

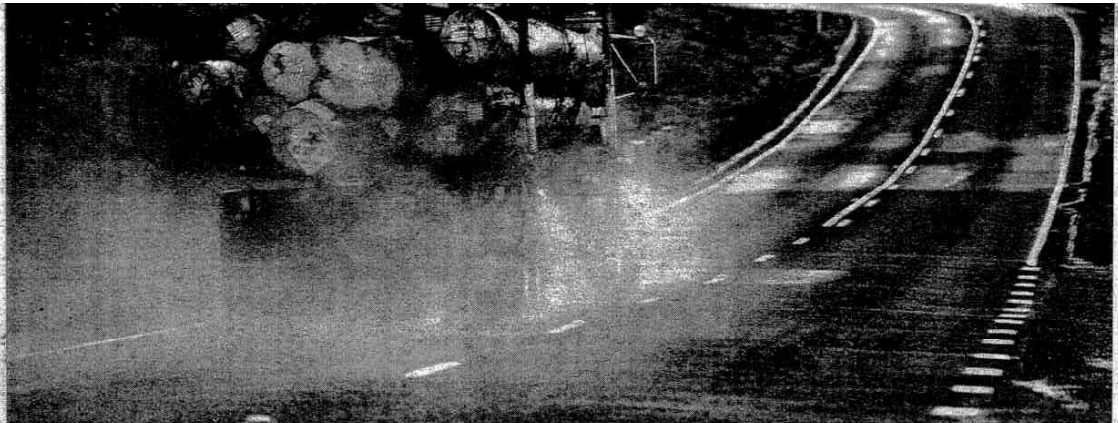
EFFECTS IF WE KEEP TRYING
to re-create Europe.

AUSTRALIA has the potential to become one of the most stupid, short-sighted, short-lived civilisations (for want of a better term) ever created. The nation could last little more than three greedy, mediocre centuries as an advanced economy and two of those centuries have already passed. Compared with what's heading our way unless we mobilise as a nation, such passing obsessions as the Iraq war and the latest federal election are mere sideshows.

People keep talking about the historic "drought" afflicting the eastern states. It is not a drought. It is far more serious than that. Even if good rains come they are not going to change the fundamental problem. The weather pattern has changed. Having mined and altered and channelled and stripped the landscape for the past 150 years in an impossible attempt to re-create Europe, we can't even see the obvious - that when you profoundly change the landscape, when you destroy vast amounts of balancing energy in the soil and vegetation, you change the weather.

Gradually, with excruciating slowness, the full magnitude of our collective ignorance and arrogance is only beginning to come into focus. We saw a hint of this focus on Friday when the Prime Minister and five premiers - all except the Premier of Western Australia - gathered in Canberra to announce a belated national effort to address Australia's slow-motion disaster with the river systems and the over-allocation of water.

The process is going to make for some strange politics. Take, for example, Senator Bill Heffernan. He can see the disaster unfolding. And because he can see it unfolding, he is now to the left of St Peter Garrett when it comes to the environment. While Garrett is locked into the union-dominated Labor Party, Heffernan has moved to the



left of Labor on big environmental issues. Take his views on that most totemic green cause, the clear-felling of old-growth forests in Tasmania, protected under the bipartisan Regional Forests Agreement:

"It's a disgrace," Heffernan told me. "They could end clear-felling of old-growth forests tomorrow. And they should. They are over-committing Tasmania's forest resources in a way they will regret in a hundred years... And in their haste to clear the timber they waste and burn and haven't even done any work on the impact on the water system. Places like Launceston are having a dramatic change in the stream pattern. It could be a long-term disaster."

Yes, Wild Bill Heffernan, the Junee farmer, Irish-Catholic conservative and political knee-capper, who sits impregnably at the top of the Liberal Senate ticket for NSW in the next federal election. He also happens to be driving two Senate inquiries (he is chairman of the Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislative Committee) into national water policy and sustainable forestry practices, and thus in-

evitably colliding with a raft of ugly statistics and ugly satellite images.

From this vantage point, and after a life on the land, Heffernan can see disasters, all different but all related, unfolding in every state. Sitting in his office in Parliament House, Canberra, late at night, he ticks off the big problems, using exasperated language which has not been vetted by his mate, the Prime Minister:

"In Tasmania, they burn everything that's there and 1080 [poison] them, it's just a mournful operation and the process of pushing down old-growth forests is a huge waste. They recover only about 10 per cent of the old growth as saw logs, the rest just goes to the chip mill."

He wants his Senate committee to consider a proposal to protect a further 240,000 hectares of that state's high-value old-growth forests, offset by what he calls a "wall of wood" coming on stream from new plantations in Tasmania and Western Australia.

"In Queensland, the great national disgrace remains the water harvesting at Cubby Station [a huge cotton farm] which completely intercepts the water rights of downstream users...

"In NSW, the over-allocation of the rivers and aquifers is a classic example of disastrous planning by governments of all persuasions. It's the same with the complete denial of the problems caused by water interception in plantation forests. It's happening in every state..."

"In Victoria, the La Trobe Valley aquifer is facing a potential catastrophe because of unsustainable drawing down of the water table..."

"In the Northern Territory, they have no brains and no experts when it comes to water management. The Government has decided to mine the arid aquifer, which means no one has learnt from the disaster of mining the Namoi aquifer..."

"In Western Australia, climate change and unsustainable water use has caused serious long-term problems for Perth's water supply."

The senator did not blink when I told him the noted environmental scientist Tim Flannery believed Perth's water shortage would become "Western civilisation's first ghost metropolis."

"We need to get beyond denial," Heffernan said. "All governments.

The only way for governments to get the political courage to act is for the public to be made aware of the gravity of our national situation. Friday's announcement by the PM and [Deputy PM] John Anderson and the premiers was real progress, a good start. They all know the Murray-Darling Basin has only 6.2 per cent of Australia's run-off but 70 per cent of Australia's water farming. They know that no matter how you do the sums, we need better technology, smarter water-farming, and the removal of some activity." He singled out rice growers and cotton farmers as having to "lift their game".

"It's a no-brainer that we need a new agricultural frontier in northern Australia, where the Timor Gulf and Burdekin catchments have 60 per cent of the nation's run-off - 10 times more than the Murray-Darling - but are virtually untapped."

Australia controls the world's fourth largest expanse of land, sea and continental shelf. We should be an ecological superpower. Instead we have chosen, so far, to remain a European colony in the most insidious, dangerous way possible.

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