

Sunday, December 17, 2006

BOB BROWN AT THE NATIONAL PRESS CLUB

Thank you for inviting me to the National Press Club again. Since I last spoke here in 2004, the world as we know it has profoundly changed. The all pervasive impacts of global warming, intensifying over the past thirty years and now accelerating at an alarming rate, are affecting everyone. The American National Academy of Sciences said last month that the world is now the hottest it has been in 5000 years.

From the melting of the Greenland ice shelf and the West Antarctic ice sheet, to the thawing of the tundra, to rising sea levels in the Pacific and worsening storms, drought and bushfires in Australia, there is no escape for any species, human or otherwise from the impacts of global warming.

We have only 10 years left to prevent catastrophic climate change. It is very sobering. It is a huge human rights issue - in fact, it is a challenge to human existence on the planet.

I have spent thirty years of my life working with communities and thousands of activists around the world to save natural and cultural heritage; from the Franklin River and Daintree rainforests to where the chainsaws still wreak havoc in Tasmania and Borneo - and the Japanese harpoons kill whales in Antarctica; and to places of cultural genius like Western Australia's Burrup Peninsula, with its World Heritage value Aboriginal rock art, now threatened by Woodside's selfish wish to bulldoze an industrial gas liquification plant which should be built further up the coast.

Much of my life has gone into making Australia a fairer, safer place and also towards advocating freedom for Tibet, East Timor and West Papua, and to helping people working, some time dangerously, for democracy in China and Colombia and Burma. But now what is shockingly clear is that all of our combined efforts will have been in vain, if we do not tackle climate change, and tackle it effectively.

What we do, or do not do about climate change in the next 10 years will determine the course of human history; it will determine how many species and ecosystems survive or are destroyed forever, and it will determine the quality of life our children and grandchildren inherit from us.

The Pentagon, in a suppressed report in 2004 warned that, "Abrupt climate change could bring the planet to the edge of anarchy. Disruption and conflict will be endemic features of life. Once again warfare could define human life."

Former World Bank chief economist Sir Nicholas Stern said this week that, "Climate change will affect the basic elements of life for people around the world - access to water, food production, health and the environment. Hundreds of millions of people could suffer hunger, water shortages and coastal flooding as the world warms up."

Stern added that, "Our actions now and over the coming decades could create risks of major disruption to economic and social activity on a scale similar to those associated with the great wars and the economic depression of the first half of the 20th Century."

That is, if we do not deal with global warming, we may be dealing with an economic ice age.

And the Vatican envoy to the United Nations, Archbishop Migliore, echoing Greens philosophy, said yesterday that, "It is becoming rapidly ever clearer that if these, the world's life support systems, are spoiled or destroyed irreparably, there will be no viable economy for any of us.[t]he world needs an ecological conversion."

Such extraordinary times require extraordinary leadership. They require new vision, intelligence and leaders who are prepared to act urgently and resolutely, and to determine indeed whether the world is to proceed at war or in peace.

Prime Minister Howard may have been the man for the complacent, comfortable and self serving times, last century. But he is not the person to steer the nation on a new course, this century. He does not see the problem. And he does not see the solutions. He still castigates those seeking action on climate change as wanting to destroy the economy. He does not see, as Sir Nicholas Stern, the Vatican and the Greens see, that the economy's health depends directly on the environment; that the economy must be our servant, not our master.

The Stern report throws the Howard government's failures into stark relief.

Peter Costello did not even identify climate change as a risk to the economy in his May budget. Amanda Vanstone refuses to accept that people displaced by climate change are refugees, and she will not consider the consequences of millions of people displaced by climate change.

Mr Howard, asleep so long on climate change, has now commissioned an inquiry into nuclear. But nuclear power will not save the world. We cannot even save it with solar, wind and wave power. The projected demand for energy as global population and economic growth soars this century, with a potential tripling in just the next four decades will overrun every reasonable plan unless energy demand is constrained.

That said, nuclear power might supply 5 percent of the world's demand in some decades. Energy efficiency can supply 30 percent now. Yet most commentators write about the 5 percent later, not the 30 percent now.

Well, we will know our prime minister is waking up when he commissions an inquiry into energy efficiency, when he stops being mesmerised by uranium.

However, the Australian people are awake to climate change and know that the Greens are best placed to handle it. I have with me today a Morgan poll of more than 11,000 voters. It shows that, when it comes to terrorism, 48.1 percent of people think the Coalition is the best manager. Congratulations, John Howard.

