

Environmental Policy, Environmental NGOs and the Keating Government

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Abstract

In the 2012 Queensland election, Katter's Australian Party (KAP) won more than 11 per cent of the total votes and 2 seats and Bob Katter proclaimed that a new political force had arrived. This paper examines the election rhetoric of, and support for, the KAP in the Queensland election in order to try and classify the Party and consider its prospects. Four elements evident in a preliminary review of the voting patterns and rhetoric are considered: northern regionalism; agrarianism akin to that of the Country Party; the focus on a 'maverick' politician; and populism. Booth level data, with statistical tests are used to identify the geographic distribution of support and to compare that with the distribution of One Nation supports in the 1998 State Election. The Party's platform is then analysed and compared to those of One Nation and the Country/National Party to identify what political space KAP might aspire to fill.

At the 1990 federal election, the public rated the environment as the second most important issue after the economy (Lohrey 2002, 33), and that election was won for Labor on the back of the environment vote (Richardson 2008, Balderstone 2008, Kelly 1994).¹ However three years later in an election planning meeting for the 1993 election, Prime Minister Keating is reported to have walked into the meeting and announced, ‘this, this and this are the priority issues ... and the environment will NOT be one of the priority issues in this election’ (Lambert 2008).² How could such a dramatic change have taken place in Labor government orientation between the two elections in 1990 and 1993?

The difference was notable not just for the speed of the change, but because a new prime minister from the same political party was the defining factor. It is more common for such swift and significant policy change to occur with a change in the political party holding power, not within the same political party. This paper attempts to throw fresh light on Paul Keating’s antagonism towards environmental initiatives and environmental NGOs, using interviews with insiders from the period. It also seeks to examine forces within the Labor Party and the Australian political system that contributed to the change in policy by Keating, including tensions within the Hawke ministry, the rise of the Australian Greens and improvements in Coalition environment policy. It concludes by commenting on the relevance of this period to understanding the position of the Labor Party towards environment policy today.

Keating’s attitude to environmentalism and environmental NGOs has been noted by scholars and activists as differing markedly from that of Hawke (Economou 1996, 17; Marr 2008). Economou argued that:

The ascendancy of Paul Keating to the Labor leadership fundamentally altered the critical political dynamics that [had] allowed the environment to become a major national issue (Economou 1996, 17).

1 In 1990, Environment Minister Graham Richardson proposed a strategy to Hawke of Labor relying on Democrat preferences. The Australian Conservation Foundation and the Wilderness Society campaigned in nine marginal electorates proposing a vote for the Democrats with Labor second. Nationally the ALP received only 39% of the primary vote and the Coalition 43%, but the Democrats almost doubled their vote to 11%. In the nine marginal electorates where the environment organisations campaigned the Democrat vote was 13.4%, which was crucial in returning sufficient Labor candidates for Labor to take office.

2 Dr Judy Lambert recalled this occasion from a period when she was representing Environment Minister Ros Kelly as a consultant in the environment minister’s office.

The public signs of Keating moving his government away from environmental initiatives came early in his term as prime minister, when he refused to attend a major international environmental conference. The UN Conference on Environment and Development, or the Rio Earth Summit as it became known, was held at the end of a decade of increasing international environmental awareness. It received huge public interest both in Australia and internationally. It was the first major UN conference at which a parallel civil society conference, a Global Forum, was also held and at which 2,400 NGOs were represented and 17,000 people participated. The Earth Summit itself was attended by 172 governments and produced five significant UN environmental agreements that continue to be relevant today.³ One hundred and eight heads of state or government attended, including US President George Bush senior (UN Conference on Environment and Development 1992). Despite being urged to attend by environmentalists such as Judy Henderson, who was NGO environment representative in the government delegation, Australia's prime minister was notable in his absence (Henderson 2008). Australia had been an early leader in international forums addressing climate change. Commenting on this, and suggesting that Keating wished to differentiate himself from Hawke, Clive Hamilton suggests that:

The first signs of decay came with the elevation of Paul Keating to the prime ministership in 1991. While Bob Hawke had taken a strong personal interest in the environment, Keating, rejecting most things championed by Hawke, treated environmental issues with a dismissiveness bordering on contempt (Hamilton 2001, 34).

