

Hunter Valley Research Foundation 2006 Lecture Series

Lecture 2
Wednesday, 30 August 2006



Patrice Newell ***Creating community through conflict: How environmental issues can bring town and country together***

I begin by acknowledging that we are on the ancestral land of the Awabakal people. They've lived here for tens of thousands of years. This acknowledgement has become customary at white fella gatherings -in what we call Australia- to acknowledge, and, where possible, identify the name or names of the people who lived here long before the pyramids were built.

This is Awabakal country. I'd like to thank the Hunter Valley Research Foundation for inviting me this evening.

I speak of a time when there were 500 indigenous languages spoken in our country. Too few survive today. My daughter Aurora has returned from a week in what we call Arnhem Land where she mingled with almost 1000 aboriginal people who spoke one or more of 15 different languages, often English wasn't one of them.

Names are important. Our pre-names, our surnames, the names of our streets and suburbs and cities. Not only do they help the postman deliver the mail but they're central to our identity. The names British colonials gave to places are frequently sentimental echoes of the old country, Newcastle, Scone, Aberdeen.

Other names derive from those of explorers, British prime ministers or minor colonial officials. Most know that Darwin is named after Charles – the most influential scientist in history - but how many Melbournians know who Melbourne was? (Second viscount William Lamb Melbourne-famous for marrying Lady Caroline Lamb who had a raging affair with Lord Byron. He was home secretary, Prime Minister and father figure to Queen Victoria when she took the throne at 18 years of age). How many Sydneysiders know who Sydney was? (Thomas Townsend Sydney British politician who was Home Secretary when the first settlers reached New Holland.)

My husband Phillip Adams spent a week making programs along the Murray River- from the source to its dry mouth. Not even the official in charge of the great Murray Darling Project, let alone the people who live along the length of the river knew who Murray was. (Sir George Murray (1772-1846) Secretary of State for the Colonies) Nor did they know that the Murray River has at least fifteen other names- aboriginal names - as it flows from the mountains to the sea.

I mention this because we're here tonight connected by – amongst other things - the Hunter River. I live at the head of the Hunter catchment – at present very impacted by climate change. All of us here in Newcastle - named for that great English coal city -

know the Hunter region well. But do we know who Hunter was? Do we know? Do we care? Well, we should.

We need to know a lot more than names. We have to know a lot more about the world in which we live and the rivers on which we depend.

We forget that we have tens of thousands of years of experience living along the Hunter that could be of profound importance to our future which flows from the past like a river gathering strength from its tributaries.

Tonight's topic? **Creating Community through Conflict. How environmental issues can bring town and country together.**

Is rather a grand title. I chose it because I've been engaged in three local environmental issues that have occupied much of my time since 1995.

First it was sub division; the carving up of rural land for housing.

Secondly water reform. How best to share our unregulated stream.

And thirdly, since 2001, I've been trying to stop an open cut coal mine BICKHAM COAL MINE, from opening at the very head of the Hunter Valley Catchment.

When we arrived in February 1987 I set about trying to learn as much as I could about every tiny fragment of land along the Pages – a river that contributes to the Hunter.

Our homestead was build at a place we call Elmswood where two rivers, the Isis and the Pages converge. The Isis is named for an Egyptian god, but years of research has failed to clarify the identity of Mr (or Mrs) Pages. Let that be a symbol of our ignorance, that even the most recent history is so quickly forgotten let alone the ancient history of the people who knew the rivers so much better than us.

Our homestead stands where the Wonnarua people once lived. The little town of Gundy was once their campsite. And once, 100 carved trees existed at the junction of the river.

I wanted to understand the environmental, geological, and agricultural complexities of this tiny area. Other people have tried hard too, all creating pieces of the jigsaw of knowledge. For years, botanist Travis Peake has been mapping the native vegetation of the Hunter Region and hopefully recording it before much of it disappears. I also discovered Helen Brayshaw, a member of the family who once owned our farm. She is a fine regional historian and archaeologist and it's been my honour to accompany her on journeys up the river banks and to read her work on the aboriginal peoples of the Upper Hunter Valley.

One also needs to learn of a more ancient history, one that no human being has experienced. I'm talking about the millions of years that created mountain peaks and valleys. The millions of years of great geological events. Once again, my researches have introduced me to extraordinary people like the geologist Professor John Roberts.

In every rock slide, with every giant boulder in a creek bed, there is a revelation. John can scoop up a handful of pebbles and fascinate me with their history and significance. His learning and knowledge has become an important part of a great battle that now consumes me and many of my friends in the Upper Hunter, for he is helping us in our fight to prevent a coal mine from destroying our river.

This is the story I am going to tell you. It is also a story of how a potential environmental crisis creates community. Natural disasters destroy communities. Tsunamis can wipe out hundreds of villages, a cyclone can destroy a major city like New Orleans which will never, can never, return to what it was. San Francisco was devastated by the great earthquake and the fire that followed it and is doomed to be destroyed again. The only question is when?

