

Muddying the Waters...

(Less than 'Good Oil' from *The West Australian*)

PETER PURCELL

Most of us see environmental matters through the window of the media—but are they always trustworthy?
Peter Purcell looks at a typical example

THE public's 'right to know' is a prominent item in the journalists' credo, and deservedly so. When a journalist provides a clear and concise statement of all the relevant facts, the reader is able to understand the world better, and to make more informed decisions about community and national matters.

The converse, of course, is that the journalist who does not report all the facts, or actually misrepresents them, can do a considerable public disservice. That has been the case recently with *The West Australian* on several stories about the environmental significance of oil exploration activity in that State's northwest.

A cartoon in the 7 February 1997 *West Australian* showed an offshore drilling rig, with a whale-shark and several people impaled on the drilling pipe, their blood flowing into the water and gushing out of the top of the well; WA Environment Minister Cheryl Edwards and drillers on the rig floor are being splattered by the blood, and the Minister asks, confused, 'Red oil?'

Such a graphic and gory image certainly gave the public a very clear editorial comment on the dangers of offshore oil exploration. The public, in turn, might well expect there to be good and factual reasons for such an emotionally-charged message.

It is alarming, therefore, to realise that the oil-well being accused of murder, albeit metaphorically, wasn't even offshore: it was onshore Cape Range, near Exmouth in northern Western Australia, and over a kilometre from the ocean (see map on the next page).

The related front page story said that the Minister had 'ridden roughshod over conservationists and opened the way for drilling on Cape Range'.

What the Minister had done was accept the advice of the regulatory authority, the Environmental Protection Act Appeals Convener, who had, after due

review, rejected the appeal against the project by the Conservation Council. Part of the reasoning was the fact that 40 oil-wells have been drilled previously on the Cape (see map), apparently without any significant damage to the environment, given the claims of the Cape's ongoing high conservation values.

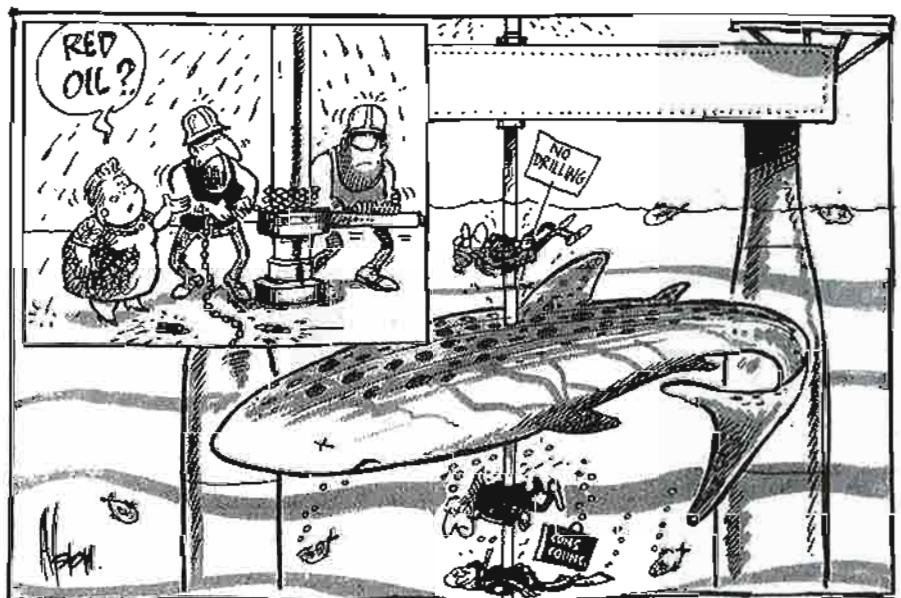
How does such a legitimate government process come to be categorised in the press as 'riding roughshod'?

Otherwise, the article was reasonably balanced. The Minister came across as being very much off-balance, but that was of her own making; when contacted by the journalist, the Minister should have stood her ground and explained the reasons for the decision clearly and carefully. The announcement that she had changed her mind and decided that a formal environmental assessment of the proposed drilling was necessary, may not have been a spur-of-the-moment, panicked response, but that is how it looked and how it was reported internationally.

The message it sent to the public was that the Conservation Council had been correct in its opposition to the drilling. The Alston cartoon is another matter. Running such an inaccurate and misleading cartoon on the op-ed pages raises serious questions about editorial policy that need to be examined and answered.