Throughout his prime ministership, Keating's public actions appeared to actively disengage the Commonwealth from environmental policy. He was reluctant to have the Environmentally Sustainable Development (ESD) process⁴ continue when he became prime minister, and he ignored the ESD working groups' recommendations when they reported (Balderstone 2008). However, it is Keating's action on native forest protection that best illustrates this disengagement from responsibility for the environment, and it was the most important environment issue of his period as prime minister. Forestry issues had been at the

³ These agreements were the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the UN Agenda 21 blueprint on sustainable development, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Statement on Forest Principles, and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change which evolved to become the Kyoto Protocol.

⁴ The Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) process set up by the Hawke government consisted of 9 working groups of representatives from industry and government that considered the implementation of ESD principles in sectors of Australia's economy with major impacts on the environment. This was particularly remarkable, pre-dating as it did the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro by several years.

heart of environmental concerns throughout the Hawke government. From the time of John Gorton, through the leadership of Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke, the Commonwealth had built up federal legislation to protect native forests (Ajani 2007, 6). In 1994, there was a public dispute between Environment Minister John Faulkner and Resources Minister David Beddall when Beddall increased woodchip quotas. Subsequently, Prime Minister Keating intervened to ensure that the Commonwealth relinquished responsibility for protection of native forests by handing all decision making to the states. This was despite a Newspoll at the time showing 80.3 per cent of Australians wanted native forest woodchipping to stop (Ajani 2007, 11). By the time this particular conflict arose, the NGO environment sector was deeply disillusioned with the lack of support Keating showed for the environment. Wilderness Society (TWS) director Marr (2008) claimed somewhat dramatically, ‘the Labor Party declared war on me, on the Wilderness Society and the forests’. The response of the environment movement was a vigorous, fiercely fought forestry campaign. Keating’s senior advisor, Don Watson (2002, 538), emphasised the importance of the conflict sparked by Beddall’s action, claiming:

The result was a debacle, the beginning of the end of the government’s relationship with the environment movement, a humiliation for the Prime Minister and an unimaginably splendid start for John Howard when in the New Year he became leader of the Opposition.

The battle over increased woodchip licence allocations saw the forestry industry blockade Parliament House for days on end, meaning that the prime minister and members had ‘to walk the gauntlet of big burly truck drivers who said Keating was selling them out’ (Parlane 2010). Linda Parlane, director of the peak state group now known as Environment Victoria, considered this experience to have had a significant influence on Keating and Labor at the time. ‘The idea that you were being stopped from getting into Parliament by your own constituency was deeply humiliating’, she claimed (Parlane 2010).

Keating’s behaviour towards the environment organisations at the end of his prime ministership sums up the extent to which the relationship had deteriorated. Prior to the 1996 election, the environment NGOs held meetings with both the major parties. Parlane (2010), representing one of the state conservation councils, recalled that a number of environment organisations were involved, including the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), TWS and the state environment councils. Keating kept them ‘waiting for a couple of hours’ and

was ‘incredibly rude’. The group was ‘lined up along a hugely long table in the cabinet room’, and when Keating walked in he pointed at each representative saying, ‘Don’t like you. Don’t like you. Don’t know who you are. Don’t like you. She’s alright’ (Parlane 2010). (The last was a reference to ACF Director Patricia Caswell, formerly from the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU.)) In our interview many years later, Parlane was still amazed at such rude, unstatesmanlike behaviour saying that after all, ‘it was the prime minister of the country dealing with a major interest group’ (Parlane 2010). She saw the behaviour as a reflection of how Labor, and Keating in particular, had further hardened their attitude towards the environmental NGOs.

Prime ministerial advisors Balderstone (2008) and Emerson (2008) repeatedly claimed to me that Keating ‘was green’ and that his position as treasurer made it impossible for him to show his true colours during the Hawke government. Judy Lambert also recalled that he supported environment minister Ros Kelly in the setting of very high standards for the approval of the Wesley Vale pulp mill that assisted in its demise⁵ (Lambert 2008). Despite the public antagonism between Hawke and Keating, Hawke (2008) told me that in relation to environment issues, Keating ‘was never a real problem’. Richardson (2008) also described Keating as ‘being pretty good’ in cabinet environment debates during Richardson’s term as minister, with the exception of debates on Kakadu Stage III and climate change.