The Boxing Day tsunami saw people from around the region and the world rush to help. Television played a major part, as it did when images of the human suffering during the Ethiopian famine were sent around the world and in the words of a BBC reporter created 'a meeting place of strangers'. The same thing happened after the tsunami. Millions around the world sent donations to help the total strangers whom they would never know. In Australia we've seen flood, drought and cyclone produce the same wave of empathy. Darwin's Cyclone Tracey is our best known example.

But now we are living in an era when natural disaster is aided and abetted by us – it involves a process that is less immediate, less dramatic, and less photographic than an earthquake, a tsunami, or a cyclone. Climate change.

One of the world's greatest scientists James Lovelock, author of the Gaia hypothesis, asks that we see our planet as an immense organism, a living creature with lungs and a respiratory and circulatory system not unlike our own, that seeks to balance temperature and keep us healthy. He fears the planet is now deeply, perhaps terminally, ill because of climate change and believes that in this century billions of human beings will perish. Lovelock suggests that only a 'few breeding pairs of humans' may survive, with most of the world destroyed by drought or inundation.

While his is the darkest of the scenarios, 98 percent of refereed science by the greatest scientific minds of our time agree – that the planet, is in peril and yet, we manage to put it out of our minds. Because it is gradual rather than dramatic.

It is a process, not a single event. It is only when the dynamics of climate change produce an unprecedented drought or killer cyclones that we take much notice.

And yet these dynamics are part of the background that I've been writing about in *The Olive Grove*, *The River*, and *Ten Thousand Acres*.

This is the over-arching background, the mega content if you will of what I say tonight.

I've witnessed and participated in a changing community that is presently facing one of the biggest ecological conflicts of recent history. Instead of tearing our community apart, it's forcing a re-evaluation of what 'community' means and more importantly what sort of community we want.

My desk faces a fireplace. I gave up the open fire because I got sick of lugging wood upstairs and ash downstairs. So I pushed the desk up against it and slowly stuck various notes, photos and quotes over the marble mantelpiece. As I sat at my computer to write this speech I realised the history of what I'm about to say is captured in those quotes. These sayings are at the heart of the very ideas that have kept me focused and determined to participate in my community.

The first quote on my wall is from anthropologist, Margaret Mead. It has been with me in every house I've ever lived in.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Now there's a lot in Mead's two sentences, but the word that jumps out at me is change...change the world. We're always hearing about how change is happening faster than ever. Bill Gates boasts about it. He knows that being fast is what will give him the edge. And we all know we'll commiserate in conversations about how change is too fast. Yet, I like change. It's exciting. Life, the passing of time, must offer change – because the alternative, no change is static, restricting, terrifying. So I meet the challenge of change with enthusiasm. The issue at hand is that I want to choose the type of change. But, I don't want to be a bureaucrat; I don't want to be the town planner or the Minister for Planning. But I want to feel that I can contribute to the evolution of my environment. I want to feel I have a right to contribute. We all do.

Where there is a problem, slowly and surely alliances form. Neighbours who have fought over fences can join forces to fight for something like the saving of a river/ the protection of a water course/ a catchment/an aquifer/ a region's water security. People who wouldn't talk to each other because of socio economic or religious differences, or some scandal in the dim past, can join forces to fight for an issue that is way bigger than themselves. It has been fascinating to observe people putting aside deep divisions to share a common vision.

City friends often say to me, 'do you feel part of the community up there?' And the answer has always been that YES, I do. I didn't move up to Gundy to broaden my social life, but once you chose to be part of a community gates and doors open.

Yes, advocacy is a type of agitation. Sometimes it can start with a wound, but even when it is oppositional – it eventually leads to a discussion on what the opposite of the opposition is.

So you want to stop a coal mine, a sub division, a dam, a marina, a high rise, a freeway? Then you need to ask, if not that ...what? If not an open cut coal mine, what? If not water for dust suppression, then water for what? And when you start to

ask these questions, the possibilities to dream and imagine the community that you want, that I want, that we all want begins. Are we sharing dreams? Are we imagining the same things? Thus what might start off as a negative is soon turned into a positive.

It's a negative capability.

I mean negative capability, that is, when man is capable of being despite uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after the fact and reason.

- Keats in a letter to Benjamin Bailey (Saturday 22 November, 1817)

In business we're always working in the business, in the 'here and now' of the business and, at the same time, planning for the future. Business requires us to have a double life, to have two thoughts happening simultaneously.

The poet John Keats, believed that having 'double thoughts', feeling the opposite of a positive, was essential to good poetry. He wrote about negative capability in a letter emphasising its importance. When I mentioned Keats's negative capability in my latest book it amazed me how many letters and questions it prompted.