But, listen to this. The Morgan poll also shows that the exact same proportion, 48.1 percent of Australians, thinks the Greens are best-placed to handle climate change. Let me repeat that. 48.1 percent of Australian voters think that the Greens are the best managers to meet the threat of climate change.

That management will feature energy efficiency. Australia cannot achieve real emissions reductions without establishing a national energy efficiency target.

What is energy efficiency? Turning off the light. Putting sensors into spasmodically used places to turn lights, heaters, and hot water supplies off when people are not there. Delivering lower temperature water for showers. Heating water where it is used, not seven stories or 13 hotel units away. It is commonsense. The Greens have been advocating it since the seventies - since the Franklin Dam furore, at least.

On the supply side, we must price carbon through a national emissions trading scheme, a carbon tax, a feed-in law and a mandatory renewable energy target. The amount of money the government has spent on renewables is tiny compared with what the private sector would spend with the right market signal. Germany has introduced a feed-in law that has triggered a solar revolution. The European Union has an emissions trading system, nine American states have done the same. There is a carbon exchange in Chicago and in California Governor Schwarzenegger is putting solar power on a million roofs. He has also asked to join the Pan European Trading scheme.

The inconsistency in Australian government policy is mirrored in Labor's response. On the one hand it will ratify the Kyoto Protocol but on the other, it will not stop deforestation. Globally the destruction of forests produces more emissions than urban transport. But Labor backs the Howard government's plans for decades more destruction of Tasmania's ancient forests, which are also our largest carbon sinks, including Gunns destructive proposed pulp mill. The Greens would end the destruction of Australia's old growth forest, and native woodland clearance.

Labor is going to have to address other policy incongruities on climate change. Just look at Peter Beattie. He, as premier of the biggest coal exporting state in this, the biggest coal exporting country in the world, has rejected an emissions trading system. Mr Beattie is pouring a fortune into enhancing coal sales while simultaneously he has announced a string of bunkers from Cooktown to Bundaberg to shelter people from the rapidly growing risk of category 5 cyclones due to climate change. He says he's considering climate change, category 5 storm bunkers for Brisbane! If the Sunshine state's Peter Beattie cannot see the sun for the coal, will Kim Beazley?

The Greens will go to the 2007 elections with a costed action plan. The Greens want Australia to have, and the world must have, an 80% or 90% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. This nation should be the world leader in environmental technology, environmental business, environmental exports and wealth and job creation.

Back in 1997 I brought a bill into the Senate for a Sun Fund. This Fund was to come from one billion dollars of the government's \$3 billion diesel fuel rebate scheme. The bill proposed equipping rural Australia with renewable energy. Our Sun Fund would have injected hundreds of millions of dollars into rural and regional economies, and created 50,000 jobs in the bush. It was optional for farmers and cost neutral for taxpayers. Mr Howard, along with Labor, rejected it. He should adopt it now.

We will remove the GST from public transport. That would cut ticket prices by 10 percent across the board. Nick Minchin hates this idea, but let's raise the 5 percent tax on imported petrol-guzzling 4 wheel drives to 10 percent, to parity with other imported vehicles, and take the tax off petrol-sparing cars like hybrids. How stupid is it to give General Motors subsidies to import the Hummer and at the same time insist that the only electric car in Australia, the Reva, be crushed or deported?

The Greens advocate that Australia take up the Dutch budget model and inject one percent of spending on transport into bikeways and walkways. The \$1.1 billion fringe benefit tax given to companies for car fleets each year would cover that good option and leave plenty for more.

The Greens would also end the decades of starving funds from trains, trams, buses and ferries. Our ideal is free public transport. We would retrofit our cities to bring fast, clean, on-time trains, buses and trams to every populous precinct. If Tokyo and Toronto can do it, so can Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

Sir Nicholas Stern said this week that, "Climate change is the greatest market failure the world has ever seen." Our Prime Minister shows why.

Before John Howard came to power, Australia produced as many solar panels as Japan. Now Japan produces nearly half the world's solar panels and Australia produces less than one percent. That is because the Japanese government has both financed research and development, and priced carbon to drive investment in commercialisation.

The constant government refrain that we need to develop new technology is disingenuous. We already have the technology to achieve deep cuts in greenhouse gas emissions. What is desperately needed is a market to provide the incentive to commercialise existing technology. The Greens would end the drought of government funds to Australia's cutting-edge scientists in the field of renewable energy.

