

Queensland

– beautiful one day (what's left of it) – destroyed the next –
Many of our birds are at high risk.

(This is a long essay but gives a very frank account of the environmental destruction being allowed and encouraged under the current Queensland Government).

Queensland's Liberal-National Party Government led by Premier Campbell Newman, seemingly still caught in a 1960s time warp, is proving to be hell bent on pushing environmental protection back to a greater extent than that of the Bjelke-Petersen era. In its first two years in office, it has already proved to be the most anti-environment government in Australia's history. Our birds are bearing the full brunt of it.

A few weeks ago, I visited one of my Yellow-tinted/Fuscous Honeyeater study sites near Herberton on the southern Atherton Tableland in north Queensland – a State Forest. Much of this reserve is wet sclerophyll, a scarce but very important habitat in the Wet Tropics which supports a good variety of birds but also mammals such as the vulnerable Yellow-bellied Glider. It had been logged perhaps 30 or more years ago. I was astounded to see that right from the entrance a strip of prime forest 25 metres wide and stretching as far as the eye could see had been cleared right along the boundary. All trees had been cut down at ground level and pushed into the standing forest. A few logs were lying on the cleared ground, obviously waiting transportation.

There is no sane reason for this clearing — not even for a firebreak which would be overdone to the extreme in this area of north Queensland where fires are slow burning and slow moving. But then the penny dropped! The Newman government has reversed protection on State Forests afforded by the previous government and has opened many old forestry reserves for commercial logging. The government is now allowing timber-getting on 30,000 ha of forest each year. About 200,000 ha of native state forest quarantined as reserves under long-held conservation agreements are in line for reopening to logging even though the previous government had disallowed logging in these and given protection to many. It seems that this forest is about to be logged but there is still no good reason for the clearing!

The sheer contempt that this government holds for the environment is evident in the fact that even Credition State Forest in the Eungella Ranges behind Mackay in central Queensland is to be logged, despite it being a stronghold and a critical part of the very small range of the endemic Eungella Honeyeater. When asked about protection for the honeyeater, the terse reply from a government spokesperson was "All nesting trees will be protected". The extreme ignorance of that statement is incredible! They must believe the honeyeater builds a huge, permanent nest similar to that of a Wedge-tailed Eagle!

That Newman and his government have only contempt for the environment was evident in an interview on 22.11.12. Newman being interviewed by Greg Carey on radio (4BC Brisbane) – said that there was one thing standing in the way of the Queensland Government (and development) and it was "a thing called the EPBC Act" (Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999).

Further, many anti-environmental changes have been adopted or legislated since the government came to office nearly two ago. Unfortunately Queensland has no Upper House so any elected government can do whatever it wants. Newman and his 1960s thinking ministers are doing just that! Even the billionaire coal miner Clive Palmer has publicly described Newman as a "cross between Caesar and Idi Amin – a real dictator."

The Climate Change Department set up by the previous Labor Government was quickly dismantled soon after the Newman government came to office. On 13.7.12 the government gave a direction to remove "environmental propaganda" including anything on climate change from all government schools. All were to be replaced by "normal science". When Koalas were put on the vulnerable list (April 2012) Newman made a statement that it would "only increase green tape and would hinder developmental projects".

Another early act on coming to office (30.6.12) was to cut funding without notice to the Environmental Defender's Office (EDO), the only organisation which assists people and environmental groups to use the law in order to defend public interests in the environment.

Yet again changes have been made where a developer or other transgressor is taken to court – another sneaky, insidious body blow aimed at the conservation movement. Previously anyone taking a company or a developer to court on environmental grounds paid only their own costs. A new bill was passed (13.9.12) which made all costs payable by the loser. The EDO has stated that this would stop many people trying to defend their neighbourhood or the environment from detrimental development by going to court.