Negative capability is in fact a positive state to be in, to simply just quietly feel the truth of what is happening. This is important. Coal mining and environmental activism are caught up in so many facts and figures and 'expert' reports and opinions that the truth of what is happening, the truth of the feeling can often be lost.

Clearly, in middle age - I speak of myself here - we draw on information and links from our past. We call on ideas that have passed the test of time, ideas we trust. I grew up with Keats, I trust him, I trust his ideas, I enjoy reading his words because they are full of a searching, a yearning, a vision for a beautiful world, a longing for deep understanding, for a deep sense of belonging...in geography, in place, in the hearts and minds of people – of lovers, family and community. He wrote for everyone. This is where the depressing sense of powerlessness that a community can feel when opposing a development can transform into a beautiful thing.

When I first learned about the Bickham Coal Mine proposal back in 2001, I thought it was a bad joke. An open cut coal mine next to the Pages River, an unregulated stream we'd just spent four years trying to save by working out a water sharing plan? A river already over-allocated with licenses? I was actually writing a book about the Pages - called *The River*. The Pages is considered one of the most biologically important streams to the Hunter because it enters the Hunter below Glenbawn Dam. The Pages also has the Cameron's Gorge Nature Reserve along it, just downstream from the mine site, one of the first areas that Bob Carr as Environment Minister had gazetted.

I phoned the owner of Bickham Coal who assured me it was a small development. It would be a small open cut coal mine on both sides of the Pages River. But don't worry. Engineering solutions fixed problems these days.

I put the phone down and felt a strange sense of unease. But I didn't hang up thinking. "I'm not going to let them do that!" I told a few people about the conversation, wrote up some notes and emailed them around.

One friend said to me (and I can hear him as clear to day as I did back in 2001), "You're not going to try and stop a coal mine are you?" This was, he was sure, the dumbest, most idiotic waste of time imaginable. "You can't stop a coal mine. No one can stop a coal mine. King Coal had precedence. Forget it. Get over it."

I'm not sure how much of his scorn was a motivator for me but it helped. Being told you can't, or shouldn't, is always an inspiration.

The owner of the mining company also told me that he was going 'save Murrurundi' because 'it needs economic activity, it needs jobs'. His open cut coal mine was going to be the best thing that could happen to Murrurundi. JOBS JOBS JOBS. It's very hard to say NO to the creation of a job. That cuts to the heart of what capitalism is all about. Individuals dreaming and creating employment, providing security through work etc. But are all jobs equal?

Well, would you work for a company that makes land mines or addictive drugs? If the answer is NO, then we can assume that you have some ethics about where you work. I want to work back from that idea.

Coal is to the Hunter Valley what computers are to Silicon Valley. Take away coal and we wouldn't be sitting here tonight near one of the world's biggest coal exporting ports. I'm sure many of you sitting in the audience have a direct family connection to coal. Maybe money for coal has paid for tonight's event? Getting away from coal is hard to do in the Hunter Valley.

The reason why it is an issue today is that we now know the real ecological impacts that extracting coal and exporting coal are having, not only on our ecology but also the world's.

We wouldn't work for a company that made land mines. Should we work for a company that exports the very substance that is creating climate change and therefore the potential demise of more life forms than at any time since the death of the dinosaurs? If 98 percent of all the scientists in the world agree climate change is happening and CO2 emissions are part of the problem, do you want to be working for a company that extracts or exports CO2 emission?

When you are faced with an open cut coal mine happening along your watercourse and people tell you they need jobs, these are the kinds of questions that get asked. Suddenly we try to piece together the bigger picture. If you dig up the coal, take the water out of the aquifer, spray it over the dirt to suppress dust, fracture rock, and open up the possibility of the river draining into the coal pit, the aquifer is polluted,

and then the coal is exported overseas and burns to release more CO₂. That adds to climate change and explains why we're having the worst drought in Australian history.

Do you want to work for a company that causes climate change?

Do you want to work for a company that may divert a river into a coal pit?

A river that's crucial to three towns, Murrurundi, Blandford and Gundy?

Do you want to work for a company that will gouge out the aquifer at the head of a catchment and possibly pollute an aquifer that feeds three towns in our case, Wingen, Parkville and Scone?

The answer may NOT be yes.

Another quote that I like –

“During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.” George Orwell.

When I say it, it makes me feel brave and often I don't feel brave. But I always want to feel brave. It's a good line to remember when one feels the obstacles before you are vast.

Soon after Bickham Coal Mine was announced, a group of people living close to the mine site formed an association – an action group, and called a public meeting opposing the mine. I went along. They elected a president, vice president and secretary and signed up over one hundred members, many of whom parted with \$50 that night for the privilege. They weren't sure what exactly they were going to do but they were going to try and find out what the mine proposal really meant.