A specific example of the Howard government's retarding influence is in sliver cell technology. Drs Andrew Blakers and Klaus Weber at the Australian National University's Centre of Sustainable Energy Systems have stunned the industry with a simple but brilliant breakthrough. They slice the silicon wafers which convert sunshine into electricity and turn the slices side-on to the sun. This reduces the amount of expensive silicon needed by 90 percent. The sliver cell technology is more efficient and it cuts costs by 75 percent.

Yet this global breakthrough has been defunded by John Howard and strangled by the lack of a feed in law and decent Mandatory Renewable Energy target.

Dr Blakers told the Canberra Times' Rosslyn Beeby last month that, "Australia used to be the world leader - not a world leader but the world leader - in solar technology," "Now we've lost that position of advantage because of the Federal Government's lack of interest in supporting a solar energy industry," he said. "Germany is where the photovoltaic industry is centring itself, and despite having the skills and the technology, Australia is going to be relegated to the sidelines in the future."

"We will become clients of our own technology, importing back expertise we lost."

Origin Energy which acquired the base patent for sliver cell technology from the ANU and spent \$30 million on a pilot manufacturing plant in South Australia needs \$100 million to upscale to commercial manufacture.

While the Howard Government is well capable of spending that amount on coal or on self-promoting public relations campaigns, Origin may go overseas. So it looks like we'll be buying our own world's best solar sliver cells from Beijing or Berlin. The Greens would ensure funding of this great product, here in Australia.

At least four other world-class solar technologies have been lost off-shore to clued-in overseas investors. Unlike Howard, they were keenly aware of the commercial, if not their planet-saving potential.

Sydney University's evacuated collector for solar water heaters, an energy collector consisting of rows of parallel transparent glass tubes, has gone to China.

A photovoltaic technology to reduce heat loss and overheating of office building with large glass areas, also invented at Sydney University, is now being developed in Japan.

Crystalline silicon on glass, a process invented by the University of New South Wales, uses laser technology and a thin layer of silicon deposited on the textured surface of a glass sheet to trap light and extract solar energy. It's gone to Germany.

Buried contact solar cells, which are cheaper and more efficient than screen-printed solar cells, went to Spain for commercial development and have since been licensed to most of the world's largest commercial solarcell manufacturers.

After 28 years in the industry, Dr Blakers from ANU has a stunningly cheap idea for politicians to take up.

"In Europe," he says "most large renewable energy research institutes have budgets of around \$40 million."

If Australia invested in creating three or four such institutes, each with a budget of around \$40 million, we would become a renewable-energy superpower.

And that is where the Greens come in. We will catapult Australia to a world-renewable energy superpower, by putting in place the financial and regulatory mechanisms that will drive investment into such ready-to-go proposals from people who know this industry best, rather than government subsidies continuing to pour into tollways, coal companies, pulp mills and tax cuts for executives.

Beyond climate change and besides rising interest rates, there are other issues stalking the Howard government's future.

In 2003 I challenged President Bush here in our Parliament, to end the incarceration, after torture but without trial, of Australian David Hicks at Guantanamo Bay. Four unforgivable years later, the Prime Minister should ring the President and have Hicks returned to Australia's justice system immediately.

Australia's involvement in the Iraq war is entirely John Howard's mistake. He ignored hundreds of thousands of his fellow citizens who turned out across the nation in early 2003 calling for Australia, like Canada and New Zealand, to stay out of this reckless and bloody Bush administration venture. He also ignored the parliament of the land. Instead, he consulted George W. Bush who dubbed Mr Howard his "sheriff", and sent our defence personal to Iraq. Now reliable estimates put the Iraqi death toll above

600,000. It is heading for one million. More than 3,000 coalition soldiers are dead. The mood in this country has swung strongly against this horrible war. Most Australians want us out. Most Americans want us out.

Most Iraqis want us out. But George W. Bush and John Howard, intolerant of commonsense, are not listening.

The Greens have led in the political arena, consistently, and sometimes alone, calling for the return home from Iraq of our Australian defence force personnel. I repeat that call today.

We have also taken a very strong stand in defence of the Australian workers. We join Kim Beazley in committing to overturning the unfair industrial relations act and returning a fair go in the workplace for the men and women who work in and for Australia.

But voters need to know it will take more than a Labor government to achieve fair wages and conditions. The Industrial Relations Act will remain if Labor wins government but the Coalition retains its Senate majority. It is essential the Greens win back the balance of power in the Senate.

