

A Green religious diatribe

Alan Anderson

AFR 18 Jan 2011

With his call for Queensland coal miners to be held responsible for the state's floods, Greens leader Bob Brown has completed his transition from political leader to religious demagogue.

In the wake of the New Orleans floods, fundamentalist preachers claimed that the catastrophe was visited on the city of sin by a vengeful God, angered by tolerance of homosexuality. Now Bob Brown has followed their lead, identifying the Queensland floods as the work of Gaia, punishing Queenslanders for their tolerance of coal-mining.

Brown's call for coal miners to pay for the devastation fails the basic legal test for tort liability: causation. Indeed, the chain of causation is broken at a number of points.

First is the assertion that the Queensland floods are the result of modern greenhouse emissions. If Brown is genuinely fond of the Australian wilderness, he might be familiar with these famous lines of verse: "I love a sunburnt country/ A land of sweeping plains/ Of rugged mountain ranges/ Of droughts and flooding rains".

They were written by Dorothea MacKellar in 1904, 11 years after the 1893 floods took the Brisbane River to a peak of over 8 metres and decades before Brown's climate dogma began to pollute our public discourse.

Indeed, Mackellar's understanding of the Australian climate was superior to that of the climate dogmatists. Less than 4 years ago, Bob Brown was warning of "permanent drought", declaring that "drought is the new norm across Australia's greatest food bowl [the Murray Darling basin]". Tim Flannery exhorted Australians to forget about new dams, because "dams no longer fill even when it does rain".

Science is based on testable hypotheses. The floods do not disprove the broader hypothesis of climate change. They do, however,

vindicate my own hypothesis that the likes of Brown and Flannery have no idea what they are talking about, and that their response to contrary evidence consists of obfuscation and historical revisionism. Their version of science is about as scientific as Scientology.

Even if you accept the floods were caused by human greenhouse emissions, the second break in Brown's chain of causation is the suggestion that Australian coal miners tipped the balance. We could close our coal mines tomorrow, and after a brief scramble to substitute supply by expanding other mines abroad, emissions would increase as before. Australia's domestic contribution is negligible: the growth in Chinese emissions each year is greater than Australia's total emissions!

In reality, coal miners and others who contribute to the Australian economy can claim credit for our resilience to floods. When natural disasters strike developing countries, the casualties are measured in thousands – witness the recent floods in Pakistan or the earthquake in Haiti. Australia's advanced state of economic development, driven in significant part by the mining industry, enables us to mitigate the human impact of such events by orders of magnitude

In any case, if we follow Brown's argument to its illogical conclusion, surely all Australians are to blame for the floods. We all use the cheap power that coal provides, and opinion polls regularly show that Australians have little tolerance for higher electricity prices to address climate change. We are all sinners! Hypocritical Green Senators who compound this sin with a jet-setting lifestyle must be especially culpable.

Sadly, Bob Brown and his Greens oppose the sorts of measures which we are privileged enough to afford – dams to mitigate floods, controlled burn-offs to reduce the intensity of bushfires. Like a medieval monk wearing a hair shirt, he would prefer that we suffer for our imagined sins.

Unlike Bob Brown, I do not care to indulge in casual accusations of murder against opponents. As wrong-headed and hypocritical as he is, I do not hold him responsible for the floods.

However, I am happy to assert that he is a political carrion crow, feeding off the misfortunes of others, and that his attack on coal miners for a disaster which runs directly contrary to his own climate warnings of 4 years ago, while the waters are still receding and the bodies still being discovered, is an act of base hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy.

We live on an island continent that is renowned for its hostile and unforgiving environment. Natural disasters have shaped the Australian character since its inception. They will continue, long after Brown and his eccentric religion have been consigned to history.

Alan Anderson was a senior adviser to former Treasurer Peter Costello