Most of these endorsements relate to Keating’s period as treasurer, not as prime minister. It is Keating’s actions as prime minister that speak louder than the endorsements of his Labor colleagues when he was treasurer. Richardson saw a difference between Keating’s performance when Richardson was environment minister and when Keating was prime minister. Richardson (2008) summed up this change saying that Keating became ‘brownier and brownier so to speak, so that by the ’96 election, there was nothing for the environment’. So, if Keating was ‘pretty good’ as Richardson said in Hawke cabinet debates on the environment, what were the factors causing him to become so antagonistic as prime minister?

⁵ The Wesley Vale pulp mill was a kraft process paper pulp mill proposed for construction near Wesley Vale in northern Tasmania in the late 1980s.

It is clear that during the period of Keating's leadership, the environment was actively removed from his government's agenda, which 'revolved more around his interest in matters to do with economic restructuring' (Economou 1996, 17). One possible interpretation is that Keating's different approach reflected a desire to differentiate his prime ministership from that of his political rival, Hawke, by championing different issues (Hamilton 2001, 34). However, Simon Balderstone (2008) (who is in the unique position of being the only advisor to have worked for both Hawke and Keating when each was prime minister) was adamant that this was not a motivating factor. Economou emphasised the difference between Hawke's favoured style of decision-making by consensus and Keating's more adversarial stance, claiming that Keating was 'anxious to demonstrate a qualitative transformation in decision-making away from the slow consensualism that had gone on before' (Economou 1996, 17-18). Economou claimed that Keating's strongly adversarial style was welcomed by some in the Labor Party who were tired of the time consensus politics exacted. Despite Balderstone's view, it is reasonable to assume that Keating also wished to differentiate his government from that of Hawke (Hamilton 2001, 34). A lack of sympathy with environment initiatives appears to have conveniently provided a means for differentiation.

However, there is evidence to suggest that differentiation strayed into active opposition. Don Watson who was senior advisor, speechwriter and 'principal confidant' in Keating's office (Gordon 2011), reinforced the notion that the prime minister and his inner circle held an antagonistic attitude towards the environment organisations. Watson (2002, 539) used strong language to describe the behaviour of environment groups over forests saying:

[The environment groups'] carping pugnacious attitude doubtless found its justification in the 1990 election when green votes possibly decided the result. Thereafter, TWS became a species of woodland Trotskyist.

He also accused the ACF of becoming the same 'woodland Trotskyist' (Watson 2002, 539). For the most part, Watson chose to ignore the environment as an issue in his recollections despite the important role of forest issues at that time and he used very strong language in the brief references he did make to the environment. The strength of Watson's language suggests an antagonistic attitude within Keating's inner circle that is consistent with Marr's (2008) interpretation and with Parlane's description of his 1996 meeting with environment

organisations.⁶ When reflecting to me on Keating's prime ministership, Richardson (2008) said, 'by the 1996 election we were not very green at all. We had moved back a long, long, long way'.

The role of the prime minister and his attitudes are crucial in determining party policy, and this story of Labor's environmental record during the Keating government does describe a prime minister both unsympathetic and actively antagonistic towards environmental initiatives. How Keating came to develop this attitude to environmental causes can only be understood by looking back, firstly at tensions within the Hawke cabinet and Keating's bid for the leadership, and secondly at a changing national political party context with the rise of the Australian Greens and improvements in Coalition environment policy.

Tensions in the Hawke Cabinet and Keating's Bid for the Prime Ministership

Throughout the Hawke prime ministership, resource and economic ministers of a neoliberal persuasion were often unhappy with decisions on the environment, but this opposition was contained by Hawke's dominance and his consensus decision-making style in cabinet. Preventing sandmining at Shelbourne Bay on Cape York⁷, and the rejection of the Helsham Inquiry on Tasmanian forestry in favour of a dissenting report by one Commissioner⁸ were two key issues. Commenting on Keating's reaction to the Shelbourne Bay decision, Hawke adviser, Emerson (2008), told me he knew Keating was not happy about it 'but in the end he kind of copped it'. The difficulty in getting agreement on Tasmanian forestry resulted in a cabinet discussion of fourteen hours – the longest cabinet debate during the Hawke government. On both these decisions, the resource and finance ministers were overruled and became frustrated by the cabinet outcomes (Warhurst 2004, 169).

