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TITLE: Whalers are an easy target

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What is it Australian politicians are afraid of? They can't seem to take a strong stand on important environmental questions. In a rapidly changing world it's reassuring that a few constants remain in Australian politics. Like the sounds of cicadas in the summer bush, the sounds of Australian politics always take on a distinctly summer hum in December.

Of course there is the buzz of leadership speculation, which does a great job of giving the parliamentary press gallery something to write about when there is absolutely nothing happening in Parliament. Not even the bogong moths are in the building at this time of year. Then there is the inevitable big picture visioning from whoever is acting prime minister while the real one takes a well deserved break. This year's missive from Wayne Swan lacks some poignancy, however, as it is the Foreign Minister, Kevin Rudd, not the Deputy Prime Minister whose leadership baton is allegedly closest to the top of his rucksack.

And then there is the inevitable political posturing about whaling and what, if anything, we should do about it. For the major political parties, expressing concern about whaling is the cheapest environmental credentialism going. Everybody, including me, likes the idea of whales swimming around, eating some krill, and putting on a great show of tail-slapping every now and then.

For the average Australian politician, opposing whaling is as intuitive as opposing the hunting of panda bears. It's not that the overwhelming majority of the Australian public are on the side of the animals that makes it so easy for our elected representatives to oppose whaling; in fact, that has almost nothing to do with it. What makes opposing whaling a political no-brainer is that Australia no longer has a whaling industry.

Consider, for example, the political contempt for majority opinion in relation to some other environmental issues.

The vast majority of the Australian public wants our elected leaders to listen to the scientists when setting emission reduction targets for greenhouse gases. But they don't. Instead they listen to the Australian steel industry, aluminium industry and other so-called "emissions-intensive, trade-exposed" sectors and set our 2020 target at 5per cent when the science says we need to cut by between five and 10 times that amount.

The vast majority of Australians support a nationwide moratorium on coal seam gas exploration until we better understand the environmental and agricultural consequences of polluting our underground water aquifers, but the major political parties don't. Giant fossil fuel companies such as Santos have spent millions on television advertisements, and who knows how much behind the scenes, to secure ongoing political support for their risky business. Like whaling, the public might support a halt, but unlike whaling, a halt might cost big companies a lot of money.

Finally, the vast majority of the Australian public support saving the Murray River from the consequences of excess water extraction by farmers. While it is true that those at the bottom of the Murray, like South Australians, are more concerned than those towards the top, like NSW irrigators, the desire to protect the river and its ecosystems is widely held across Australia. But, just like tackling climate change and introducing a moratorium on coal seam gas exploration, the major political parties have found it easier to deliver words than water when it comes to the Murray.

Just imagine what the political debate about whaling would sound like if, as was the case a few decades ago, a few thousand Australians earned a living killing whales. Those calling for an end to Australian whaling would no doubt be criticised for being extremists who put the interests of animals ahead of the interest of whaling communities.

Then there would be the economists who, for a large fee, would use their alchemy to turn a small number of jobs into a large number of jobs through the misuse of "the multiplier effect". For the record, it's true that the multiplier effect exists but it is untrue that it only applies to those who work in forestry, mining or whaling. Indeed, the multiplier effect actually applies just as well to public sector jobs as it does to private sector jobs, but we don't hear much about that whenever further cuts to the public sector are proposed.

And finally there would be a few folks running the argument that, because Australia is a small country and the world's oceans are so big, any decisions made in Australia would be irrelevant.

Luckily Australians ignored all of those arguments back in the 1970s and '80s and banned whaling because it was the right thing to do. But, sadly, 30 years later many of our political leaders are happy to still trade on that momentary lapse of economic obsession. Many of them are using their ongoing support for the hard decisions made by their predecessors on whaling as a substitute for making their own hard decisions about climate change, coal seam gas and the Murray River. And the summer whaling season is a great time to do it. The supporters of whaling in Japan cite the local jobs and cultural significance of whaling just as opponents of restoring environmental flows of water to the Murray do here in Australia. The supporters of

whaling in Japan claim that there are lots of whales and their actions don't make a global difference, just as opponents of setting ambitious national emission-reduction targets do here in Australia.

There is no question that whaling is cruel and unnecessary and should be banned. But there is a big question about how some Australian politicians would act if they had to take on a domestic whaling industry in order to hold that view. Would they act on their conscience? Would they act on the views of the vast majority of Australians? Or, like with climate change, coal seam gas, protecting the Murray River, ending live beef exports or ending old growth logging, would they seek to "balance" the desires of the public with the "interests" of industry? Protecting the environment is politically easy when it only involves taking on powerful industry groups in other countries but, it seems, it is much harder when those industries are active in Australia. What is hard to understand, however, is that even though the mining industry is 83per cent foreign-owned and can't vote in Australian elections, many of our politicians are more afraid of offending those foreign companies than they are of ignoring the views of millions of Australians.

I wonder what it is that so many politicians are afraid of? And I wonder if Japanese politicians have the same fears?

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