

Cape York Aborigines go into a divided wilderness

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Last weekend I told readers about my appearance before the Senate committee on the constitutional and legal affairs inquiry into Tony Abbott's private member's bill.

The bill seeks to override Queensland's Wild Rivers laws regulating development and to require the Bligh government to negotiate agreements with Aboriginal landowners before making declarations that affect their ability to manage and use their land as they have for the past 200 years and for thousands of years beforehand.

The committee is chaired by Trish Crossin, Labor senator from the Northern Territory. I got the distinct impression that she was hostile to our position. Her line of questioning to me and other witnesses appearing before the inquiry were a facsimile of the spin routinely put by the Bligh government and by the real organ grinder behind Wild Rivers, the Wilderness Society.

For instance, Crossin tried to raise the spectre of Aboriginal groups upstream having a different position on whether to make agreements about river management and protection from groups downstream.

This is a talking point generated by the Wilderness Society. You know the blackfellas, they're too fractious, they never agree with one another and requiring the state government to make agreements with them would be a recipe for stalemate.

I pointed out to Crossin that the business of getting adjacent landowners to come to a common agreement had its challenges, whether or not Aboriginal landowners were involved. I pointed out that the vast areas around Weipa -- bauxite mining leases held by Rio Tinto and proposed to be given to Chinese government company Chalco -- were exempted from Wild Rivers laws precisely because the Queensland government would never have obtained Rio Tinto's agreement. Rio would never agree, so its area gets exempted from Wild Rivers.

Meanwhile, the state imposes Wild Rivers on the blackfellas. Which of the two kinds of landowners is actually doing anything that might affect the environmental health of rivers on western Cape York?

Moreover, I pointed out to Crossin that there were numerous examples of multi-tribal agreements registered under the Native Title Act. The creation of the McIlwraith Range national park in central Cape York involved four tribes getting together and making a common agreement with the Queensland government.

In anticipation of a proposed pipeline to transport natural gas from Papua New Guinea to the Australian mainland, all the tribes of Cape York Peninsula entered into a common agreement under the Native Title Act to create the necessary easement over almost 1000km.

The notion that Aboriginal groups are too divided is an argument that seeks to justify why they should not be given the right to make agreements whenever governments want to deal with their land.

Decades ago it used to be the mining industry that made this argument. The long battles of Australia's mining lobbies against Aboriginal land rights throughout the 1970s and the 80s, saw mining companies using a range of divide and rule strategies.

They caused division within tribes by peeling off members with emoluments. They sponsored the creation of breakaway land council movements that challenged the role of indigenous representative bodies. The history of the Northern and Central land councils in the Territory in the past three decades is full of exchanges showing the divisive tactics of mining companies opposed to the idea that honourable agreements should be made with Aboriginal landowners before doing anything on their land.

Many of these divisions that resulted from these externally induced arguments still exist today and have never healed. The social and cultural costs of unconscionable behaviour by some mining companies have been horrendous.

Crossin should ask her Labor parliamentary colleague from the Territory, Indigenous Health Minister Warren Snowdon, for a history lesson.

If she reflected on this history she would see parallels between how the miners behaved in the 70s and 80s, and how the extreme end of the environmental movement, led by the Wilderness Society, now conducts itself. It is no longer the Minerals Council or Rio Tinto that assumes division within Aboriginal communities, it is some environmentalists. And they use the same tactics as the mining companies did.

Witness the past vilification of the Kimberley Land Council and its director Wayne Bergmann, for failing to do what the extreme environmentalists and their celebrity fellow travellers from Sydney and Melbourne said was the right and proper thing for real blackfellas to do: say no to development.

According to these hypocrites posturing on the ramparts of their affluent morality, Aboriginal land rights is only a power to say no, never a power to say yes.

Ironically, today the resource companies are completely politically correct while the extreme environmentalists are showing themselves to be the rednecks.

The resource companies have learned that they still get their way by not engaging in the apoplectic tactics of Hugh Morgan's heyday. After all, the state Labor governments that are prepared to cede a degree of control over Aboriginal land to the Wilderness Society for green votes at elections still deliver for the resource companies. It is the powerless who lose.

These forces don't really collide, they collude.

That is how you get Anna Bligh parading her environmental credentials over rivers on Cape York Peninsula while tripping over herself in the rush to develop \$60 billion worth of new coalmines in western Queensland. Who has the real green credential? The hypocrisy is staggering.

I would not mind so much being overridden by extreme environmentalists if they imposed the same costs on everyone, including their own families and communities. I would not mind if their proposals affected the rich and powerful equally as the weak and poverty stricken.

But this is not what happens. Being part of the broader society, their families never pay the costs. They continue to enjoy the prosperity of the modern Australian economy, which is underwritten among other things by coalmining in Queensland.

Where do the celebrities who get paid for their entertainment services think the money that underpins their privileged lives comes from? Where does the green bureaucrat working in the government agency that devises Wild River laws think the money that the government collects comes from?

It comes from dirty, disgusting mining. Dirty, disgusting agriculture. Dirty, disgusting industry.

The \$50 we pay to see the performance of one of these (invariably mediocre) celebrities slurring Bergmann, where do they think it comes from?

The fact is Bergmann and other Aboriginal leaders have to take responsibility both for environmental protection and economic development. For land rights and welfare reform.

Just because mainstream Australia wants us to take a stand on only one side of an argument, doesn't mean we must yield. We would abdicate our responsibility to our people if we did so. The greens may not like us to say this, but we need sustainable development. Resource developers may not like us to say this, but if Aboriginal groups do not want development in certain places, then we insist on the right to say no.

While Aboriginal leaders such as Bergmann and I have to insist on a balance between environmental management and development, captured in the principle of sustainable development, our opponents in the Wilderness Society can afford to take what I see as an irresponsible, extreme position.

We blackfellas have to realise that, in their eyes, the moral ideal of wilderness is more important than our human rights.

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