⁶ Keating and Watson subsequently became estranged in what has been described as 'the most enduring, unexpected fallings-out in modern Australian political history' (Gordon 2011, p. 15). However, there is no doubt that during Keating's period as prime minister, Watson was the most important member of Keating's inner circle and the PM's 'personal confidant' (Gordon 2011, p. 15). It was a relationship that still existed at the time Watson wrote these words.

⁷ At Shelbourne Bay in far north Queensland, a Japanese mining company sought to mine silica sand on the traditional land of the Wuthathi in far north Queensland.

⁸ The Helsham Inquiry was set up to resolve the issue of whether there were viable alternatives to forestry operations in the National Estate areas of the Lemnathyme and southern forests in Tasmania. The majority report from two commissioners recommended 90 per cent of the area be logged, but a dissenting report by Peter Hitchcock, the only commissioner with scientific qualifications, recommended almost the opposite and suggested alternatives to logging.

The main resource and finance ministers who were overruled in cabinet were Ministers Walsh, Dawkins, Button and, on occasion, Kerin and Cook (Economou 1992, 463; Richardson 1994, 260; Economou 1996, 14; Richardson 2008). Different combinations of these ministers acted in concert at different times. Economou (1996, 17-18) described Keating as a 'leading voice amongst the economic "hard heads" within cabinet'. While this was probably the case by the end of the Hawke government, this was not suggested by Hawke and Richardson in interviews. Instead, they claimed that the most energetic and consistent minister in this opposition group was Peter Walsh who in recent years has been closely associated with the ultra conservative Lavoisier Group: an organisation that exists to oppose climate change initiatives (Lavoisier Group 2009). In discussing ministerial opposition to environmental decisions, Hawke described Walsh to me as 'the leader of the drys push...he was a Neanderthal basically' and he said, 'the economic drys...[were] always using the economic arguments against making what I could see as sensible environmental decisions' (Hawke 2008). Similarly, although former environment minister, Graham Richardson (2008) considered Button, Kerin and Cook as a group to be 'pretty hard line', he singled out, Walsh as 'just against anything that looked remotely green; he hated it, and still does apparently'. Opposition from these ministers continued even when public opinion was in favour of taking positive environmental action (Richardson 1994).

A third decision, stopping a gold mine at Coronation Hill in Kakadu National Park, was even more significant in its implications than cabinet discussion of Shelbourne Bay and the Helsham Inquiry. Coronation Hill not only divided cabinet, but saw Hawke overrule the majority of ministers, weakening him politically in caucus and cabinet to the extent that the decision has been described as 'the nail in his coffin' that led to his overthrow by Keating (Toyne 1994, 148). The Coronation Hill decision came as the battle for leadership between Hawke and Keating was reaching its climax. The economic 'drys' in cabinet were strongly opposed and Keating by this time had become the 'leading voice amongst the economic hard heads within cabinet' as described by Economou (1996, 17-18). His leadership ambitions had become irrevocably bound up with the anti-environment views of this group of ministers. The detail of the decision is worth examining as it weakened Hawke (Toyne 1994, 148), it was the beginning of Keating's rise to the prime ministership and it cemented Keating's bonds with the economic and resource ministers.

Hawke maintained that his cabinet 'always operated on the basis that the overwhelming majority of decisions were consensus decisions' (Hawke 2008). In contrast, to this norm, however, the Coronation Hill mine was prevented from going ahead only by the prime minister using the full prestige of his office. Hawke insisted that he 'allowed enormously long debate', but that Coronation Hill was one of only two issues, 'both to do with the environment', in which cabinet 'resisted' his view (Hawke 2008). On this occasion, he took the unusual step of lobbying ministers beforehand and later leading the debate in cabinet. In describing this decision, Hawke (1994, 510) also said:

I did not have the numbers around the Cabinet table but I did have the authority of the prime ministership. My position on mining at Coronation Hill was accepted. This was comfortable for the more bitter of my opponents, who had the luxury of making it known that the decision represented the will of the Prime Minister and not the majority view of the Cabinet.

