

OPINION SPORT

'Tis the season for talkback radio to be swamped by two kinds of callers: angry Richmond fans and people with conspiracy theories about tankers — teams that throw games for better draft picks.

CHAS LICCIARDELLO **SPORT 7**

COMMENT & DEBATE



Australia, the environmental vandal, is how the world sees us

ON FEBRUARY 13, Switzerland experienced something akin to a minor revolution — a rare occurrence in that rather conservative country. *Echo der Zeit*, Swiss national radio's respected current affairs magazine, broke with a tradition. Instead of starting the program with the opening jingle familiar to generations of listeners, 1 million Swiss heard Kevin Rudd saying "Sorry" to the members of the stolen generations. "How proud the Aussies must be of their new PM," one listener said.

He has had a good run overseas, Kevin Rudd. Many foreign media celebrated the new man in Canberra. That should not surprise: John Howard and Alexander Downer were hardly the most popular visitors overseas, except of course at black-tie din-



URS WALTERLIN

Cuddly koalas do not hide our record pollution and resource wasting.

ners organised by conservative American think tanks. Many foreign politicians and analysts saw them as Washington's lapdogs, as willing participants in one of history's biggest foreign policy blunders, and as opportunistic populists when measured on issues such as the

Pacific Solution, the AWB scandal and the Haneef debacle.

In contrast, Kevin07 seemed to press all the right buttons: ratifying Kyoto hours after being sworn in; going to China to tell the apparatchiks in Beijing in their own language that despite his affection for their country he would always put Australia's interests first; and the "sorry", which was seen as a historic step away from the paternalistic policies of the Howard government. All this earned Rudd quick recognition and respect in the rest of the world.

No surprise then that the illustrious German broadsheet *Die Zeit* used a rare editorial on Australia to declare Kevin Rudd and the Labor Party to be the "role model Down Under" for other, less successful social democratic parties.

But that is history. While

Kevin07 stood in the foreign media as a figure glossier than the Oscar statuette in Hollywood, Kevin08 seems to lose his sparkle faster than a copper penny in a bath of hydrochloric acid. The "big picture man" with a truly global perspective — a rare attribute in Australian politics — seemed to let himself get seriously bogged down by comparative banalities.

His involvement in the internationally reported witch-hunt of artist Bill Henson being one example, the ludicrous debate about petrol prices another. But it was the budget decision to means-test the solar power program that sent a wave of disbelief through the ranks of foreign observers. After then opposition leader Rudd's last year's climate summit, most analysts had expected that as prime minister Rudd would

begin a renewable energy revolution. It was hoped he would put alternative power on top of the agenda, after the previous government had allowed Australian solar technology and thousands of associated jobs to go overseas.

4 Australia as the world's top coal exporter will be in the firing line. 7

Today's green paper will be analysed meticulously. Since Rudd's spectacular trip to Bali last year, the global spotlight is well and truly on Australia's environmental performance. And it does not look good for this country's image, as a browse through some overseas publications shows.

Not only the climate issue,

but scandals such as the controversy about the planned pulp mill in Tasmania and the deliberate destruction of the Burrup rock art in Western Australia are major news. At a time of rapidly increasing awareness for environmental matters worldwide, Australia — which is per capita one of the worst environmental polluters and a record annihilator of biodiversity — will not for much longer be able to hide behind sweet pictures of kangaroos bounding off into the sunset.

When the inevitable hunt for scapegoats begins, Australia as the world's top coal exporter will be in the firing line. This country could be perceived as not only contributing to, but profiting from, the destruction of the global environment.

Under the climate change sceptic John Howard, a decade

of opportunities to develop awareness and maturity in the debate on climate change was wasted for the sake of ideology. Rudd faces the monumental task of having to fundamentally change the mindset of large proportions of a population addicted to the ferocious consumption and wasting of resources.

He will not only have to fight a swerving coalition, powerful industries and some unions, but that group of the Australian media that is well used to excusing the inexcusable. However, Australia will eventually have to make the hard decisions and large investments in order to catch up with the increasing number of countries in which alternative energy generation, efficient public transport, strict recycling and the protection of natural resources are already the

norm — and offer massive new commercial opportunities.

Even if one does not subscribe to the view that the fight against global warming is a moral duty, at least it makes economic sense, if the boom in sustainable investment products is any guide. Soon, not only companies will be rated according to their environmental performance, but whole countries. Australia, eternally dependent on foreign investment, tourists and qualified workers, simply cannot afford to become an environmental outcast.

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