

TRANSCRIPT of the Speech by the Hon. Bob Carr at the launch of
The Impact of Coal Mining on the Gardens of Stone report
10.30am, Tuesday 27 April, 2010

Sydney Mechanics School of Arts,
Level 1, 280 Pitt Street, Sydney

Thanks Elizabeth [Elenius, Chairperson of the Colong Foundation], thank you Keith [Muir, Director of the Foundation].

I recently flicked on Foxtel. Why would I do that? I've got no explanation, no defence other than one channel that was running a documentary celebrating the 60th birthday of Prince Charles. Maybe I have a fascination with how a man, an adult, can wear a waist coat, with lapels, and a tartan kilt. Defending his interest in the saving natural world, Prince Charles said "Who will speak for nature?" [His question] resonated with me.

This is a very challenging question. Who will speak for nature? What defenders does the natural world have? Who will speak out for, in this case, stream paths, hanging swamps, cliff faces, pagoda forms in the sandstone. Who will say this is legitimate, this ought to be saved? This is part of our heritage, this too has a right to life, along with all the bustle of economic activity, coal mining included? That to me is the significance of this excellently researched report, and in launching it, I'd urge my former colleagues in the state government to consider it very seriously.

I haven't had a chance to hike in the area for a long time, nor to test the conclusions and recommendations of the report, but I will say this, it deserves to be taken very seriously.

One reason it deserves to be taken very seriously is the record of the Colong Foundation over the years. A couple of years ago we celebrated the 20th anniversary [of the Wilderness Act, 1987], which was a wonderful opportunity for people to reunite and talk about those times and, the wild country we've got, and we mustn't forget that the Foundation came into existence and won a big public debate in the 1970s [The Colong campaign] and won it by asking and inspiring people.

Someone at that celebration told me that she'd been in the Liberal Party [State Council] in the early 70s and had approached Ministers in the Askin Government on the issue.. Was that you Elizabeth? It seems incredible [that as Elizabeth] told me, Ministers in the Askin Government had accepted invitations to go up there and see the Plateau threatened by mining. The Colong campaign was a very interesting early conservation struggle to persuade a state government to forego the short term benefits of mining and quarrying, to set aside wild country.

The campaign might have been touch and go in the 1970s, but today who would want to have that argument recast? Who would even contemplate destroying that plateau?

I was reading a speech which a former head of National Parks in NSW, John Whitehouse gave at a celebration of the declaration of coastal national parks on the NSW north coast. John spoke about former environment minister, Paul Landa declaring Bunjalung and Yuraygir National Parks. When they were declared in the late 1970s it seemed excessive and

farfetched. They were vast areas and it certainly looked very ambitious to take those huge areas and give them national park status. However, within about fifteen years, by the time I was environment minister in 1984, the population growth on the north coast had been such that they were seen as quite appropriate. Today they would be seen as barely adequate in relation to the population increase in that part of Australia: the NSW north coast and southern Queensland.

So it is with all our conservation campaigns. What at first looks controversial with nature conservation, looks entirely appropriate five to ten years after the sometimes heavily argued decision. In that spirit I'd like to think that the state government will assess this report.

Keith underlined the fact that the report is very largely focused on limiting damage. The report accepts the realities of coal mining. It strongly argues for low impact mining and the elevation of conservation in land use planning in this special area.

There are obviously major challenges ahead. "To lower water quality standards to allow the pollution of drinking water supplies and wild rivers" argues the report, "polluted with hazardous metals, borders on collective insanity. To top it off, to run power station condensers on saline mine effluent that were designed to operate on fresh water instead and then to award a Green Globe Award for doing so, beggars the imagination."

The report's recommendation that "no further mining leases should be issued within the Gardens of Stone unless the industry agrees to adequately protect all heritage values of the area and the environmental performance of existing collieries dramatically improves" is a serious one. It's argued strongly. I hope it finds allies and I hope it wins the day.

The report argues: "Only mining that does not impact upon a catchment's capacity to collect or convey water and does not cause pollution should be permitted." These strong recommendations are backed by the sort of research and scholarship that you would expect from the Colong Foundation for Wilderness and indeed the nature conservation movement in NSW.

The Gardens of Stone had a big impact of my thinking as the Minister for Environment and Minister for Planning and Environment. Occasionally there would be arguments from the industry that mining under conservation areas should be contemplated, that it could safely be done, that there was no risk. I remember having this argued to me in respect of mining south-west of Sydney. I was able to say that there are issues at stake here. The sort of subsidence and pollution that we have seen in the Gardens of Stone. How can you be certain about these? I've seen the Gardens of Stone. We know what's happened there, that there's been subsidence and the seepage of polluted waters from mines under this great natural area.

You cannot have mining under national parks. The Foundation's report and case studies argue this with conviction. I think both sides of NSW politics also accept this, but don't let this opportunity slip. Old songs are the best songs. You have to keep returning to these themes no matter how well worn you think they are, to ensure that a new generation of ministers understands their importance.

When I visited Lithgow once, I said, this is precisely the town that Helena and I would consider retiring to. I was told that Neville Wran had said the same thing when he was Premier and he held a cabinet meeting, as I did, in Lithgow. I'm no closer to that decision, either to retire or to retire to Lithgow, but the chances of me doing it would be that much greater (and Neville Wran too I suspect) if there was greater protection over the Gardens of Stone, with Lithgow emerging, as Keith puts it, as another Katoomba, a place people will visit to explore and appreciate intact wild country, or as intact as we can make it.

Thank you, I declare the report launched.