing think tanks is Hugh Morgan, Chief Executive Officer of Western Mining (WMC) and a Director of Alcoa since 1977. Mr Morgan has been a member of the Executive Committee of the IPA since 1978, Honorary Treasurer from 1981 to 1986. Mr Morgan helped raise finance to properly establish the Centre for Independent Studies in the late 1970's and is also a Director of the Cormack Foundation. Mr Morgan is a member of the Environmental Task Force of the Business Council of Australia. WMC has an advisory group which has a Senior Fellow and former Executive Director of the IPA as it's longest serving member. More recent appointments are better known for their green credentials. This, of course, raises the fundamental question of whether a company such as WMC can ever be

sustainable or whether advisory boards are simply a form of 'green window dressing'.

### WORKERS ARE DISPOSABLE.

The silent partner of the recent waterfront dispute where thousands of people stood in solidarity with the Maritime Union of Australia against the stovedoring company Patrick over the use of non-union wharf labour was Peter Scanlon, who incidentally was an IPA councillor in 1990. Peter Costello, a founder of the H.R. Nicholls Society, wrote articles about industrial relations and lessening the power of unions for the IPA in the eighties, as did Victorian Treasurer Alan Stockdale, who in 1993 privatised 20 000 hectares of native forest in the Strzeleckis, 2 hours drive east of Melbourne. Ian McLachlan, former Federal Shadow Minister for the Environment, who resigned over the Hindmarsh Island affair in 1995 is an active player within the IPA circles, as is resource minister Warwick Parer who was extremely active within the IPA in Queensland during the eighties.

Current President of the IPA is Michael Robinson, who has been a Senior Partner of Arthur Robinson and Hedderwicks law firm since 1996. Robinson is also a director of Gandel Retail Trust which specialise in property developments. (Interestingly co-director of Gandel Retail Trust is Christopher Stewart who is Chairman of Melbourne Water who dump 1 billion litres of semi treated sewage and industrial waste into the ocean and Bay each day. Melbourne Water, have also had a close connection with representatives of North Ltd. Current ERA and North director Thomas Barlow was Chairman of Melbourne Water from 1992-94 and ex North Ltd manager John E Morgan was Melbourne Water's Managing Director from 1995-98. Another North Director, Nora Scheinkental is a Director of City West Water, who provide water to Melbourne's western suburbs. The Chairman of South East Water who supply water to the south eastern suburbs and the peninsula, Ric Charlton, is a Director of right wing think tank the Centre for Independent Studies and was also Chairman of Shell Australia and an ex Chairman of the Australian Institute of Petroleum).

### CONCLUSION

This brief introduction to the influence of think tanks such as the IPA is just the tip of the iceberg. Far from offering us a visionary way forward in regard to the environment, these groups and the individuals within them remain locked inside the narrow parameters of their economic theories. In short, they are preaching to those already converted to the belief in 'economic liberty' (or economic rationalism, as it is more commonly known). They offer us nothing but further polarisation, environmental degradation and genocide. The fact that individuals from these groups have attracted the support of Liberal politicians should make us all realise the philosophical vacuum that the conservatives are operating in.

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