Hawke (2008) elaborated to me his feelings about this cabinet debate, saying,

I was in a very clear minority on that. I thought their arguments were pathetic on it. It was not just the environment, it was the environment argument and there was the Aboriginal sacred site argument.

The reaction of cabinet ministers and the mining industry to the Coronation Hill decision was remarkable. John Kerin, the Minister for Primary Industry and Energy, who had been overseas for the cabinet meeting, took the extreme step of breaking cabinet solidarity to criticise the decision publicly. Toyne (1994, 145) says that industry 'saw the decision as a test case'. Managing Director of Western Mining Corporation, Hugh Morgan, referring to Aboriginal arguments against the mine, declared that Prime Minister Hawke had become a 'neo-pagan', and called for a counter attack on the 'religious crazies and green antimonians' 'who threaten our prosperity and eventually our survival' (Morgan 1991, 38). In the same vein, Sir Arvi Parvo, chairman of Western Mining Corporation, Alcoa and BHP, accused the government of making the decision 'on the basis of superstitions' (Kitney, G. 1991, 8). Gavin McDonald, the president of the Australian Mining Industry Council (AMIC) said that mineral investors would look to other countries to invest (Seccombe 1991, 5), and John Quinn, managing director of Newcrest Mining claimed that stopping the mine would 'send a clear signal to my company and to the mining industry to take its funds to countries with reliable

and rational rules' (Kitney 1991, 8). AMIC claimed a reduction in the exploration zone of 98 per cent and depicted the decision as total capitulation to the conservation movement (Kelly 1994, 539). This was despite the fact that the deciding factors for the decision were based on Aboriginal concerns, not environmental protection. Hawke and Sir Arvi Parvo, whose friendship was well known, had an exchange in which Parvo said, 'I can't believe anything the government says anymore', to which Hawke responded saying that Parvo 'can't be trusted in terms of the relationship between the government and BHP' (Kelly 1994, 539–540). The mining industry's bitterness as a result of the Coronation Hill decision was deep seated. In this context, there is a contrast between the energetic, emotive responses from ministers and industry, and the fact that the Coronation Hill decision had a 75 per cent approval rating with the public (Toyne 1994), and it played a key role in the ALP's 1990 election success (Kelly 1994). Despite the industry's strident claims that the decision would drastically cut back mining and drive away investment, Hamilton used Australian Bureau of Statistics figures to show that expenditure by the industry on exploration actually *increased* in the following years (Hamilton 1996, 16).

The Coronation Hill decision was the debate that cemented Keating's leadership and dominance as the voice of the 'economic hard heads' in cabinet. The ensuing controversy generated by the mining industry served to reinforce Keating's cabinet leadership and strengthened his hand in the ensuing battle for the leadership of the parliamentary party. It was irrelevant that public support for the decision had been high. The economic and resource ministers were already predisposed to hear the voice of the mining industry, not the voice of the voting public, and Keating's destiny was tied to these ministers.

Coronation Hill may have hardened Keating's stance against environmental initiatives, but there was another Hawke cabinet debate that is interesting in the light of current policy debates on climate change. In 1989 Richardson took his first proposal to cabinet for reduction of carbon emissions based on the Toronto targets.⁹ He was unsuccessful due to opposition from Keating and the resource and finance ministers. In our interview, Richardson (2008) claimed:

⁹ The internationally agreed Toronto targets called for a 20% reduction in greenhouse emissions by 2005 based on 1988 levels.

It's a really well kept secret. I actually went in and argued we should have cuts to greenhouse gases 20 years ago, and Keating and others just monstered me, as though I was some sort of complete idiot.

