

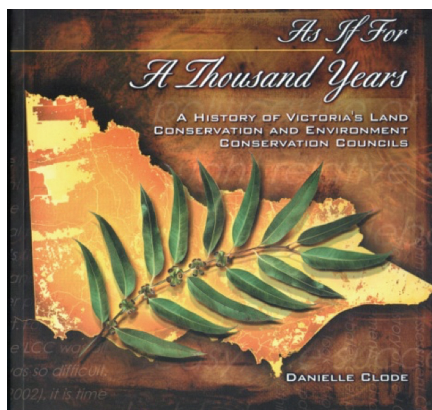
As If for 1000 Years: A Land-use Planning Authority for Queensland?

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Relevance

This paper reports on Victorian experience in establishing a statutory authority to advise the government on the use of public land. As Queensland grapples with a number of unresolved dilemmas – whether irrigated cotton is an appropriate use of the Murray-Darling floodplain, mining versus agriculture and carbon sequestration versus tree clearing on pastoral land for example – the value of an independent authority of this kind should be a prominent topic during public debate over the future of the rangelands.

Analysis

“AS IF FOR A THOUSAND YEARS” was the planning horizon directed by the Minister when he commissioned the fledgling Land Conservation Council to assess all of the public land

in Victoria with a view to determining its *most appropriate use*.

That was 1970, at the dawn of an era when it was possible to conceive of a state government being persuaded by scientific advice and public pressure to pursue a pro-conservation agenda. The government of the day was a conservative government: the Minister, Bill Borthwick, was a Liberal in Henry Bolte’s Coalition.

Henry Bolte was a ‘capital C’ Conservative, but he was shrewd enough to heed a groundswell of public opinion opposed to the government’s decision to clear virgin heathland in the Little Desert in the north-western Wimmera region for pastoral production. He was nudged along by *The Age* newspaper, which had supported a pro-environment campaign on that particular issue for months. Further, it had not escaped the government’s attention that agricultural scientists,

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biologists and other experts within the public service had been quietly publishing reports and briefing community groups against the project – leaking, we would call it now – for years.

The Land Conservation Council faithfully followed the Minister’s instructions. By 1988 it was able to report that 98% of its recommendations had been accepted by governments – of both major persuasions (LCC, 1988).

Upon the establishment of the Land Conservation Council in 1970, controversy drained out of many land-use dilemmas, development of the Little Desert not least. With the promise of a transparent assessment of scientific and socio-economic parameters, a transparent process of public consultation, overseen by a body regarded as independent of both the political parties and sectoral interests, all sectors set their minds to generating and submitting their own evidence and insights. The Wimmera region was deferred until late in the work program as many other resource-use controversies pressed themselves forward.

Comparability with Queensland’s Pastoral Estate

The land tenure canvas of Queensland is very different from that of Victoria in the 1970s. The Land Conservation Council’s remit was restricted to *public* land. This included a large number (thousands) of Crown reserves of a small total area, but the main focus of its work was the large tracts of Unallocated Crown Land and Reserved Forest under the administration of the Department of Crown Lands and Survey and the Forests Commission Victoria, respectively. There were fierce debates within the public service and in the public arena over high-country grazing and in particular logging.

Queensland has a very different tenure canvas. There is very little Unallocated State Land, mainly water frontages and residual discontinuities in the cadastre. Much of the coastal area that was previously forest reserve has been transferred to national park. The great bulk of the Crown estate – some 60% of Queensland –

is not *public* land but *private State* land leased for grazing, either in perpetuity or for a term of years, with few alternative economic uses. A work program for a comparable body in Queensland’s rangelands (by no means the only potential assignment) would look quite different. First, it could examine the future use of term leases long before their expiry, to give certainty to the lessees. Second, it could examine the case for freeholding of perpetual leases and other changes in tenure status on a strategic basis rather than an ad hoc property-by-property basis as has traditionally been departmental practice. Third, it could replicate the pioneering assessment of land for its potential as national park by Sattler and Williams (1999), chronicled in Sattler (2017). Pre-eminently, it would examine the implications of climate change and environmental deterioration for continued pastoral occupation.

