

the currency and manipulate interest rates it will force Britain to concentrate properly on achieving genuine increases in efficiency and productivity.'

- 'Yes, as soon as practical. Britain's future is in Europe, and the euro is part of Europe.'

The UK Independence Party's answer is 'No, never!' The Liberal Democrats say 'Yes, as soon as practical.'

The Labour government's official policy is 'Yes, but only if certain economic conditions are met and only after a referendum.' The official Conservative policy is 'Not in this Parliament or the next'. This is a compromise to stop the Party splitting. Pro-Europeans pretend that it's consistent with 'Yes' because for practical reasons it would hardly be possible to join the euro any sooner, while anti-Europeans don't mind because they can keep campaigning for 'Never!'

Mr Hague himself points to the European election result and the opinion polls as proof that what the British people want is to be 'in Europe but not ruled by Europe', and says that this is what his Party is offering. The Conservatives will therefore win the next general election. QED.

This isn't persuasive. Europe is likely to be a minor issue in a general election. Business remains, on balance, in favour of the single currency, a fact that the British electorate these days is unlikely to ignore altogether, and that the government certainly won't ignore. The Labour campaign in the European election was strangely lacklustre, almost as if Mr Blair didn't want to win. Labour voters stayed home in droves.

Why didn't Labour try harder? Here are some suggestions. One: Mr Blair was too busy in Belfast and the Balkans. Two: he was too canny to lead a pro-euro, pro-Europe, campaign while the euro was visibly sinking and the old, scandal-tainted European Commissioners were still occupying their posts. Better to write this election off and save the ammunition for a winnable battle. Three: Labour's MEPs were mostly 'old Labour'; the fewer who were re-elected, the better for Blairite New Labour.

My favourite is number two. What's yours?

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IPPA

# Plantations 2020's Myopic Vision

IAN MOTT

If you are not regenerating native forest, please do not discourage someone who is.

**A**SSISTED regeneration of local native species is world best-practice forestry. That was the conclusion of the Second International Pro-Silva Congress, held in The Netherlands in 1997. When possible, regenerating a forest is the best economic and ecological option to expand productive forests—but an unholy alliance of greens, bureaucrats and plantation interests is not keen for this message to spread here.

The central plank of current Australian forest policy is 'The Plantations 2020 Vision', which was set up by the Keating Government with the aim of trebling the area of timber plantations from 1 million hectares to 3 million by the year 2020. Each State has endorsed the Vision's agenda to reduce impediments, etc., with funding for administration and extension services at regional level. But the name was actually borrowed from Dr Mahatir's vision for a speculation-based fast-track for the Malaysian economy. And the evidence is mounting to indicate that the Australian forestry namesake is just as flawed.

Curiously, the vision is not for a two-million hectare expansion of production forests onto cleared land but, rather, for planted forests only. The vision assumes that the only way to expand a forest is by planting one. Yet this flies in the face of over 1000 years of international forestry practice, which has always been based on assisted natural regeneration.

Indeed, the term '*by hook or by crook*' has its origins in a serf's right, when collecting firewood, to remove any branches from his master's forest that could be reached by either of the two implements. It is a term that only has relevance to a regrowth forest, as old-growth forests do not need pruning or thinning.

There have been some significant reforms to forestry policy initiated by Federal Ministers Robert Hill, John Anderson and, more recently, Wilson

Tuckey, but there is considerable inertia to be overcome at State and local level. Only last year—at the behest of the Australian Forest Growers—was the management of private native forests accorded *back-door status* in the 'farm forestry programme'. Prior to this, there was no recognition, at the policy level, of existing, lawful, private native-forestry businesses.

Most bureaucrats accepted the greens' policy that all native forest logging should be phased out. And they did this without any regard for the legal status of those private forestry operations or their own statutory obligations to deliver fair and equitable policy.

So the 'Vision' was formed in disregard for the needs and capacities of the target market, namely, the farmers who exercise sole discretion over the use of land on which any forest expansion must take place. These farmers already own more than 12 million hectares of higher volume, forestry-relevant, native forest and about 100 million hectares of open woodland which is capable of a lesser contribution. Much of this resource has regenerated on previously cleared land. There is very little untouched forest left in private hands as its compulsory removal was often a condition of the original grant of title.

A major cost burden for farmers is the maintenance of the productive capacity of pastures in the face of persistent regeneration of native forest and woody weeds. This condition is more pronounced in tropical climates, with summer rains, than in temperate climates, with winter rains.

The tree-clearing figures for Queensland show nothing but pasture maintenance. Analysis from Landsat satellite data indicates that 285,000 hectares per year are cleared compared with claims from green groups of 1.8 million hectares per year. Between 43 per cent and 75 per cent of this is woody weeds and regrowth less than five metres tall—and it would ▶

be a statistical improbability for most of the remainder to be anything but older, taller, regrowth.

