

Bush remedies keep failing basic test of policy

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The Age editorial

The Nationals' influence has a high environmental cost.

NEW governments routinely intone that they will govern for all and act in the public interest. In Australia, this is, firstly, a pragmatic acknowledgement that voters tend to be fairly evenly divided between government and opposition. Secondly, it implies a recognition that whatever sectional interests a government represents, it has a duty to ensure its policies are soundly based. Ted Baillieu's Coalition government has made several decisions that suggest the Nationals call the shots on environmental policy with little regard for evidence.

The Age raised the alarm early when the government rushed to restore alpine cattle grazing and declare the first full duck-hunting season in years. Neither policy was supported by public opinion or scientific research. Factors in the flooding of Victoria's north-east include catchment clearing and logging and cattle damage to alpine moss beds. In nature, these areas served as sponges to soak up heavy rain and slow run-off, moderating river flows.

Last week, *The Age* revealed the government has scuppered plans to phase out cattle grazing along parts of the Murray River slated to be a national park, which itself is in doubt. Yesterday, we reported the Nationals' Peter Walsh, as Water Minister, thinks it a good idea to remove vegetation from waterways to clear floods more rapidly. A parliamentary inquiry is considering this, he said.

Mr Walsh's argument is of the anecdotal "commonsense" variety often heard from his support base. "If you look at quite a few of the areas where there were flooding issues last year, there had been vegetation grow up in streamways and floodways that then held up the water," he said. The Victorian Farmers Federation has made a submission along these lines. It must be said that, as the federation noted, riverine vegetation is a mix of "native, non-native and noxious" species. Some vegetation types - such as highly invasive willows that clog waterways - do demand urgent management.

What would be of concern is a simplistic view that clearing vegetation reduces floods. *The Age* would urge the government to listen to the experts who have closely monitored the effects of changes to waterways and floodlines. Water governance researcher Jamie Pittock, of the Australian National University, regards vegetation clearing as a discredited policy with "perverse environmental impacts". Indeed, New South Wales has submitted that vegetation is crucial for healthy waterways because it stabilises river beds and banks, reducing the "scour" effect of floods. "Rivers should not be seen as drains to move flood waters away quickly," it states. Tellingly, the submission notes that vegetation-clearing policies in the 1950s made floods worse.

If the science is against such policies, why adopt them? The common thread from cattle grazing to duck hunting to vegetation clearing to putting new parks on hold is that such policies are the price of the Nationals' support for the Liberal Party in government. Their rural support base is inclined to scoff at scientific research that disproves the claim that "grazing prevents blazing"; shows duck hunting is unavoidably cruel and harms protected species; and demonstrates the need to protect redgum forests in a new park.

This contempt for science has especially worrying implications for sustainability and climate change. *The Age* has observed the systematic but stealthy scrapping of programs to cut greenhouse gases. Mr Walsh gave a hint of attitudes in the government when he said: "A lot of people were brainwashed into thinking that it was never ever going to rain again because of the discussion around climate change." Never mind what climatologists said about extreme weather events.

When it comes to environmental policy, the only dots this government is joining match the world view of a junior partner for which barely one in 15 Victorians voted. That is not governing for all. It is certainly not producing policies that serve Victoria well.

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