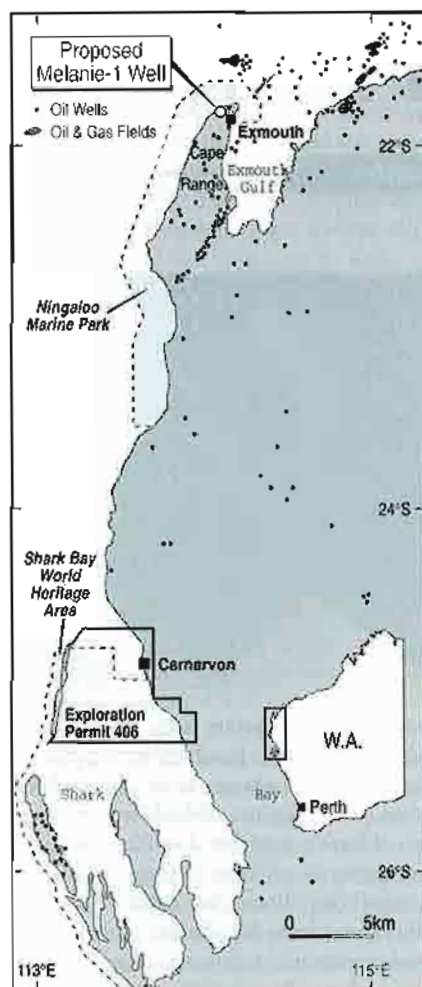
On 5 March, the same *West Australian* editorial policy sponsored a cartoon showing dead dolphins floating near a drilling rig in Shark Bay, and a forest of oil-wells, all blowing out oil, in the Pinnacles national park, north of Perth.

The underlying issue on that occasion was the front-page report that the Court Government had given 'the go-ahead for oil and gas exploration in World Heritage-listed areas of pristine Shark Bay'. Green groups, the Federal opposition, the Democrats and even Federal Environment Minister Robert Hill were said to be furious that the permit had been granted in November 1996 'without public consultation'.



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REVIEW



The fact is that the 1988 Shark Bay Region Plan, on which World Heritage listing for Shark Bay was based, explicitly acknowledges petroleum exploration and production interests and notes that exploration may continue there. The subsequent Plan of Management for the Shark Bay Marine Park, developed by the State Government with extensive public consultation, specifically provides for the possibility of future exploration and production. The WA Minister's granting of Exploration Permit 406 in November 1996 over an area between Bernier Island and the coast, including part of the Shark Bay Marine Park, was entirely consistent with the World Heritage plans for the area.

The fact that the media did not pick up the story until Democrat Senator Meg Lees 'exposed' the matter during question time in March 1997 led some journalists to imply there had been a conspiracy of silence between Government and the companies. What there had been, in fact, was a lack of attention by journalists to publicly-available industry maps, journals and newsletters, which had been reporting the matter throughout much of 1996.

Notwithstanding that, the 5 March article by *West Australian* journalists, Tony Barrass and Geraldine Capp, was reasonably fair, given the material they had to work with—a mix of misjudgement and misinformation from the political leadership on environmental matters, including both the State and Federal ministers.

Opposition environment spokeswoman Carmen Lawrence took the conspiracy route and accused the WA Government of being 'deceptive and sneaky'. Democrat Senator Meg Lees bemoaned the fact that 'a World Heritage area on our coast is opened up to oil and gas exploration'—which means she doesn't know, or doesn't want the public to know, that the area has been open for exploration for decades. There has been little work because the exploration in the 1960s suggested that the area had low prospectivity.

The flurry of comment from Federal Environment Minister Robert Hill, particularly the references to possible Federal intervention, would also have done little to reassure the public that there was no need for undue concern. Quite the opposite, in fact: it suggested a fundamental conflict between petroleum exploration and conservation values, particularly of the World Heritage category.

It might have been more useful for the Federal Minister to remind the public that it was in recognition of the excellent environmental record of the petroleum exploration and production industry in Australia and world-wide, that the previous Federal Government signed Agenda 21 at the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro. Among other things, Agenda 21 states that 'offshore oil exploration and production activities generally account for a very small portion of marine pollution'.

WA Minister Edwards played a more useful role on this occasion, pointing out that the permit grants the companies only the right to explore, and that formal WA environmental impact assessment procedures will be required

at each stage of exploration to ensure that the environment is properly protected. Her comments appear to have been fairly reported.

What remains unclear is the intent of *The West Australian* in its editorial policy. The headline, the first paragraph and a vitriolic cartoon communicate a very sharp anti-petroleum message that will get the attention of far more people than the article as a whole, regardless of efforts by the journalists to be balanced in their reporting.

Is it a coincidence that *The West Australian* ran an article on 10 March, announcing that the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Wilderness Society were 'so appalled at the State government's environmental record that they have put WA at the top of their agendas and are planning major campaigns here this year'? And that both have mining (including petroleum exploration) in national parks as a main issue?

Is *The West Australian's* editorial policy to promote the agendas of these groups? That is their prerogative, of course, but they have a duty of truth to the public to make that clear.

Whatever the motivation, *The West Australian* is not presenting a balanced view of the significance of petroleum exploration and development activity in WA, be it the major economic impact or the minimal and carefully-managed environmental impact.

