

Native Vegetation Laws, Greenhouse Gas Abatement and Climate Change Measures¹

The vegetation focus

1. There is a focus within government on vegetation generally. However land represents only about 30% of the Earth, the 70% balance represents the oceans. This point seems to have been lost in the environmental debate and funding direction, and I consider that considerably more emphasis needs to be planned into the cleanliness of the oceans. One good example is that Pacific Ocean rubbish vortex which needs to be rectified.

The ETS

2. I believe that the ETS represents a tax, which effectively would tax the air we breathe, without achieving any environmental outcomes. I also consider that the implementation of an ETS would place Australia in a non-competitive international position, and would damage our current standard of living, effectively driving this country and its people into a lower standard of living with rising prices of essential goods and services such as electricity (which I understand has already commenced in anticipation) and food. In addition, the ETS will burgeon the already large bureaucracy in Australia.

Native vegetation restrictions and implications

3. Native vegetation on private land cannot just be locked up because of government policy. This is against proprietary rights principles, the owner effectively becoming a park ranger over de facto national park and without due and proper payment. The value of the asset substantially reduces with the inability to use and enjoy the land.
4. If a government wants to take over privately owned land, then I believe that the government needs to pay compensation at a level akin to damages that would be received in a relevant successful court action. An example is the market value of the land, and the loss of opportunity of future earning potential from the land that is yet untapped (being loss of opportunity to make profit from the land in the future, discounted to present value), and the inability to continue making current profits (discounted to present value).
5. Alternatively if the government and the landowner want and agree to the land owner remaining in ownership, then an agreement could be made. For example, the government could agree to lease part of the private land in question in return for paying the market value of the leasehold interest (which would also include the opportunity cost for not being able to develop that part of the land for the lease period), as well as including compensation for the owner to manage that portion of the land so leased in accordance with the agreement reached.
6. The other difficulty is that by locking up the land, Australia will increasingly become a net importer of food. Such agricultural opportunities in Australia make this concept scandalous and I believe this issue needs to be given much more attention than it is presently receiving.

¹ For the purpose of responding to this inquiry it is assumed the scientific interpretation, models, forecasts and assumptions are correct.

The incentives approach

7. Instead of the ETS, financial incentives could be put in place to encourage an individual to undertake to do or not to do certain things. Further, if a landowner decides not to avail themselves of the government's financial incentives, then that landowner is able to maintain their status quo without punishment or penalty. This seems to be the thrust of the Opposition's policy and particularly I support bio-sequestration incentives which I believe improves the soil's productivity.

Other matters that should be considered regarding proposed legislation and policy

8. Care needs to be taken to mitigate risk of fire, so if strips of designated land are to be retained for vegetation, fire breaks need to be included to prevent fatalities of life and fauna as has happened in Victoria, and also to protect the environment from itself. This must also apply to existing national parks. (In Victoria, as a result of the Royal Commission investigating the 2009 fires, the government has introduced vegetation removal exemptions in the planning schemes regarding fuel breaks and the like, although I consider much more could be done in this area.)
9. In Victoria there is no recognition that making people's lives safe also makes the animals and plants safe. Humanity can enjoy a high standard of living safely whilst enjoying a safe environment. I believe that the physical safety of people and the natural environment has been frustrated as a result of purported 'green' policy, two examples being preventable fires and preventable floods.
10. People have the right to be able to fully enjoy and use their private property.
11. In addition, the lack of public transport infrastructure is problematic and the benefits that would flow if it was substantially improved have been ignored. If public transport was expanded, was reliable, clean and could be used at a reasonable cost or for free, I believe that this would be a true incentive for people to choose not to use vehicular transport. This would also increase efficiency and productivity and improve environmental outcomes.
12. The Victorian government's water policy is to construct a desalination plant in order to maintain rivers and wetland perceived conditions, rather than new dams. Desalination plants are much more energy intensive compared to dams, which also costs three times more and produces only one third of water compared to dams. Desalination plants will not only increase the cost of water, but also reduce the agricultural food bowl of Victoria, reducing the standard of living on both counts. I believe this policy has failed to take into account that dams allows the control of water flows in flooding and in drought, and which reduces flood damage and drought damage to the people and to the environment. If the Victorian government recognise that it should act consistently with its own and its federal government counterpart policy of reducing the 'carbon footprint', then it would have resulted in the finding that desalination plants are not the answer. The Victorian government has already admitted that they will be purchasing renewable energy credits to offset the carbon emissions caused as a result of the desalination plant. They have acted inconsistent with federal government policy to reduce emissions, and have not taken on board other lower emitting options that also have much more environmental benefits than their desalination plant.

In addition, the by-product of seawater concentrate is to be re-introduced into the sea, which the Victorian government has stated will return to normal seawater salinity and

temperature around 100 metres from the discharge point based on modelling. Modelling is open to error, and is based on assumptions, and I am concerned for the marine life and flora in the vicinity of the desalination plant.

Policy attitudes and outlook

13. There seems to be a notion that farmers cannot be trusted to manage their land. However farmers have been managing their land successfully for hundreds of years, who improve their practices as knowledge evolves. It is in farmers' interest to optimise the soil to maximise its productive output. This of course requires carrying out tasks such as clearing, vegetating areas susceptible to erosion if applicable, and maintaining trees to act as shade for animals if applicable. The farmer and the land are in a symbiotic relationship.
14. It seems that there is a real push to increase the population, and herd people into cities within high rise building tenements, and not provide the needed services to maintain our standard of living such as the water supply needed for corresponding population increases, and farms left to become overgrown (so most food will be imported), whilst effectively making the rest of Victoria a national park. This seems to be a policy introduced over the last twenty years in Victoria.
15. Indeed it seems the underlying theme of this push is that colonisation of Victoria is regrettable, with pre-colonisation being an era looked upon with sentimentality of the vegetative state of Victoria.
16. Over 30% of Victoria has already been classified as national park, reserve or state forest, in addition to the already substantial holdings of Crown land. I consider that this is more than enough and which achieves the 'balance' between humanity and vegetation cover. Therefore the myriad of laws, regulations and policy that have been put in place to convert private landholdings into de facto national parks is untenable. I strongly recommend the cessation of making private property de facto national parks by stealth and paying due and proper compensation or provide financial incentives instead.