In October, 1990, cabinet agreed to a proposal similar to Richardson's first submission setting an interim planning target to reduce emissions by 20 per cent by 2005 on 1988 levels (Hamilton 2001, 32). However, it contained a vital caveat, 'as long as such action does not adversely affect economic development' (Balderstone 2008). This outcome might have satisfied the mining and carbon intensive industries, but it must have also alarmed them. They would have been well aware that the issue could re-emerge to threaten their industry. The rise of organised opposition to climate change mitigation that Guy Pearse identified as the 'greenhouse mafia' (Pearse 2007) can be linked to decisions by cabinet on Coronation Hill and climate change mitigation. Pearse has confirmed to me that his interviewees repeatedly referred to the Coronation Hill decision (Pearse 2009). Apart from its importance in Keating's legacy, this history is relevant to current policy debates and to industry opposition to government legislation. It is notable that Richardson named Keating as one of those in cabinet who were most vociferous in opposition to action on climate change. So, tensions within the Hawke ministry were harnessed by Keating in his battle for the leadership, and reinforced his opposition to positive action on the environment by the time he came to the prime ministership.

Changes in the Electoral Landscape

The rise of the Australian Greens as a national political party also played a part in Keating's anti-environment stance. Throughout the 1980s, various state-based Green parties contested state and local elections, at times with significant success, as when the Green Independents gained the balance of power in Tasmania in 1989. However, it was August 1992 that the national Australian Greens emerged as a political party (Lohrey 2002, 35), and it was the 1993 election at which the nationally federated Australian Greens first contested seats in the Parliament of Australia. Keating's victory speech on the evening of the 1993 election gave credit to the 'true believers' or traditional Labor supporters (Grattan & Colebatch 1993, 1). However, Marr (2008) asserted that in 1993 Keating was returned to government by preferences from the Australian Greens operating at a national level for the first time. Marr (2008) claimed there were only 1,500 votes across a few seats that made the difference

between winning and losing, and these votes could be identified as Green. Instead of rebuilding the environmental constituency after this election, Marr claimed Keating chose to neglect it and to become actively antagonist towards the environment organisations, rejecting their political influence.

Former shadow coalition environment minister, Chris Puplick (2008) identified the entry of the unified Australian Greens into federal politics as leading to a reduction in the influence that the environment NGOs had with the other political parties, claiming the Australian Greens provided a natural home for the environment vote. In a personal interview, Wilderness Society (TWS) director, Alec Marr described a caucus debate in 1995 at which Keating was reported to have spoken derisively about the environment organisations and to have claimed that they had nowhere to go other than to Labor so they could be ignored (Marr 2008). Puplick believed the emergence of the Australian Greens was ‘an absolutely critical factor’ in the environment movement losing its influence (Puplick 2008). Lambert raised the interesting conundrum as to whether the formation of the Australian Greens as a national party was accelerated by the environment organisations feeling shut out after Keating came to power, or alternatively, whether perhaps the formation of the Australian Greens led to the environment organisations being shut out because Labor could now negotiate directly with the Australian Greens for preferences (Lambert 2008). It is possible both proposals have some validity, but either way, the emergence of the Greens reinforced Keating’s predilection to ignore the environment vote and environment organisations.

The other change on the environment policy landscape was a significant strengthening of the Coalition’s environment policies, so that Labor could no longer use the environment to advantage as a defining issue. No matter that the Coalition was weak on implementation because of a refusal to challenge states’ rights. The stronger Coalition policies narrowed the difference between the major parties. For the 1990 election, Puplick developed a very comprehensive policy. It emphasised land degradation, used the tax system to reward good environmental companies and punish the bad, protected flora and fauna, banned mining in Antarctica, and promised a 20% cut in greenhouse emissions by 2000, which was more generous than the government’s commitment (Kelly 1994, 535). Puplick pointed out that the Coalition was ahead of Labor on some issues such as carbon reduction targets, but he was frustrated by Howard’s focus on State’s rights and the environment sector’s emphasis on

forestry and wilderness. In an interview, he claimed to be ahead of the Labor Party on ‘global warming issues’, ‘on the Antarctic...and on whaling issues’, but went on to say:

Partly because we had been so hobbled three years before by Howard’s negative views in relation to States’ rights, it was too difficult to get Peacock and the rest of them over the line for the 1990 election to demand that we overthrow our commitment to States’ rights and get back to supporting some serious interventionist issues which we had already pioneered (Puplick 2008).

Despite this, the Coalition environment policies reduced environment as a defining issue for Labor.

