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WHITHER THE GREEN MACHINE?

The No Dams campaign revealed the possibilities for a new politics

ARIEL KAY SALLEH

BY the summer of 1982, the Tasmanian Wilderness Society, with 12,000 members, a donated kitty of \$1m, and large numbers of volunteer workers in some 70 branches across the country, had become a force in Australian politics.

Was it the Franklin River or the No Dams movement itself that had gripped the public imagination? And now that the Hawke government and the High Court have resolved the crisis in south-west Tasmania, where does the movement go? A look at who joined the Franklin River campaign and the way the campaign was waged may provide an answer to these questions.

Who were the "greenies"? Like its counterparts overseas, the TWS was solidly middle class (something that led one Sydney Marxist to comment that the campaign had "no political theory"; at the blockade, another said: "We'll give TWS three months of this larking about, then bring the unions in and show them"). The political spectrum ranged from the afflu-

ent, often elderly, Liberal voter, to relatively apolitical Outward Bound types, naturalists, and technocrats from both government and private sectors; from idealists who might be pro-Labor or Democrat, to the "alternative" people, non-voting Buddhists among them. Few unionists joined the TWS, despite Tribune's valiant efforts to rally them. The mood was a blend of political anger, evangelistic resolve, Buddhist spirituality, and readiness to try to apply academic theory to a practical situation. For some people who joined the campaign, it was simply Vietnam all over again, though the moratorium was never as tightly orchestrated as this. Older supporters and Tasmanians say the Pedder campaign mobilised them; for younger activists the experience of Nightcap National Park was the model.

The TWS was motivated by the belief that both "capital" and "labour" were wrong about the possible benefits from the scheme. The island's geographical isolation has always meant extra operating costs for manufacturers there, and at the time the Franklin proposal was being floated the demand for industrial power in Tasmania was clearly falling. Comalco

had invested in a new smelter in Queensland, Temco was talking about a move off-shore to cheaper labour markets, APPM said it would not expand because it had failed to find the money, and Electrolytic Zinc was laying-off men right around Australia. The scheme would spend half-a-billion dollars, establish no more than 29 permanent jobs, and would have a power output of less than the now obsolete Pyrmont Station in Sydney. Logically, it was not a viable proposal.

Orthodox political economy is not very helpful in understanding the TWS, for the Franklin issue was at base cultural rather than economic. The sort of analysis that is called for here is one that uncovers why Western culture gives so much status and power to its technocrats when patently so much of what they do is irrational and destructive. After all, the Tasmanian government's commitment to development — the growth-at-any-price mentality — is characteristic of all would-be industrial societies, including socialist ones. To quote one Hydro-Electric Commission worker: "The job of just one engineer is worth all the Tasmanian rivers put together."

It is true that TWS could never have been so well organised if it had not been for its educated (often scientifically trained) members. Routine management of trek equipment, supplies, medical and legal aid, information retrieval, and public relations all rely on disciplined skill and judgement. But this instrumental mentality is also the basis of the cost-effective consciousness that produces the most destructive aspects of post-industrial society.

Although orthodox political economy is not very helpful in understanding the campaign, the criticism of the Sydney Marxist that the "TWS has no political theory" is relevant in that the result of TWS efforts, the High Court decision in favour of the World Heritage listing, was a legislative compromise. The whole exercise does appear to have been contained within the hardy "apolitical" tradition of small liberal reformism. The revivalist fervour subsided, rafts and wet gear were packed away, the boys went back to their lab stools, hippies headed north, and the status quo remained unthreatened. In this sense, TWS can lay no claim to radical politics, even if the constitutional balance between commonwealth and states was shaken up.

Yet what that criticism does not take into account is that political alliances and ideologies have become bankrupt. The uproar and inter-party confusion in Tasmania last year demonstrated this. (The recent struggle against aluminium manufacture in the Hunter Regions is a similar story, although unionists and small conservative wine-growers united then in one cause.) Old terms and criteria have little relevance to crises in post-industrial society. Structural unemployment, nuclear armament, and the sexual revolution are new political problems and the longer the hackneyed rhetoric of Left versus Right is tossed about, the longer the public will take to grasp this fact.

What is interesting about the groups that are emerging with the aims of protecting the ecology, or peace, or women's rights is that each in some way attempts to bridge the gap Western culture has made between "human society" on the one hand, and the "natural world" on the other: an arbitrary separation basic to Western economics, science, and government.

As global life-support systems are tampered with in the name of progress and break down irretrievably, survival becomes more urgent than equality – even if the problems that Marx pointed to remain to be solved. Whatever the origin of our culture's schizoid, exploitative, even violent attitude towards "nature", the environment and peace movements are at least making a start towards changing it and finding new frames of reference for political debate.

At the same time, the TWS movement did have internal contradictions and tensions – clues to the forces that will determine how it will develop in the future. There were those who saw the campaign as cultural revolution and those who saw it as straightforward single-issue politics without any wider historical meaning.