Australians have more material wealth now than ever before but we are no happier because we live on the treadmill of the market economy. We have no time. We work harder, longer hours over seven days a week and it has been made worse by the Howard government's industrial relations legislation. There is less and less family time. Weekends have gone.

Australians spend hours in traffic, breathing fumes. 50 percent of us are overweight or obese. We work harder to earn more to buy more things to keep up with the latest trends but we don't have enough time to spend with our children and our spouses or our friends. Our old people are too often lonely and our children are too often at risk. There is not enough time for recreation, school sport, visiting friends, socialising, thinking, reading for pleasure, staying healthy, being actively involved in the civic life of our communities. Or just enjoying the day.

How can you describe a government that has put its people on a treadmill and devised ways to keep families from spending time with each other as having family values?

Reversing the impact of the government's IR laws means more than the better workplaces. It will be an important step towards restoring the time together which is essential for happy families.

Even without balance of power, we Greens have won significant gains for Australia through our Senate power base. These gains include:

- a) the roll-out of non-sniffable petrol to end the scourge of petrol sniffing which has been killing or maiming hundreds of young Aboriginal citizens in central Australia.
- b) Christine Milne initiated the Senate inquiry into Australia's future oil supply which is due to hand down its report soon.

- c) Christine Milne and Rachel Siewert initiated the Senate inquiry into our national water policy.
- d) a core role in insisting that East Timor, the poorest nation in Southeast Asia, got a fairer deal for its Timor Sea oil and gas revenues.
- e) Rachel Siewert's questioning of the Wheat Export Authority which helped trigger the Cole Inquiry into alleged Wheat Board kickbacks for Saddam Hussein.
- f) amending legislation, so far blocked by the government, to ban junk food advertising aimed at kids, as obesity rates soar in Australia.
- g) Kerry Nettle's work showing how the private health insurance rebate overwhelmingly benefits wealthy people in Liberal electorates.
- h) the legal advice from Melbourne Senior Counsel Brian Walters which forced the government to retreat from privatising the Snowy Hydro Scheme.

The Greens were the only party to have the courage to oppose the tax cuts for the rich this year. In the Senate, Christine Milne argued that we need to use the profits from the good times to adapt to climate change and oil depletion. But the Liberal and Labor parties gave that \$37 billion away.

The Greens would also do much more to help farmers adapt to a new future rather than staring at cracked earth with no hope but a bandaid drought relief and a Prime Minister in an Akubra praying for rain. Climate change presents opportunities for new endeavours in rural Australia.

Western Australia is showing one way by developing alternative fuels for income and jobs by planting of deep rooted perennials which addresses climate change, salinity, and biodiversity loss.

We want to help grow more of our own food as a nation and as a community, and become more self reliant. We especially back organic food - healthy, drought-resistant, family-farm organic food. Who does not want to support our own farmers and rural communities? Yet, Free Trade Agreements, like the US Australia Free Trade Agreement, end up exemplifying market failure.

And isn't it time global air and sea transport paid properly for its massive cost in terms of climate change?

It makes no sense to effectively subsidize imported orange juice from Brazil while farmers in the Riverina feed their oranges to cattle.

Speaking of biodiversity loss, ANZ wants to become carbon neutral as a company, whilst preparing to finance logging of Tasmania's old growth forests, by financially backing Gunns pulp mill. ANZ does not see the interconnectedness of its own practice and what it finances. Besides destroying the forest carbon banks, studies at Melbourne University show that such logging will increase the chance of extinction of Tasmania's giant wedge-tailed eagle to 99 percent in the pulp mill logging zone. What about that, ANZ?

The same with the Managed Investment schemes for plantations touted to be a solution to climate change when conversion of native forest to monocultures has dire consequences for carbon emissions, water availability and biodiversity loss. The Greens would stop this ecologically destructive market intervention immediately.

Water is another example of market failure. Commonsense says that cotton and rice irrigation are not a good idea on the world's driest continent. In August I visited the Macquarie Marshes north of Dubbo. Here is one of the world's great bird breeding wetlands. Let me cite the case of one particularly beautiful bird. For centuries the Marshes have hosted tens of thousands of nesting white egrets each year. Not any more. Due to the Macquarie River being sopped up by largely foreign-owned cotton farms upstream, not one white egret chick has survived since the turn of the century. In 2002, a trickle of water did get down to a bit of the marshes.