In NSW, the 150,000 hectares per year clearing estimate that was used to justify clearing controls has since been shown by Landsat analysis to be only 18,000 hectares per year.

Regrowth is also more prevalent in association with cattle-based pastoralism than with sheep-based pastoralism. So it is no surprise that in Victoria—with winter/spring rains and sheep-based pastoralism—the clearing rate is only 3,000 hectares per year, which represents little change from pre-clearing control times.

Furthermore, after 40,000 years of Aboriginal firestick farming, nothing speeds up the regeneration of the evolved forest species more than a fire at seeding time. A recent CSIRO Workshop on Regrowth Management, at Orbost, Victoria, reported that seedlings that germinate in ash beds grow up to five times faster than those that don't.

With good management, native forest growth rates approach those of plantations. Farmers soon learn that there are few more frustrating activities than fighting a paddock that wants to be a forest. And there are 12 million hectares of evidence that they will retain such forest if they can see a value in keeping it or if the return from pastoralism is less favourable.

It should be remembered that most of the *return* from plantations is merely the compound interest on establishment costs. So a forest that costs next to nothing to establish will be far more profitable than one that costs more. It is no coincidence that the nursery sector focuses on volume output and price rather than profitability.

That 12 million hectares can only mean that many farmers already understand the value of trees. The critical pre-conditions for any decision to invest in forestry are:

1. an understanding of the value of trees; and
2. ownership of land or the capacity to acquire land.

Any such individual will, almost certainly, already have native forests on their land, so the 2020 Vision not only ignores about 95 per cent of the target market, but actively antagonizes it.

It fails to recognize farmers' achievements to date, it implies that what they were doing was socially and environmentally unacceptable and it sends a clear message that plantations are to replace their market share and thus reduce the value of their existing forest to zero. It is

the land management equivalent of *terra nullius*.

So most of the current funding is directed at either landowners with prime cropping land (with no economic reason to have more than a token presence of trees) or the urban salaried class who own no land. The forestry bureaucrats spend the money on themselves and blame the resulting failure on, wait for it, '*the lack of a farm forestry culture*'.

#### JUST ONE INSTANCE ...

The failure of all levels of government to address the perceived threats to the harvest security of regenerated native forest is instanced by one seven-hectare site. The policy caused the owner to spend \$40,000 establishing a plantation of introduced (50 per cent exotic) genotypes, the option least favoured by the Pro-Silva Congress—a \$40,000 sacrifice to 'gonzo' forest policy. The site in question is ideal for native regeneration, although only the Europeans and Americans would officially think so. The owner could have assisted the local species to regenerate on the site for less than a sixth

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of the cost (from \$4,000 to \$7,000 in total). But the risk, entirely due to government's plantation fetish, was far too high.

The 70-year-old regrowth stand above that site has mature blackbutt, tallowood and white mahogany. Below the site are early-mature rose gum and brush box, with grey gum, iron bark and blue gum further away. The entire site is well within the normal range of natural seed dispersal, so to reclaim the varied, wet sclerophyll mosaic that most closely resembles the original (and nearby regrowth) forest cover would have needed only minimal effort. At most, all that was needed was a controlled burn at seeding time, weed control and thinning of the emerging seedlings.

After spending \$6,000/ha on plantation establishment, seedlings from nearby stands are already out-performing the planted trees. On the evidence, the natural regeneration of the entire site could have cost well under \$1,000/ha.

This waste of money is all due to public policy. Ironically, \$25,000 of it came from the public purse.

A government grant of \$10,000 was available for plantation establishment but not for native forest regeneration. A tax deduction for the remaining expenditure cost taxpayers a further \$15,000. Nevertheless, the owner still parted with \$15,000—more than double than what was needed for assisted regeneration.

#### THE BROADER CONSEQUENCES

Soon after the plantation just mentioned was established, a neighbouring property with similar potential for forest expansion came up for sale but the owner of the aforementioned site no longer had the cash for a deposit.

That property has since been subdivided into small holdings with eight new predatory cats, eight new access roads, eight new stereos and eight new light sources to ruin the night vision of shy, nocturnal forest-dwelling species (including the forest-owning neighbour). It could have been a self-funding rental property with a new addition to a working native forest, sustainably managed on a 60-year rotation.

Few people understand that, for 21,900 days of a 22,000-day management cycle, a working forest will produce nothing but ecological benefits to the owner and the community. But current policy only shows up for the remaining 100 days when the economic benefits are to be gained. Current policy only examines the last 0.5 per cent of the owner's actions and demands to see a balance of ecological and economic values.

Sadly, this demand is usually made, at the local level, by people who spend most of their time approving new housing developments, etc., that involve the permanent removal of forests or the effective preclusion of them.

To take such an intellectually nourishing activity as tending a forest and bury it in anxiety and fear is not just maladministration, it is an ecological crime.

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