The previous Beattie Government introduced restrictions on clearing of vegetation following massive land clearing throughout Queensland. The huge bird rich Brigalow belt of central and southern Queensland had been completely eliminated (a legacy mostly of the Bjelke-Petersen government) without a single worthwhile area being saved and given National Parks status. The Newman government introduced the Vegetation Management Framework Amendment Bill 2013 to "relax the vegetation management act" (i.e. the tree clearing laws). This introduced new clearing purposes for "necessary environmental clearing, high value agriculture clearing and irrigated high value agriculture clearing". Alarming, it allows self-assessable vegetation clearing without the need to obtain a development permit. This was to be part of a strategy to "normalise the economy."

Agriculture now takes precedence over conserving vegetation and forest. This means that if vegetation has fertile, agriculturally productive soil below, then "high value agriculture" takes precedence. This legislation also "removed high value regrowth regulations from freehold and indigenous land". One of the objects of this government is to introduce measures to "double food production in Queensland by 2040".

A review of national parks has been initiated. There has been a push to reverse National Parks status on some parks which have been proclaimed since the early 2000s. In September 2012, National Parks Minister Steve Dickson made a statement that he was looking at closing 875,000 ha of newly-allocated parks (by previous Labor governments) so they could be used for grazing and logging. Parks which are costly to maintain because of weed invasion and other introduced degradation, regardless of their environmental importance, are likely to be de-gazetted, developed, or grazed. Neither scientific nor conservation sector experts will be consulted; nor will there be any public consultation over the fate of these lands which were originally gazetted to be protected in perpetuity, for the public good. Of Queensland's land expanse, 83% of Queensland is approved for cattle grazing, 80% is covered by permits for mineral exploration, and only 5% is set aside for National Parks. This backward government wants to greatly decrease the area reserved as National Parks.

Grazing has already been allowed in some National Parks where drought has affected large areas of grazing land. The government's reason for allowing cattle on National Parks was "starving stock before picnics" – and that came from Deputy Premier Seeney! However, that action backfired to an extent. The owner of cattle put into Blackbraes NP west of Townsville was interviewed in late 2013 on regional ABC radio. There was little feed left for the cattle and they had nowhere else to move them. And with the ongoing drought, the cattle were still in too poor condition to be sold. The owners said that they would have little alternative other than to shoot them.

Wild Rivers legislation which was put in place by the previous government to protect the remote river systems of Cape York Peninsula, the Gulf of Carpentaria and western Qld (where graziers pride themselves in growing organic beef) is being repealed and replaced by new legislation which will probably allow development right up to the banks of streams. Wild Rivers guaranteed indigenous people traditional hunting, fishing, land management and conservation through protection of native title rights and support for rangers. Many indigenous people are in favour of wild rivers protection but some of the more "progressive" pro-government indigenous leaders have been strongly against it. Western Queensland graziers want the western rivers preserved under this act, mostly so they can continue to produce organic beef and other produce.

By any criteria, Cape York Peninsula, probably the last remaining wilderness area in Australia is an extraordinary place, much of it worthy of World Heritage protection. However, Newman and his deputy Seeney are planning to open up sensitive waterways and landscapes to broad scale industrial development i.e. mining, agriculture and timber-getting on an unprecedented scale. Up to eight new mines for sand, kaolin, coal and bauxite right across the Peninsula are planned.

The previous government initiated the nominating of much of Cape York Peninsula for World Heritage protection. Predictably, the Newman Government ceased talks on the World Heritage listing shortly after it came to office. Their intention now is to "convert Cape York Peninsula into Queensland's food bowl" (this statement by Deputy Premier Seeney) – a great example of absolute stupidity. The Cape has never been an economic hub in the past simply because of an extreme and difficult climate, impoverished soils, a huge distance from markets, nowhere to build viable dams and demand being met from other better situated and more productive regions. For one thing, much of the Peninsula is flooded for half of the year during the Wet Season when one to two metres of rain falls over a three month period! Land movement and associated activity is impossible for months.

