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26 April 2019

AS IF FOR 1000 YEARS: A LAND-USE PLANNING AUTHORITY FOR QUEENSLAND?

Keywords: *land-use planning, statutory authority*

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 – mining versus agriculture, carbon sequestration versus tree clearing on pastoral land for example – the value of an independent authority of this kind should be placed on the table.

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 as 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 ground swell of public opinion focused on the government’s decision to clear virgin heathland in the Little Desert for pastoral production. He was nudged along by *The Age* newspaper that had run a pro-environment campaign on that particular issue for months. And it had not escaped the government’s attention that agricultural scientists, 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).

In the 1960s and early 1970s, the Victorian National Parks Association, the most prominent conservation group in the State, had publicly advocated for 5% of the State to be declared as national park. As the recommendations of the Land Conservation Council started flowing through, the Association went very quiet with this claim, because it became clear that the 5% figure would be substantially exceeded. Indeed it was. At the date of writing, the terrestrial national parks and conservation reserves total 17% of Victoria’s land area.

In Queensland, the comparable figure is 5.5%, augmented by private nature refuges. The story of how the national park estate grew from 0.64% in 1975 to 3.86% in 2000 is laid out in absorbing detail in Royal Society of Queensland Past President Paul Sattler’s conservation memoir published in full on the Society’s website – and summarised in volume 119 of the 2014 *Proceedings of the Royal Society of Queensland*.

The greater proportion of this augmentation derived from the purchase of freehold and leasehold pastoral stations, unlike in Victoria where most of the non-freehold estate was uncommitted Crown Land State forest. Come 2019 in Queensland, one can now only dream of budgetary adequacy for the resource assessment necessary to underpin prudent decisions about national parks, coal mining, gas drilling, transport infrastructure or any of a number of other land uses. The numbers of scientists employed in the state’s public sector in 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. The one-person secretariat for the NatureSearch voluntary citizen-science program was abolished more than a decade ago.

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 Des Houghton year after year use their privileged position in the pages of *The Courier-Mail* to denigrate scientists and cast doubt on scientific advice. Their antipathy, of course, is directed at environmental science and especially climate science: they don't pour scorn on the systems analysts, 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 ground swell of public opinion and media commentary obliged the government of the day to establish the Land Conservation Council!

Without making any partisan comment, the loss of some 14,000 positions during the era of the Newman Government 2013-2015 disproportionately weakened the ranks of middle management and what might loosely be called backroom staff as distinct from the front line services that the government of the day alleged would not be affected. It is extremely easy to underestimate the importance of the 'backroom staff' in horizontal coordination between portfolios and external sources academe and hence in prudent, effective and implementable government decisions.

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.


In Victoria, 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 encompassing the Little Desert was deferred until late in the work program as many other resource-use controversies pressed themselves forward. When the *Final Recommendations* advocating that remaining uncommitted Crown Land be dedicated as the Little Desert National Park were issued in 1986, the subsequent dedication was a foregone conclusion.

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. In Queensland, a comparable body has yet to be established. 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.

Conclusions

In considering the adequacy of the institutions of government to resolve the challenges that accelerating climate change will place in front of landholders and policymakers 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.

Status

This paper is available under Creative Commons licence CC-BY-ND 4.0  for publication and re-use. It is written in the author's capacity as Adjunct Professor, Centre for Governance and Public Policy, Griffith University. The author was an officer of the Victorian Public Service from 1970-1979 during the period when the Land Conservation Council was established.

References

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