

FOREIGN POLICY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Address by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Gareth Evans, to the Queensland Branch of the Australian Institute of International Affairs, Brisbane, 14 March 1990.

The curriculum of foreign policy is often revised and updated, but it is rare for a major new subject to be added to it. Today is such a time as the environment moves towards the top of the international agenda.

Diplomacy is familiar with and well equipped to address issues such as changes to the strategic balance, shifts in trading fortunes, or internal upheavals in neighbouring regions. But, until very recently, it has given little attention to the environment as a matter of international concern. For the most part this relative neglect has reflected the priorities of the international community. From the 1970s, environmental protection became an important part of the domestic political programs of several nations - particularly western developed nations - but it was not perceived as having an urgent international dimension. There were other issues - non-alignment, a new international economic order, disarmament, and decolonisation - which seemed a higher priority. The environment was generally regarded as a domestic issue or, at the most, a worthwhile but minor aspect of international cooperation.

The 1980s saw a significant shift in both perceptions and priorities. In Europe and North America, ecological problems like acid rain served to highlight the trans-national aspects of environmental threats. The scientific evidence on trends like global warming began to accumulate. The push of the financial markets and communications technologies were drawing all countries - developed and developing alike - closer together, and, making them more aware of their common interests and inescapable links. And particularly in western developed countries an active and articulate Green movement was gaining strength and demanding that environmental protection be built into national and international strategies. By 1987 the Brundtland Commission on Environment and Development - with a membership drawn from across the regional, economic and political spectrum - captured both the direction and driving rationale of this new trend with its seminal Report on "Our Common Future".

The Brundtland Report signalled that environmental issues were on the global agenda to stay, and since then hardly an international meeting has been convened which has not repeatedly underlined the urgency of common action to save our common future. In less than a decade protection of the global environment has emerged as one of the most

pressing issues facing the world. The greenhouse effect, the ozone hole, the future of tropical rainforests, the protection of Antarctica, the sustainable development of fishing resources - all this and more has become part of the established lexicon of international diplomacy. An increasing number of nations now recognise that international cooperation on the environment warrants at least as much attention and effort as other endeavours - like arms control and disarmament - directed at maintaining global security.

THE ENVIRONMENT AND GOOD INTERNATIONAL CITIZENSHIP

In all of this Australia has sought to be an active and constructive participant, and today I wish to elaborate on this role and the place that the environment occupies in Australian foreign policy.

I think it worth emphasising at the outset that the approach we take to international environmental issues is not one pursued in isolation. It is an integral part of

the broader foreign policy interest we have in being - and being seen to be - a good international citizen. I have noted on several occasions that concept of good international citizenship is not the foreign policy equivalent of boy scout good deeds. It is the logical consequence of Australia's place in a world where increasing interdependence makes global cooperation not some idealistic indulgence, but a pressing necessity.

Because we recognise the interdependence of the world and because we need to have a say in how we are to solve global problems, we have placed, and will continue to place, a considerable emphasis in our foreign policy on multilateral diplomacy. This is particularly important at this time of extraordinary fluidity in international relations, which does create rather more opportunities for successful multilateral cooperation in areas such as the environment than have previously existed. In particular, here as elsewhere, the end of East-West confrontation has removed one significant potential obstacle to effective international cooperation.

There is no more clear cut example of global interdependence than the global environment. We cannot erect national fences to insulate us from the threats of environmental degradation which are global in scope. We cannot legislate to keep out of our national territories gases that destroy the ozone layer or upset the finely tuned rhythms of nature.

For Australia, the imperative to help resolve global and regional environmental problems goes well beyond the protection of our own national environment. Environmental problems, if unchecked, could threaten our security. They could weaken our economic infrastructure and trade prospects. Climate change, for example, has potential implications for our energy exports, especially coal, and for our agricultural productivity. The

increased costs incurred by some industries through environmental taxes and regulations may result in pressure on governments to protect these industries through trade restrictions, with flow-on effects for Australia's multilateral trading interests. These are all potential costs which we need to keep under close review.

We must also recognise that, on the other side of the ledger, greater international sensitivity to the causes of climate change could open up new trade opportunities for Australia in such areas as organically grown foodstuffs, alternative power sources and anti-pollution technologies. But much more importantly, the potential economic, social and security costs of not acting to avert environmental threats are massive.

