

Government needs more consistency in environmental management

by Gary Taylor

How well is the government managing environmental issues?

Let's start with mining.

Clearly Ministers have badly misjudged the public response to their proposals to open up highly valued conservation land to mining. It is now in fast retreat mode and the chances of mining in National Parks, on Great Barrier Island or on the Coromandel Peninsula any time soon are remote.

Proponents of mining, who lobbied government for the changes, have become so desperate as to draw fallacious comparisons between hard rock mining and a building excavation site in Ponsonby.

The stridency of the advocacy for mining Schedule 4 land, including that from the Minister of Energy and Resources, polarised the discussion from the outset. There is now a risk that mining everywhere has been demonised and will face huge community backlash. The environmental movement, forced into reactive mode, has become highly energised and its cause embraced by thousands of New Zealanders including National members and supporters.

It isn't the first misjudgement of public sentiment on an environmental issue by this government.

The sacking of the regional council and weakening of river protection measures in Canterbury have been hugely controversial there and show no signs of abating. The same resentments about a heavy handed approach felt nationally about mining are being replicated in Canterbury about water management. The prospect of "mining" our protected rivers for irrigation is hugely controversial.

Then when a member of the Board of Inquiry into the New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement was so exasperated by comments by the Minister of Conservation and took the unprecedented step of releasing it publicly, her knee-jerk response was to say that protecting the coast didn't sit well with the government's economic development agenda. She then quickly recovered her position and said she wouldn't be rushed into premature decisions on whether to adopt the new coastal policy.

There are other big environmental issues coming up that might lead government into difficult territory without some more adroit political management than we have seen to date.

For example, there are a number of proposals to mine the seabed and to explore for oil and gas in our huge Exclusive Economic Zone. But there is hardly any environmental regulation

out there at all. Events in the Gulf of Mexico reinforce the need for us to place careful controls over activities in our oceans. This will require the opposite mind-set to what we seen from Ministers regarding land-based mining and exploration – tightening up environmental standards rather than loosening them. We have yet to see the final configuration of the Environmental Protection Authority – another good initiative. Will it be the EEZ regulator?

Given all this track record of mismanagement, is there any good news for the environment? Yes there is.

The government's Land and Water Forum is a very positive and worthwhile initiative. It is looking at the management of one of New Zealand's competitive advantages: relatively abundant freshwater. It is a genuine collaborative process, a new way of doing things in this country. It will shortly report to government on a fresh start for freshwater. As an experiment in collaborative processes, it could chart a new decision-making process for resource management that reduces conflict and litigation – an approach that should have been adopted around the mining issue and in Canterbury.

The recent announcement by the Prime Minister of increased investment in applied science is similarly welcome. It represents a better way forward for New Zealand: development of a clean economy, based on high tech, knowledge based, industries as an alternative to reliance on commodity production and unsustainable resource exploitation. The next logical step is a Green Economy Taskforce, looking at how we can more quickly transition our economy in a way that gives us growth and allows us to maintain and enhance the quality of our environment rather than harm it.

Similarly, the government appears staunch in resisting opportunistic efforts by some self-interested parties to get it to withdraw its Emissions Trading Scheme. We clearly need a price on carbon so that a market including forest sinks can develop with some certainty without the policy settings flip-flopping again. It was good to see Business New Zealand providing some leadership on this point.

These positive examples aside, the overall picture is one of *ad hoc* initiatives with no sense of direction or consistency of approach on environmental management. National does have its Blue-Green vision which is excellent, but not all Ministers have signed up to it.

Pursuing an enlightened approach to environmental management can fit well with a Conservative government. Just look at the environmental policies in the Liberal Democrat – Conservative coalition agreement in the UK: "The parties agree to implement a full programme of measures to fulfil our joint ambitions for a low carbon and eco-friendly economy."

The retreat on mining should be followed by a new, progressive and bold approach to environmental management. This is where the Prime Minister needs to step in and ensure Ministers don't keep stumbling. Instead they should provide clear and consistent leadership and direction on environmental management across the whole government.

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