Large scale agriculture in the Lakeland area in the southern part of the Peninsula was attempted by the mining magnate Clive Foyster in the late 1960s but failed in a few short years. Later, peanut growing had a similar fate. The only successful crop to date has been bananas under irrigation. Apart from grazing, most of the few areas that can be farmed on Cape York Peninsula have already been farmed, small as they are. Some areas bordering a few river systems on the south-western side of the Peninsula probably have some agricultural potential (irrigated) and one large company is taking a chance and planning on converting a large area to agriculture to be irrigated from the Gilbert River. At present,

it supports tropical woodland. In the past, the Peninsula has been used as second class cattle country – the cattle had to be shifted to more productive areas south of the Peninsula to be fattened – a costly exercise in itself.

When asked about the proposal by the last government to declare World Heritage over Cape York Peninsula, Deputy Premier and Minister for State Development, Seeney said "I have no interest whatsoever in World Heritage nomination" (so much for governing for *ALL* people!). He further added that World Heritage issues will not figure in their 20-year plan (proposed for Queensland), with the rider that "Every time anything is proposed, the conservation movement makes an over-the-top claim about something being destroyed or Cape York being ruined".

Alarming, there has been persistent rumours that the government intends to allow logging of the extensive Darwin Stringybark forests on the Peninsula. These are Queensland's last stronghold of the Near Threatened Red Goshawk. Probably 95% of Queensland's remaining Red Goshawk population exists in these forests. Logging and clearance of the forests would be a direct and extremely serious threat to this species. Populations have dropped markedly and mostly disappeared in other areas where these practices have taken place.

Another equally alarming aspect and an example of this government's absolute contempt for the environment was a call for tenders (October 2013) to explore six areas of Queensland for petroleum and coal seam gas including the near pristine Pascoe River catchment on Cape York Peninsula. This catchment contains a large proportion of Queensland's remaining tropical lowland rainforest and surrounds and drains Iron Range National Park on the northern section of the Peninsula! There are few roads into it and much of it is inaccessible. The deadline for applications was 22.11.13 and by then no interest had been shown in the Pascoe River area. However, if a lease was to be taken up a network of roads to service the drilling would have to be built, much rainforest would be destroyed and undoubtedly there would eventually be heavy pollution of the waterways. This area was within the proposed World Heritage area. Local residents were not made aware of the potential for gas exploration and extractive industries in the region nor that tenders for exploration had been called.

At this time, a seemingly encouraging note occurred. An application to mine bauxite surrounding the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve on the western side of Cape York Peninsula, which would have adversely affected the reserve was disallowed. Cynically, but with this government's pathetic environmental record, there is little doubt that an ulterior motive was paramount. This had to be a trade-off for the calling for petroleum and CSG interest over the Pascoe River catchment not far to the south-east. It was made only days before the Pascoe River call for CSG exploration was made!

Still the anti-environmental attacks continue. A major clash with conservationists centres around the soon-to-be-destroyed Bimblebox Nature Refuge in central Queensland which lies within the huge Galilee coal basin. Bimblebox, an 8,000 hectare reserve, and the last large still-in-tact expanse of original woodland remaining in the Galilee Basin has been recognised for its high environmental values, e.g. the *endangered* white rumped race of Black-throated Finch exists within this reserve. Its "excellent condition and biodiversity" were sufficient for the Howard Liberal Government to invest public money (approximately \$300,000) into purchasing it to add to the National Reserve System as part of the Natural Heritage Trust. It is covered by a perpetual conservation agreement with the Queensland Government. Unfortunately Nature Refuge status does not protect against mining!