Even if it were possible for the Australian continent itself to be insulated from environmental degradation, we would still face grave consequences from environmental threats in our region and beyond. A rise in sea levels, to take just one example, would have a devastating effect on the small island countries of the South Pacific. It would destabilise a region of primary strategic interest to Australia. It would create in its wake several hundred thousand "environmental refugees" who would look mainly to Australia for resettlement. It would place heavy additional demands on our aid program. In short, quite apart from the cost in human misery and dislocation to the island communities, which of course are ample reasons in themselves for our concern, it would jeopardise vital Australian national interests.

Sustainable Development. This chain of enlightened self-interest constitutes a compelling case for international cooperation. But it is not, in itself, a sufficient basis for effective action. Common interests only get us to the starting gate. If we are to finish the course we also need to address the many complex issues of equity, responsibility and development that lie at the heart of the issue. These are, in a sense, the conceptual hurdles which need to be overcome if common interests are to be translated into common action on specific environmental problems.

The most fundamental issue is the relationship between growth, development and environmental protection. The Brundtland Report dealt with this linkage within the framework of "sustainable development", which has since become the guiding principle of the economics of environmental protection. Sustainable development rejects the false dichotomy between economic growth and the protection of the environment. It is defined in the Brundtland Report, with characteristic elegance, as "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

It is important to understand that sustainable development is not about stopping economic growth. Its starting assumption is that it is possible to have economic development

without destroying the environment. Indeed it explicitly endorses the vital role that economic growth plays in helping to eradicate poverty and in reducing other problems such as debt and population pressures. Sustainable development is about development with minimal environmental destruction.

The Australian government endorses sustainable development as an approach which harmonises developmental and environmental objectives. Economy and ecology, as has been observed elsewhere, both come from the same Greek word - "oikos", meaning household management. They are two sides of the same coin of sustainable development. If they are pursued in an integrated way the result will be good long-term economic development which is also good environmental policy.

Assistance to developing countries. For sustainable development to become a reality, it must not only meet the test of balance but also, in the international context, of equity. There are going to be costs involved, quite possibly massive costs, in meeting the new environmental responsibilities that are going to be forced upon us if the world as we know it is to survive. Developing countries, trying as they are to cope with massive and long-standing existing social deprivation, cannot be expected to share this burden alone and unaided. The adjustment will have to be equitably shared by all of us, and in a way that recognises the inter-connection of this problem with all the other problems - of population growth, international trade, debt, and development - that press against so many developing countries.

The point here is not that concern for the environment is a luxury that poor countries cannot afford. Communities living on the margin of survivability are vitally concerned not to endanger their fragile productive base. It is true that individuals and nations in dire straits will seek to survive now at the expense of later survival: deforestation, for example, is widespread in the third world partly because poor people need firewood and forage for their animals. Even when they well understand the long term damage that their fuelwood and forage gathering activities cause, their short term needs are so urgent that they are prepared to risk the long term consequences. Nobody understands the harsh trade-offs between short term and long term conservation better than poor people in developing countries.

Yet these are precisely the sort of desperate trade-offs which it is in everyone's interest to avoid. If we in the developed nations wish, for self-interest as much as anything else, to encourage developing countries to pursue sustainable development and to thereby refrain from economic policies which contribute to environmental problems on a global scale, we must also be prepared to assist them to meet the short-term costs of such an approach.

This is a principle which Australia explicitly endorsed when I signed last March, on behalf of the Government, the Declaration of The Hague on the preservation of the atmosphere.

The Declaration recognises that industrialised countries have special obligations to assist developing

countries which will be negatively affected by changes in the atmosphere. Without an equitable transfer of resources and technology from the north to the south, a new environmental order has as much chance of success as the wasted campaign of the seventies for a new international economic order.

Here, as elsewhere in the area of good international citizenship, credibility is crucial to success. Not only must our domestic policies be consistent with our espousal of sustainable development, but in terms of international action we must also put our money where our mouth is.

Last July, as part of his comprehensive environment statement, the Prime Minister announced a new four year Environment Assistance Program within my portfolio costing \$20 million. To be administered by AIDAB, the main part of the program is to promote sustainable development. In implementing the program we are committed to ensuring that environmental issues are taken into account across all areas of Australia's aid program, and that our aid activities are subject to environmental screening procedures. In addition to our national efforts through bilateral and regional aid programs, we will continue to support wider international measures by organisations like the World Bank and the OECD to resolve environmental problems.

In this context, I am pleased to announce today that within the Environment Assistance Program I have approved a supplementary contribution of \$300,000 to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) above and beyond our current core contribution to UNEP of \$340,000. These funds will be directed towards training and coordination activities aimed at stimulating awareness of environmental issues at senior levels in a number of countries.