The excited egrets laid eggs. But by the time the chicks fledged, that is, got feathers, the trickle had dried up. When the fledgling egrets launched out of their nests on to the hard, barren earth, they died. You know, these birds live eleven years. So, another five years and the last of the breeding thousands of white egrets will be dead in the Macquarie Marshes.

Imagine that! Imagine too, the plight of the farmers in the Macquarie Marshes. For them, no water means no income. Due to the foreign cotton combines upstream, these good Australian family farms have also landed on parched earth, their next generation drained of hope.

Governments have made monumental miscalculations across the whole of the Murray-Darling basin and tough decisions are needed to unmake those mistakes. The current Howard-enhanced drought across much of Australian is now the colour of our future. Limiting the damage to our productive farmlands requires, in a world fast approaching a global food deficit, the degree of attention and commitment John Howard has given terrorism. We are calling on him to set up a national climate change centre.

The Greens would also put three and a half thousand gigalitres of water into the Murray Darling (\$3 billion) and a good start would be to ensure Cubby Station gave back its water.

Before this summer's predicted holocaust, a start should be made on upgrading the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre in Melbourne to an International Bushfire Institute.

This major bushfire study and control centre would co-ordinate bushfire emergencies, drawing on all the state, territory, local and international information and aid available. It would look at better fire-proofing Australian and New Zealand farmlands and cities, minimizing the impact of fires on biodiversity and - this is so important - devising an action plan to minimize the deadly work of arsonists. We have to detect and more readily apprehend arsonists before they set neighbourhoods alight. That prevention will involve a more vigilant public and a review of laws, treatment and penalties.

Earlier this year I canoed down Queensland's Mary River with local residents. Farmlands and rare species are threatened by the Labor government's Traveston dam proposal. The dam is simply bad policy when real water efficiency, diverting

Brisbane's downpipes into tanks, and recycling current supplies in South East Queensland is a river-saving option.

One of the Mary River's species is the Queensland lungfish, facing extinction after millions of years on the planet. It has survived all challenges - that is, until the present Labor Party arrived.

Professor Jean Joss, the world expert in lungfish at Macquarie University says that this creature explains how vertebrates came from the sea and colonised the continents. The lungfish is our distant ancestor. It gave us our backbone. Maybe that is why so many politicians don't care - they haven't inherited the feature.

Back in the Murray-Darling basin, the Greens want Parliament House to show a national lead in energy and water efficiency. Yet Capitol Hill's presiding officers refuse to even install water-saving dual-flush toilets. Unless the Prime Minister has secretly had one fitted in his own suite, not even he has a dual-flush, water saving loo.

Here's a few other things I would advise John Howard might think about:

- a) Bring spending on Aboriginal health up to the same level as the rest of us - after all, First Australians are dying 20 years to soon.
- b) Give that great Nobel Peace Laureate and world-loved man of compassion, the Dalai Lama of Tibet, a parliamentary reception when he comes back to Australia next June.
- c) Give every Australian a free tertiary education. Abolish HECS. And, go on, tell the Elect Vessel of the Exclusive Brethren sect, who lives in your electorate of Bennelong, to let Brethren kids go to university too. You know him. Tell him that you won't tolerate repression of any Aussie family to the point where their kids are banned from uni.
- d) Visit the Burrup. See the rock art for yourself, and save it.
- e) Call up Greenpeace. Get them to come back and re-erect those free solar panels on your roof at Kirribilli - tell them that this time you won't rip them down. They won't mind. We all make mistakes.

Speaking of which, I was elected to this Parliament in 1996, the same year as John Howard was elected Prime Minister. I gave my maiden speech in the Senate at the exact same hour as Pauline Hanson gave hers in the House of Representatives.

Ten years later, may I say, humbly, that it is a pity for Australia that John Howard took her direction, not mine. We four Greens Senators are a robust team working so well together. We have just endorsed party room rules which will help ensure good internal governance as our team increases in Parliament in the coming years. These rules are set for the day we have 40 members in our party room in Canberra, not just four.

Let me read from the epilogue of our rules, because you won't find this in the other parties' standing orders. Here it is:

"Our electoral obligation is to the voters of our age, but let us keep future generations equally in mind, for we are also the custodians of their world."

Our aim is to put a smile on the faces of our grandchildren. And when, in our mind's eye, we see those grandchildren smiling back, we all start smiling too. That's the Australia, we Greens are working for.