A massive \$6.5 billion Clive Palmer coal mine (Waratah Coal's China First Coal Project) to cover 8,000 ha is proposed for the Galilee Basin. It is planned to mine 1.4 billion tonnes (40 million tonnes each year) of thermal coal to be transported on a new (to be built) 468 km rail line to the expanded Abbot Point coal terminal. Clearing for the mine and its facilities is estimated to take in 4017 ha of Bimblebox with a further 3422 ha affected by subsidence from underground mining. An EIS indicated that the project would not be viable without the destruction of Bimblebox Nature Refuge. BirdLife Southern Queensland, Birds Queensland and others have been fighting to save the reserve. A recent survey by the major rural and conservative body AgForce indicated that the threat of mining on Nature Refuges is an issue of concern to its members i.e. many landholders' properties border on these reserves.

However, the mine (and destruction of Bimblebox) received conditional approval from the Queensland Government on 12.8.13 and received Federal Government approval late on Friday 20th December 2013. One condition of Federal Government approval is that Waratah Coal provide an alternative area of 16,000 ha "for protection". But where is similar original forest in the same "excellent condition" available and does the Black-throated Finch inhabit the area?

When asked about this project, the Galilee Basin and objections to its development, Newman's response was "They (Indian and Chinese power companies) want coal to come for their thermal power stations day in day out, week in week out, month after month, for not 10 years or 20 years or 50 years; they want it to come for 70 to 100 years" (Australian Mining - 28.11.13). So much for the slightest belief in climate change! He further stated that opening up the Galilee Basin to mining would be worth \$60 billion to Queensland and create 15,000 jobs, indicating it was a top priority for his government. On the same token, his government (on 2.7.12) cut funding to a large solar power plant at Chinchilla (Solar Dawn) in south-east Queensland – a 250 megawatt power plant to cost \$1.2 billion. The Federal Government was providing \$464 million towards the project.

A massive port has to be built at Abbott Point, about 30 km northwards along the coast from Bowen (to be the largest coal terminal in the world) to ship the coal. Dredging of the harbour has to take place. The Newman government was set to allow the dredgings (3 million cubic metres or 5 million tonnes) to be dumped within the Great Barrier Reef World Heritage area/Marine Park. The federal environment minister Hunt then stipulated that some spoil must be dumped onshore. The idea was that it was to be used for "reclaiming land" – probably meaning more habitat would be destroyed! However, he eventually capitulated and agreed to allow all the waste to be dumped out to sea within the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

The Marine Park Authority which was to give the final go-ahead to dump the dredgings in the GBH Marine Park finally did so during January 2014. However, it has been revealed (3.3.14) that no one in Marine Parks wanted to issue approval but then suddenly approval was given. With this government's record, one can only suspect that pressure was exerted to bring about that approval.

At one stage, after concern that increased development in Queensland would probably endanger the Great Barrier Reef, a World Heritage listed area, Newman's unbelievable response (2.6.12) was "(Halting) development along the Queensland coast to protect the Great Barrier Reef is not an option." He later had to back track when UNESCO issued a threat later in the day that they would list the Great Barrier Reef as a World Heritage Area Endangered if more ports which would bring harsh conditions were allowed to be developed. Ironically Great Barrier Reef tourism is worth \$4–5 billion to the Queensland economy, employs 63,000 people and attracts 1.6 million visitors annually!

The tunnel vision of this coal crazy government is astounding. One would bet that these blokes count coal trucks to put themselves to sleep each night!

Another example which demonstrated the 1960s thinking of this government was the issuing of permits to fruit growers to shoot fruit-bats, not long after the government came to power. Up to 8,000 animals could be shot. This is despite the fact that fruit bats are a keystone species, vitally important for pollinating rainforest trees and others. It is well known that shooting of bats does not protect the orchards! Only netting of the trees is successful and many of the more progressive growers use this method. The sensible thing to do would have been to subsidise nets to the orchardists! Unfortunately, common sense does not rate with this government.

Fruit-bats have set up roosts in some towns and cities and councils (local government) have been trying to get rid of them. On 27.3.13, Premier Newman issued an ultimatum to all councils – get rid of the bats in their towns or he will send in a "bat squad", eradicate them and charge the cost to the councils. He described some councils as "lily-livered" because they had not applied for permits to do that. He added that bats are a major pest and had to be removed.