Implications from the Keating Government Years

Keating’s antagonism to environmental NGOs and his lack of enthusiasm for environmental initiatives has been documented by scholars, but it is an aspect of his legacy that appears less well known in the community. Marr also claims that there are some in the NGO sector who ignore the history of Keating’s prime ministership and presume that the Labor Party is their logical base because of the significant gains achieved under Hawke (Marr 2008). This paper suggests that those gains were very dependent on support from Hawke and Richardson who saw electoral advantage in gaining environment sector support. In fact, the majority of cabinet were not in sympathy. I would argue that the situation under Keating can be seen as a closer reflection of Labor ministers’ attitudes.

The vigorous reaction of the mining sector to the Coronation Hill decision in 1990 has echoes in that sector’s reaction to the Rudd government’s mining tax proposal in 2010. Both reactions were strident and effective, using the media and claiming threats to Australia’s economy. These echoes may not be coincidental. I have argued that it was the conjunction of the Coronation Hill decision and cabinet decisions on climate change abatement in 1990 that led to the rise of the ‘greenhouse mafia’ or industry-bureaucracy nexus described by Pearse (2007). On the occasion of the Coronation Hill decision and the 2010 announcement of the mining tax, Labor ministers displayed considerable sensitivity to the vocal response from industry. On each occasion the public were in favour of the decision, but Labor responded to the pressures of this vocal economic interest.

Before their post-election agreement with the Australian Greens in 2010, the failure of the Rudd and Gillard governments in addressing the central environmental questions of climate change and energy issues suggests a systemic policy failure on the part of Labor. Mark Diesendorf (2012, 59) has said,

The Rudd-Gillard government, in particular, exhibited mastery in the art of creating a confusing multiplicity of programs for renewable energy by: splitting, recombining and renaming them; announcing apparently new programs based partly on previously promised funds; making big promises for the medium-term and long-term future when it may not be in office; and designing fundamentally flawed programs that could not be effective in reaching their stated goals.

He goes on to nominate the Rudd government's 'misnamed' Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme and the 2009 Renewable Energy Target scheme as examples (Diesendorf 2012, 59). Crowley and Walker (2012, vii) claim that in Australia over recent decades, 'There is a line of historical continuity in environmental policy failure that is unbroken by changes of government.' It is only the current agreement between Labor and the Greens that spawned a much-strengthened suite of legislation as a response to climate change. This did not come about because of a natural affinity for environment policy from the Labor Party, but because the Australian Greens insisted on it. The environment sector today needs to ensure that it maintains strict neutrality towards all political parties (Australian Greens included), responding only to their policy as appropriate, not being influenced by any past history such as that of the Hawke government.

Conclusion

The Keating government demonstrated an anti-environment bias that was demonstrated from the time Keating took power. Failure to attend the Rio Earth Summit may have been symbolic, but it was followed by a series of policy positions that moved the government away from environmental protection reversing previous initiatives, such as the ESD process, or pushing responsibility to the states, such as in relation to forestry issues. In particular, Keating's relationship with the environment sector became openly antagonistic.

The reasons for Keating's stance have been located in his battle for leadership of the party. He did not demonstrate a strong anti-environment bias until his contest with Hawke over the leadership became overt. He then joined openly with ministers sympathetic to a neoliberal perspective who had been unhappy with earlier environmental decisions. This move was consistent with his neoliberal economic outlook, but also suited his ambition. Cabinet debate on the proposed Coronation Hill mine was a key turning point, but earlier cabinet discussion on climate change also saw Keating leading the 'economic hard heads' in the Hawke cabinet. His humiliation during the forestry debate of running the gauntlet of demonstrating truck drivers only served to strengthen his already existing antagonism towards environmental initiatives. Other factors, such as the rise of the Australian Greens and improvements in Coalition environment policy, changed the electoral influence of the environment sector and reinforced Keating's position.

The period demonstrates that the environment sector should not presume that Labor is its natural home and that the remarkable environmental achievements of the Hawke government relied strongly on two individuals – Hawke and his minister Richardson. The environment sector should maintain its political independence and neutrality at all times, responding to all political parties only on the merits of their policies, not to any historical loyalty.

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