Environmentalists from alternative communities were aware of the broader social changes needed if their commitment was to be fully realised, but this awareness was not always shared by urban activists. This issue came up during the election campaign (formidably and highly successful waged by the TWS if the swings in Eden-Monaro, Phillip, and Calare are any indication). While most TWS members were bent on conventional electioneering tactics, a small group, mainly non-violent direct action (NVA) trainers, opposed lobbying, maintaining that the problem was violence to both the environment and human society and the cut-throat party mechanism was simply a perpetuation of this. As a feminist anarchist from the group said: "I want no truck with phallic politics, NVA is where the real revolution is going on as far as I am concerned."

As it was demonstrated in the campaign, non-violent direct action is a real alternative to conventional political behaviour. Originating with the Movement for a New Society in the USA, it is based on the integrity of each political individual and the insistence that coercion or force against any person by another is intolerable. Communication is seen as the new political act par excellence. To this end NVA involves affinity-group training using exercises in listening, role-play for empathy with difficult opponents, practice at reaching consensus, and at defusing aggression. This training had good effects both inside and outside the TWS, smoothing interaction and bonding individual activists into supportive affinity groups, which in turn acted as a brake on excitable members during public demonstrations.

NVA depends on personal openness at every stage, a far cry from the competitive and defensive "ego level" politics we are used to. It is in tune with both feminism and the Gandhi-inspired section of the peace movement. Bodies such as the HEC or the Tasmanian police force, for instance, are seen to be held together by their employees' motives and beliefs. The more these people are approached in a friendly and informative way, the more change there is that they may be talked into withdrawing support from their employers. Blockaders visited HEC workers camped up-river and had good relations with many of them. More than one policeman was known to wear a green No Dams sign



Philip Thornton

inside his helmet. Practical non-cooperation is the basis of non-violent resistance, for, like feminism, where "the personal is political", it is based on the assumption that people make history through their day-to-day choices, not just at the ballot box or picket line.

Despite the differences in the TWS about the right basis for action, the dilemmas of personal autonomy versus social control, grassroots participation versus hierarchy, were comfortably reconciled. True, a few at the blockade (dubbed by some as "freeloading hippies") saw the coordinators and trainers at Strachan base camp as a "tight-arsed bunch of bureaucrats". And more than a handful of green guerillas at Butlers Island camp up-river jumped ship to get away from NVA control. Some felt the TWS was too hierarchical when it came to choosing delegates for national meetings, but complaints like these are found in every organisation. What is important is that differences were aired and defused as soon as they came up, at the large meetings where campaign strategy was collectively decided each morning.

At a macro-political level, the TWS walked a tightrope over the central-



isation-decentralisation question. Environmental groups are usually local uprisings, but in south-west Tasmania the pattern was reversed. In this case a federal government promised to be the liberating force, while a local one was regressive. This contradicts Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* and the idea that only the scaling down of production and government to a regional level will bring appropriate resource use and self-management.

The constitutional drama of commonwealth-state relations over resource management is only just beginning for Australia, but it holds exciting possibilities. Is it perhaps the case that only larger, more outward looking legislatures have access to principles pertinent to the new political issues? (Compare the European Parliament and its influence on family law reform in Greece.) Or was federal action on this issue simply a cynical swoop for more power? Whatever the case, the TWS chose a pragmatic centralist stance — "one nation, one future" was the line. It seems the historical pendulum will swing against the decentralisation ideal for some time yet.

The Franklin River campaign has shown how history is made, intentionally and unintentionally, by people living at the intersection of conflicting social tenden-

cies. Some of their actions will have progressive outcomes in terms of their struggle, others will be regressive or unproductive. It is a sociologist's job, not so much to count heads, as to make these processes plain to people so their choices can be the product of reflection.

Where will TWS go? Must it lose momentum and finally disintegrate now that its single issue has been won? Since the High Court judgement the TWS has certainly lost a lot of its drive and enthusiasm. The organisation has renamed itself *The Wilderness Society* and it aims to protect all threatened Australian natural areas. Secondly, while there has been no admission that its emphasis on electoral strategy may have been short-sighted, it is well understood within the movement that a change of government and parliamentary mood in Canberra could bring a reversal of the heritage decision. Further, the Tasmanian government shows a determination to push ahead with face-saving schemes such as the Henty-Anthony and King river dams, projects connected with the original Franklin proposal and whose completion would lend weight to a future reversal of the decision. BHP and Amoco have taken out mining leases in the forests of the south-west, and Lend Lease Cor-

The No Dams campaign as art: Dr Brown and the Green Old Time Walz, by Harold L. Thornton, was an entry in the 1983 Archibald Prize and was exhibited at the NSW Art Gallery.

poration is interested in tourist development there. So, in addition to fund-raising to pay back its heavy campaign debts, the TWS must now become a vigilante group. Meanwhile, its third focus is research and promotion of both employment and energy-generation alternatives, but so far there has been little response to this in Tasmania.

In its heyday, the TWS set up an impressive structure, an ideal Green Party apparatus with talented personnel and a charismatic leader in Bob Brown. Yet while the TWS's major strategy during the campaign to save the Franklin became an electoral one, with back-up lobbying of decision-makers, there was much resistance among members to being seen as a political group. The short-term electoral emphasis distracted many people from the importance of the cultural and spiritual vitality that arose at the blockade itself. Radical grassroots change takes time and moves laterally rather than vertically through society.