More recently – 1.3.14 – the Government announced its intentions to introduce legislation to stop "ideological objections" to mining projects, allowing only objections from land holders and local government – another direct blow to the environmental movement.

The catch-cry of this government with every new project is always "jobs" – i.e. each new project will provide a huge number of jobs. This was the same government which, immediately coming to office, very coldly sacked 14,000 people from the public service, many being important and highly trained health workers – an act which shocked even the Government's own supporters.

Development is being spear-headed by the Deputy Premier Geoff Seeney, a member of the far right and ex-leader of the old National Party. He now holds two portfolios — Minister for State Development and Minister for Infrastructure and Planning. Seeney who seems to be especially caught in a 1960s time warp has no time for National Parks, World Heritage, the environment, "greenies" and their "radical green policies" and speaks of "winding back environmental protection." He has suggested that oil, gas and mining companies should "vigorously fight against environmentalists".

Every development approval has the hypocritical phrase attached to it, "it will be developed in an environmentally responsible manner". Seeney often states that the government always considers "responsible environmental values" when considering approval for a project.

Campbell Newman was parachuted into the leadership of the LNP, resigning as Lord Mayor of Brisbane, months before he had won a seat in Parliament. He was given the title of "Can-do Campbell" during his stint as Lord Mayor. He is the son of Kevin and Jocelyn Newman, both of whom represented Tasmania for the Liberal Party and were ministers in the Fraser and Howard governments respectively.

Things won't improve until this government loses office and worse can be expected in the meantime. It was Queensland which gave Pauline Hanson's far right One Nation party eleven seats in State Parliament in the 1998 State election indicating there is a lot of far right support in the community. The Newman Government won the 2012 Queensland

State Election on a landslide with a huge majority, (78 of 89 seats). However, recent polling is showing a 14% to 17% swing away from the government which could see a loss of up to 39 seats and loss of office at the next election due in early 2015. Such a swing would also see Newman lose his Brisbane seat of Ashgrove which he won from Kate Jones by a small margin, a very capable minister in the previous government. The LNP is trying to find a safe seat for him, currently in a seemingly devious way by calling for nominations in all seats despite many being held by long-term politicians.

If Newman does lose his seat, there is a strong possibility that Seeney with a safe country/mining seat (Callide) will become premier, should the LNP retain government. If this happens, we can look forward to a situation far worse than the Joh Bjelke-Petersen era, the man responsible for much of the complete destruction of much of Queensland's inland forest belt including the brigalow belt – and much more. Seeney will make Joh look like a conservationist.

With the "one-stop-shop" for environmental approval announced by the Federal and State governments which allows state governments to give approval to projects without federal intervention and with no Upper House in Queensland, it will be open slather for this destructive government. And it can only become worse if the Federal Government waters down the EPBC Act as has been floated.

With shooting introduced into National Parks in New South Wales, attempted return to grazing in the high country, extended duck hunting and proposed selling off of national parks in Victoria, the never ending destruction happening in Queensland, the new one-stop-shop environmental approval and Prime Minister Abbott's recent public statement that too much forest was protected and that there were enough national parks, the greatest threat to our birdlife and their habitats is undoubtedly conservative governments!

Lloyd Nielsen,

Author –

Birds of Queensland's Wet Tropics and Great Barrier Reef – and Where to Find Them

Birding Australia – A Directory for Birders (editions for International & Australian Birders)

Birding Australia – Site Guide – The South-east

Daintree – Jewel of Tropical North Queensland

Birds of Lamington National Park – A Guide's Guide

(The above has been compiled from newspaper reports, press releases, radio interviews and news items, and the internet. To the best of my ability and wherever possible, facts have been checked to verify their accuracy.)

12th March 2014

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