In parts of Queensland, the business model of family pastoral enterprises has run its course, as the converging challenges of climate change, the prevailing economic framework, the cost of restoring degraded lands, the inability to manage marginal lands sustainably, the inflated value of rural properties and the hollowing out of rural communities are coming to overwhelm the capacity of single families to cope.

Given the sovereignty that pastoral lessees enjoy over their lands, such a work program would need to be restricted to an advisory role, with the bulk of its work being mapping and regional assessment that would be of as much benefit to graziers as to local government and the state. It would be of immense service if it did no more than fill the gaps in resource assessment, such as those identified in 2004 by Sanders.

In the 1970s there was a Division of Land Utilisation within Queensland’s Department of Primary Industries which produced excellent mapping of natural resources and the value of lands for primary production. Unfortunately, this original work did not receive the support needed, due to the rural politics of the day.

Budgetary Parsimony

Come 2019 in Queensland, one can now only dream of budgetary adequacy for the natural resource mapping and assessment necessary to underpin prudent decisions on regenerative agriculture, carbon storage, national parks and biodiversity, coal mining, gas drilling, transport infrastructure or any of a number of other land uses. The number of scientists employed in the state's public sector in both systematic and curiosity-led resource assessment has suffered from years of budget cuts, hostility from some governments and repeated restructuring. Funding is now more likely to be project based, requiring repeated justification.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the capacity of the Department of Premier and Cabinet in particular to coordinate between portfolios has been severely weakened and that staff now spend their time responding to the day's dramas as selected by the Editor of *The Courier-Mail*, whose opinion as to what is and is not important is more influential than that of any scientist or policy officer in sight.

The lack of investment in forward planning for managing Queensland's resources and landscapes is not surprising, given that commentators like Andrew Bolt, Peta Credlin and Judith Sloan (2018) and editorialists year after year use their privileged position in the pages of *The Courier-Mail* and *The Australian* to denigrate scientists and cast doubt on scientific advice. Their antipathy is directed at environmental science and especially climate science: they don't pour scorn on the electronics engineers, chemists and physicists whose labours bring ever more wondrous technological inventions into our lives.

How far has public debate fallen since the 1970s in Victoria when a groundswell of public opinion and media commentary obliged the government of the day to establish the Land Conservation Council!

Gravestones

It is not just incremental budget cuts damaging individual agencies that have weakened

Queensland's ability to solve controversies in the use of its natural resources. Entire agencies have been abolished. Royal Society member David Marlow has compiled tables (Marlow, 2019) outlining a sample of scientific bodies that have been abolished despite faithfully achieving what they were commissioned to achieve and despite producing information of value to a broad range of business, government and civil society sectors.

The establishment of bodies such as the Resource Assessment Commission, Land & Water Australia and the National Land and Water Resources Audit is evidence that the need for partisan-independent expert bodies charged with gathering evidence from numerous disciplines and crossing sectoral silos to produce considered recommendations for decision makers is widely recognised. Those three were national bodies that were not replaced by any institutional architecture for independently evaluating competing claims upon natural resources or for monitoring condition and trend; the Queensland Government is constitutionally competent to establish its own.

Conclusion

In considering the adequacy of the institutions of government to resolve the challenges that accelerating climate change will place in front of landholders and policy makers alike, Queensland should look across the border to the Victorian experience which placed land-use decision making on a systematic, consultative basis informed by the best science that could be assembled at the time.

Bill Borthwick died in July 2001. On the day of his funeral, one of his senior officers delivered a lecture in Brisbane to Queensland public servants on the history of achievements of the Land Conservation Council in establishing a measured, scientific basis for land-use decisions. The proposal for a comparable body has yet to find a firm place on the policy agenda of either major political party in Queensland. In Victoria, Mr Borthwick's legacy will undoubtedly endure for as long as there is responsible government and orderly land administration, quite plausibly for a thousand years.

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Author Profile

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