The package will include:

- \$100,000 as a one-off, unearmarked contribution;
- \$60,000 towards the Global Resource Information Database (GRID), a network which collates and processes regional environmental data;
- \$70,000 to assist South-East Asian and South Pacific nations to establish ozone protection measures; and
- \$70,000 for desertification control to deploy Australian expertise in the prevention of land degradation in South-East Asian countries.

Senate Committee Report on Environmental Impact of Development Assistance. In December last year the Senate Standing Committee on Environment, Recreation and the Arts issued an important report on the Environmental Impact of Development Assistance. The report recognised the crucial importance of taking proper and full account of environmental factors in framing assistance programs. Among the more significant recommendations were an increased program of aid for environmental projects, greater capability within AIDAB to handle environmental issues, better environmental screening and review of aid projects, greater involvement of NGO channels, and a strong environmental monitoring by Australian representatives of the programs of the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank.

I personally welcome this report and the guidance it gives in this important area. I am happy to say that many of its recommendations have already been adopted or were on the way to being so. Last year the Government approved an aid and environment policy and, in spite of budgetary stringencies, established a new Environment Assistance Program. This, as mentioned already, has included the establishment of a new program of assistance to NGOs for environment projects, and a doubling of our contributions to organisations such as SPREP and UNEP. From a program administration point of view, a special environment advising group has been established in AIDAB and strict procedures have been established to ensure the proper screening and assessment of projects for environmental effects. Australia is also proving to be an effective force in support of improved environmental practices at the World and Asian Development Banks. As economic circumstances permit, I would expect that we would be able to do more by way of direct environmental programs.

THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL AGENDA

Today, the distinction between national environmental issues and international concerns is increasingly blurred. Each impinges on the other. Just as we accord in our domestic policies a high priority to the protection of the Australian environment, so also in our foreign policy do we see the need for Australia to be at the forefront of international cooperation on the environment. That is why we took the pioneering step of appointing a very distinguished Australian - Sir Ninian Stephen - as Australia's Ambassador for the Environment.

There are many urgent issues on the agenda of the global environment in which Australia is taking a close interest. Depletion of the world's stock of natural resources; the loss of biological diversity, through such practices as clearing tropical rainforests; land degradation; desertification; the disposal of radioactive and other hazardous wastes; marine pollution; protection of freshwater resources - these are all international environmental problems to which Australia seeks to make a constructive contribution.

Global warming and climate change. Important as these problems are, however, they are necessarily of a different order of magnitude to the prospect of irreparable damage to our atmosphere - the canopy over our common home. The threat to our atmosphere, from what has been described as the "exhaling breath of industrialised civilisation", is the biggest ecological problem, the biggest challenge, faced in this or any other age.

We believe from all the scientific evidence accumulated to date that something is happening to upset the fragile and delicate atmospheric balance on which life depends. We know that, if that is happening, it has the potential fundamentally to impact on sea levels, agriculture, energy use, and indeed on the whole network of international economic and political relations.

We do not, of course, know at this stage, certainly not in the degree of detail and with the degree of confidence we would like, just what is happening and how far reaching the impact will be. In a number of respects the scientific jury is still out. But the problem is that by the time that the jury finally returns its verdict, the damage to our planet may be irreversible.

So the time to recognise the enormity of the problem, and to make a global response to it, is not in one or two decades time, when the scientific evidence may be complete and irrefutable: the time to act is now.

A good start has been made in the 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, in The Hague Declaration on the preservation of the atmosphere, in the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and in work being done by the OECD. But much more needs to be done. We need to promote universal adherence to those conventions already negotiated, and we need to develop new framework Conventions on the protection of the atmosphere and climate change. We need more research, including contributions from the private sector which also has a great deal at stake. We need to extend more practical assistance to countries to implement environment protection programs, and we need to strengthen the institutional authority of the United Nations to deal with environmental issues.

It is vital that the United Nations system rises to the challenge posed by the environmental threat, that it be constructively involved in the search for practical solutions to environmental problems. It is not enough for the UN to be a forum for statements of concern about the environment. It must also be able to demonstrate that it can do something; that it has the means of co-ordinating international efforts and of crafting agreements which directly address environmental problems. We hope that by the time of the 1992 Conference on Environment and Development global conventions on climate change and biological diversity will be ready for signature. Australia has offered to host negotiating sessions for both and we will be working hard to secure a practical and

equitable outcome.

We will also be seeking to inject a regional perspective into the discussions. The South Pacific, with its vast expanses of ocean, low lying atolls, dependence on agricultural exports and tourism, has a particular and obvious concern about climate change and rising sea levels.