The 1995-96 Annual Report by the Australian Maritime Safety Authority on the National Plan to Combat Pollution of the Sea by Oil endorsed the

estimate by the US Academy of Science that only 2 per cent of oil that enters the ocean has any connection with the petroleum exploration and production industry, whereas 50 per cent comes from urban run-off. Of the 349 reports of oil discharged into Australian waters during the year, 74 per cent were in ports; most other sightings were associated with ships, with fishing boats

being the main single source of oil-discharge sightings. None was from offshore oil and gas operations.

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These figures suggest that the main threat from oil pollution to the EP 406 area of Shark Bay would come from the town of Carnarvon, which is within it, and from the extensive use of that port by boats, including a large fishing fleet. There is also the fact that oil tankers pass close to Shark Bay regularly, and also to Ningaloo Reef. Tankers actually enter Exmouth Gulf several times a year to deliver fuel to the Exmouth military base. None of this seems to attract alarmed editorial comment, despite the fact that spillage from tankers during routine operations is a large component of the vessel-related pollution.

(This shouldn't be a surprise, really: the considerable alarm in 1970 when the oil tanker *Oceanic Grandeur* ran aground in Torres Strait led ultimately to the establishment of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, in which oil exploration was banned, but through and near which oil tankers have continued to sail ever since! Over 200 vessels per year bring fuel supplies to Brisbane and other cities. A study conducted several years ago reported one minor spill per week in the park, mainly from fishing boats, with a larger spill every three months, from operational discharge by commercial vessels.)

Misleading statements by pro-environment people, be they journalists or politicians, can have a major influence on community opinion, and the political and economic decisions which those opinions dictate through the political process. The irony is that, however well-intentioned the person, if they promote policies and regulations based on fallacies rather than facts, then their actions are unlikely to be in the best interests of the ecosystem they are trying to protect.



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IPA

The Pyrrhonist

BRIAN TUCKER

The Incurable ABC

I confess to being a regular listener to ABC radio and television, especially news and current affairs programmes. Its commercial counterparts are difficult to take: I find the advertisements inane and intrusive, and the intellectual content much inferior.

Bias is said to be in the eye of the beholder. Nevertheless my enjoyment of the ABC has been spoiled by what appears to me to be a left-wing bias. This perception is shared by many. Despite protestations by those who disagree, it is difficult to find anyone who asserts that it shows any right-wing prejudice. The bias is evident in several aspects of programming: selection of topics, selection of interviewees and selection of material.

There are obvious difficulties in justifying this perception. A carefully constructed and comprehensive survey would be required, and even then the classifications can only be subjective. An approach to some of the broad policy considerations was made by Keith Mackriell in 'Redefining the ABC' in the *IPA Review*, Vol. 49/2, 1996, where he proposes both a requirement fairly to reflect contesting views and a re-examination of corporate sponsorship. He argues that to ensure an honest reflection of controversies there needs to be reference to this in a new ABC Charter and a connection between this charter and the code of practice. He cites some examples which extend to autumn 1996. Little has changed in the following twelve months despite the spotlight focused on the ABC; indeed the attitude of some staffers is petulant and resembles defiant intransigence.

A few ABC performers do not pretend to be other than left-wing advocates. Phillip Adams works hard at being the paramount example, whereas others are more devious in attempting to persuade listeners to their perspective. His argument, that left-wing ABC bias is justified as a response to 'the overwhelming bombast and bigotry that's pouring out of commercial radio', might be expected from an advertising man who regards the air waves as a polemical battleground: he who shouts loudest wins. He seems to think it



entirely appropriate that government should allocate funding in support of propagandists who are working to subvert that government. Others in the same mould are somewhat less obvious in attempting to persuade listeners and viewers to their political perspectives. Of course there are many broadcasters who do appear to strive for objectivity and balance notwithstanding their personal opinions but—in a spirit of corporate solidarity which seems to exist quite independently of the Board—they are naturally reluctant to indict the 'true believers' among their colleagues.

Characteristically the ABC seems to adopt causes and, by constant repetition, to promote selectively one side of a controversy. The aboriginal predicament in Australia is one obvious example. The frequency with which exposure is given to indigenous activists and their sympathisers, rarely critical, far exceeds time allocated to issues concerning any other ethnic group. It is somewhat more than might be expected to be devoted to less than 2 per cent of Australia's population. Another example is the pejorative treatment given to those described as 'economic rationalists', characterised as callous and hard-hearted: only one side of politics cares about people, the other is entirely motivated by self-interest. A third example is the demonising of Pauline Hanson. Whatever one thinks of her, it is difficult not to allocate some blame to the ABC in causing the erroneous perception in South-East Asia of rampant racism in Australia. What other national public broadcaster so eagerly solicits adverse opinions of its country from neighbouring nations

REVIEW

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