

Mr Whitlam as nature lover

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The ALP's conservation policy

Mr. Whitlam has a policy on conservation, and, what's more, it is accorded enough respect to be discussed with the broader ALP science policy in a recent article in *Search*¹. This awareness is very welcome to all conservationists, perhaps it indicates a growing awareness of the environment as one of *the* political issues of the seventies. It would be too much to expect that this awareness extended generally throughout the population but if politicians are alive to the possibility of an ecocatastrophe, then the conservationists are no longer alone. This does not give me any great feelings of security, knowing at last who our bedfellows are, but at least environmental activism is not quite so cold a job this new year.

The policy is interesting because it tells conservationists more about the minds of politicians than about conservation practice. Although the latter aspect is important if only because it discusses conservation from the standpoint of twentieth century scientific man.

To my mind, the most important feature is the way conservation is integrated within larger contexts. Firstly, conservation practice is seen as a thoroughly scientific pursuit and, as such, comes within the domain of a larger Labor policy on science. Basically, Labor's version of science is the 'planned' type and although it is beyond the scope of this to discuss this approach in detail, it needs to be briefly treated. Here, science policy is formulated by an executive body, the Australian Science Council, made up of elected and *ex officio* scientists, and science is carried out by CSIRO-type organisations to minimise the effects of a bureaucratic gerontocracy as in much of the public service. The checks on this system are the Australian Academy of Science for the scientists and a parliamentary standing committee on science and technology for the public.

Secondly, and this will be dear to the heart of the socialists, conservation is treated within a framework of national planning. It is intimately related to Mr. Whitlam's urban renewal scheme which he has been proclaiming from the hustings. As such, conservation in a Labor state comes within the sphere of the new Department of Urban Affairs. From the things we have been promised from this department, conservation seems a natural addition to the already impressive list. This sort of planning is valuable in that it establishes a set of national priorities which override the competition for the Commonwealth's money by departments whose statutory interests often conflict. It is easy to imagine a newly established Department of Conservation being outcompeted for funds and national resources by an older established Mines or Forestry Department. Indeed, one does not have to imagine it in some states. The sort of planning that Labor proposes would eliminate this by returning the establishment of national priorities back to the people via parliament. This would be a two-edged sword because conservationists would be face to face with the enemies of the environment in the forums of the nation, and it would be up to us to directly influence the setting of these priorities.

If Labor's policies are put into effect, conservationists will then need to convince the public and politicians as never before of the essential sanity of their claims. Not that Mr. Whitlam seems to need convincing. His rationale for environment action is at once elegant and sane – 'urban man is diminished by any final severance of his links with nature and the countryside' – as is his understanding of the problem – 'we should not suppose that the natural environment of our ancient continent is so tough or so resilient as to withstand without harm the insults and injuries inflicted by its more thoughtless inhabitants'.

The specific methods of implementing this conservation policy do not seem to be fully worked out – this is the advantage of a policy statement – but the Department of Urban Affairs would play an important role in establishing priorities with the Commonwealth seeing itself as the 'curator and not the liquidator of the national estate'. Outside of this department, there would be a biological resources survey, a nationwide system of national parks and an expanded Australian Institute of Marine Science for marine studies beyond the Great Barrier Reef. Furthermore, urban and regional planning, with which Mr. Whitlam ties conservation, would also be considered by a National Institute of Social and Economic Research which would endeavour to understand the dynamics of Australian society.

The essence of Labor's plan, it seems to me, is to plan the environment for man with the aid of experts in many fields. This, in itself, is a great advance over the previous *ad hoc* policies we and the environment have suffered. But a few things about 'the plan' still nag in the back of my mind. It is as if Mr. Whitlam was using all the right conservation type words but hadn't yet convinced himself of the underlying philosophy. He says in one part 'a Labor Government will commission as a matter of urgency a survey of the Australian countryside designed to identify areas suitable for the expansion of existing cities or the establishment of new regional centres'. This gives one an indication of the way the priorities will go. There is no sense or tone or implication of finally finishing expansion and growth.

The old socialists were obsessed as much as new capitalists are now with a utopia from endless economic growth. It seems that in this respect Mr. Whitlam still clings to the traditions of the party. Others in the party also see it this way – the Kedron (Brisbane) branch of the ALP called recently for eventual worker control of industry because 'our vast complex of factories and machines supply the very essentials of life and living'. These theories of the origin of wealth are widespread among socialists but they do not make ecological sense. Dr. Aubrey Manning could have been speaking of our Labor party when he wrote in *The Ecologist* 'How can the planners be so myopic as not to realise that to plan an environment for man we must begin by planning the numbers of man himself'². This is a bitter pill for a country that was shouting 'populate or perish' yesterday.

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¹ E. G. Whitlam (1970) A national science policy. *Search* 1(4): 134-138.

² A. Manning (1970) No Standing room. *The Ecologist* 1(1): 7-10.