Environmental issues more generally have in fact been a crucial element in the forging of regional cooperation in the South Pacific. Nuclear waste dumping has been a long-standing regional concern. Opposition to nuclear testing in the South Pacific has been driven largely by worries on the part of island countries that testing would contaminate their ocean environment. More recently, the region - with Australia playing a leading role - has been at the forefront of international efforts to ban driftnet fishing - so aptly called a "wall of death" because of its indiscriminate pillaging of marine living resources.

Australian policy has been responsive to all these concerns: through commitment to exchanging information and undertaking research and monitoring of climate changes; through our support for regional conventions like the South Pacific Regional Environment Protection Convention (SPREP); and through working to ensure that South Pacific interests are addressed in broader international forums.

Tropical rainforests. The South Pacific is an example of how environmental cooperation can serve to enhance Australia's bilateral relations. More structured bilateral arrangements - like the Australia-France Joint Working Group on Environmental Issues, and the Australia-USSR Environmental Protection Agreement signed during Prime Minister Ryzhkov's recent visit - can also be useful. There are, however, other instances where environmental issues have the potential to create difficulties in bilateral relations. The call by some sections of the conservation movement for a total ban on the importation of tropical rainforest timber is a case in point. The Australian Government shares the ecological concerns about the implications for biological diversity of rainforest clearing but we believe that the problem is best addressed by tackling the root causes of the destruction of the world's rainforests: population growth, poverty, pressure on land from agriculture and clearance for urban development.

A ban on imports of rainforest timbers could have serious implications for the livelihood of the communities in the exporting countries. It could lead to even worse deforestation as whole communities, faced with the loss of their livelihood, are forced into clearing larger areas of land for subsistence farming.

In our view the preferable approach, and the one which Australia is taking, is to work for an International Code of Practice in Forest Planning, Management and Logging. We are also committed to providing practical assistance to countries to develop long-term

programs to tackle deforestation, and to manage rainforests. I am referring to programs like the 180,000 kilometre ecological reserve in the Amazon Basin, the International Tropical Timber Organisation study into forest management in Sarawak, and the proposed Tropical Forestry Action Plan for PNG, to all of which Australia has made financial contributions.

Antarctica. It is perhaps inevitable that most of the international effort on environmental issues is threat driven: aimed at overcoming or containing problems which are already upon us or just around the corner. Yet, as in health care, prevention is equally if not more important than a cure. This is why Australia, together with France, has taken the lead - initially against the opposition of many important countries - to prevent once and for all any future mining and oil drilling in Antarctica and to turn this magnificent and fragile wilderness continent into an international "nature reserve - land of science".

For thirty years the Antarctic Treaty has protected the Antarctic environment, kept Antarctica free of political conflict, and preserved it as an area of scientific inquiry from which nuclear weapons and military activities are prohibited. Australia's Antarctica initiative, of which Prime Minister Hawke has been very much the driver, seeks to build on this unique achievement, within the framework of the Antarctic Treaty system. We recognise that on this issue we have set our sights high, and that the road ahead will be neither easy nor quick. But we have made a solid start and we are determined to see it through.

The progress of the Australia-France initiative - not least with the recent decision to, in effect, come aboard of New Zealand, the architect of the alternative approach to Antarctic resource development - is a telling lesson in what can be achieved on international environmental issues with good timing and strong political will. What was seen less than six months ago as hopelessly unrealistic, is today judged very much possible, and will, I am confident, eventually be seen as inevitable.

The Brundtland Report opens with an evocative description of the first time planet earth was viewed from space through human eyes. The image is one of a small and fragile ball dominated not by human activity and edifice but by a pattern of clouds, oceans, greenery and soils. It is an appropriate start to a Report on our common future because it captures so graphically the essential unity of the global environment and its dominating profile in the global household.

We live today in a world which, for the first time in human history, possesses the technology to both transform and destroy the habitat around us. We are not the first generation to face profound shifts in the rhythms of nature, but we are probably the first to endanger nature through our own actions. The environment, it is true, is neither static nor pristine. It copes daily with change. But there are limits to the interference it can brook,

and we are drawing dangerously close to that line. Unless we tether our economic aspirations to the values of sensible ecological protection, we will lose both.

We need today, in the words of the UN Secretary-General, an "earth patriotism as strong as any national patriotism to relieve the distress of our ailing and exhausted planet". It is a call to action which people around the world have shown they fully endorse; and it is a cause which stands as a fundamental objective, not just of this Government's domestic policy, but of Australian foreign policy.