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Research that matters.

TITLE: How a minister buckled in the face of a mob of locals

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The Howard Government has made a mockery of the environment and heritage portfolio, turning it into little more than a pork-barrel buffet. But who would have thought that things would stoop to the level where the federal Environment Minister would use environment laws against the environment. This is precisely what occurred on Wednesday when the minister announced that he was using the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act to block a wind-farm development at Bald Hills in Victoria's South Gippsland, supposedly on the grounds that the wind turbines would threaten the survival of the endangered orange-bellied parrot.

The risk allegedly posed by the wind farm is that the parrots would occasionally collide with the wind turbines, pushing an already precariously posed species closer to extinction.

At first glance, this may sound slightly unbelievable, but bird collisions do occur. Thankfully though, this is a very rare occurrence. Modelling conducted on behalf of the Government suggests that the cumulative effects of collisions with wind farms on the orange-bellied parrot are likely to be the loss of fewer than one bird a year. The real threats to the parrot are habitat loss, predation by feral animals and competition from exotic birds.

And hanging over the species like a dark cloud is climate change. A number of studies, including one quoted as an authority by the Federal Government, have identified the orange-bellied parrot as one of a potentially large number of native species that are at risk of extinction as a result of global warming. Of course, a medium-size wind-farm development in South Gippsland will not halt temperature rises. Yet, there is little doubt that wind energy must constitute an important part of any strategy to cut greenhouse emissions. Don't tell this widely accepted fact to the federal Environment Minister - he buckled in the face of a mob of locals who would rather efforts to address climate change occurred in somebody else's backyard.

Worse still, rather than admitting that he lacked the political fortitude to approve the project, the minister decided to sell us the line that his actions were motivated by his concern for the parrots.

You see, the minister is actually a biodiversity lover - well, that's what he'd like us to believe. A quick review of how the Act has been used - or left unused - will give you an idea of how ridiculous this proposition is. Over the past decade, about four million hectares of native vegetation has been cleared in Queensland alone. Yet, not one land-clearing proposal has been stopped as a result of the Act.

The fishing statistics are even worse. There are at least 17 Commonwealth-managed fisheries that are currently over-fished, but not a single fishing activity has ever even been referred to the minister for approval under the Act.

In total, only three development proposals have ever been refused approval under the Act's environmental assessment provisions, the third being the wind farm at Bald Hills.

Adding to the absurdity of the situation is the fact that the orange-bellied parrot hasn't been seen around Bald Hills for years and the closest "potential" foraging habitat is about 10-35km away. There are certain places where wind farms are inappropriate and planning restrictions are necessary to guarantee that highly valued natural and cultural landscapes are protected. Surely though, an agricultural area that contains little native vegetation, no striking natural features, and no places of national or state heritage significance does not reach the necessary conservation threshold. The Victorian Government didn't think so, and quite rightly approved the project.

But don't let good policy get in the way of the federal Environment Minister and a political opportunity.

Just as the minister jumped at the chance to use the Act to try to stop the Victorian Government from excluding graziers from high-value conservation areas in the Alps, he seemed drawn to this development.

Of course, he could not simply say he was knocking this project back because there were a small collection of disgruntled locals, so he chose to dress up NIMBY concerns in ecological garb.

It is ludicrous to suggest that we should stop a wind-farm development on the grounds that there is a tiny risk that a very small number of orange-bellied parrots could be killed when we know climate change could wipe out this and many other species within 50 years.

The Government's own study on the impacts of wind farms on the species says that stopping these developments would have "extremely limited beneficial value to conservation of the parrot without addressing very much greater adverse effects that are currently operating against it".

If nothing else, Minister Campbell is certainly audacious. The price we pay, though, is high - here it was a \$220million project that would help curb our greenhouse emissions.

What next?

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