George Orwell would have been proud of them.

“During times of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act!”

I never knew I had revolutionaries as neighbours.

The mine proposal reminds me of another organisation that likes creating craters, the Bush administration.

It's into waging wars and seeks justifications for doing so. It coerces its security organisation - the CIA - into doctoring information, cooking the books to provide excuses for an invasion, and those who oblige the White House finish up looking foolish, discredited and dishonoured.

Our war is a war on the environment. Mining companies have been known to persuade and coerce so called environmental consultants and hydrologists into telling them what they want to hear. Good people sell out and sell their integrity. After years of being on the right side in environmental arguments they take the money. They remind me of that wonderful poem about the wood cutter taking his axe into the

forest – how the wooden handle of his axe becomes a traitor to the trees. I've seen too many people become traitors to the environment. Too many consultants become weapons of mass destruction, no better than the bribed scientists who parrot the mining industry's climate change denials.

Edmund Burke said:

“All that is necessary for the triumph of evil - is that good people do nothing”

You can imagine how community consultative committee meetings began. Communities and environmental groups simply asking what is going on. The government agrees and says that the companies should tell the communities what's going on, let's make them set up consultative committee meetings. Let's make these committees part of the approval process.

But what happens is that mining companies reveal the information they choose to reveal, when they want to, sometimes a little ahead of time when they actually begin doing it. But so what? Are we - the community - meant to be pleased about this? Pleased to be told in a meeting that overburden will rise 100 metres beyond the hill, blow dust into our house, spontaneously combust, that rubble will drain into creek beds, the pH of the water could change, that salinity is likely, that we'll hear explosions, that water from the hard rock aquifer will be used to settle dust, that surrounding stock won't thrive, that subsidence will only be 2 metres?

And will the community feel happy to learn that they can officially complain about violations to conditions, or anything else for that matter and that there's a toll free number you can use? Does being told the news make you feel better? The answer I usually hear is NO.

Mahatma Gandhi said:

“Non co operation with injustice is a sacred duty”

He would have had something to say about consultative committees.

Back in 2001 when I first heard about the mine, I'd been reading and learning about Karl Henry Robert's group The Natural Step. He's a Swedish doctor and he was motivated to form a group that attempted to analyse problems upside down. Instead of getting caught up in the enormity of sustainability problems, the points of dispute, he asked 'What do we agree on?, What do we value? What values do we actually share?'

Today The Natural Step organisation are all over the world and they've gone into companies to try and help them analyse and understand how sustainable they are and how they can improve. I had been talking to one of the directors of TNS [here in Australia] who lives up at Coal Point, Joe Herbertson. He was helping me understand the work that TNS are doing. We agreed that the Bickham Coal Mine proposal could

go through the motions of TNS, that is, be analysed with all stakeholders, etc and we could really have an open dialogue.

Joe and I held meetings with the local council and they thought the idea was good. We met local anti-mine people and they thought it was good. Then we met the owner of Bickham Coal and even he thought it was good. Jo and I even went as far as booking a venue to have the first meeting and I even discussed the catering for the day. That's how sure we were that this was going to happen. But then, the owner of the mining company showed us the little diagram that the DMR sends out to all potential miners to help define what they have to do before a mining license is granted. Once Bickham Coal got their head around that little bureaucratic task, the last thing they wanted to do was participate in a truly open and transparent community discussion using the Natural Step process. Suddenly, our phone calls weren't answered and in the end they told us that they would be doing community consultation anyway. So they didn't need yet another thing to do to get their approval.

So we're stuck with community consultation committees that don't even begin to understand the meaning of the word consult.

This brings me to a new word, **solastalgia**.

This is a word thrown into the community debate in the Hunter by Glenn Albrecht, the environmental philosopher from Newcastle University. It's a word evolved from a word we know well. Nostalgia...NO-STALGIA, a 'comfort food' word used to refer to a sentimental longing for the past. Nostalgia used to be a medical condition up until the middle of the 20th century. You could actually die from it, pining for the home land, pining for the past, for the familiar. Dislocation from place could and often would make you ill. Imagine the nostalgia aboriginal communities must have felt.

Solastalgia is a spin on that because it takes into account the fact that for many of us here we have not been displaced, forced to move, rather the change is happening right around us. It is the pain experienced when there is recognition that the place where you live and love is under physical assault. It's attacking one's sense of place, one's sense of belonging and the feeling is one of dislocation, and the homesickness one gets while still at home."

Development usually means building something, and in Australia building an urbanised world. Development transforms landscapes, it can change the ecology of a place to such an extent that one feels disjointed and it's a change that we are agreeing to let happen. I think of this each day when I irrigate. Should I? Can I? How can I not? How much of the problem am I creating? Is watering olives, keeping cattle that drink a lot, a good idea for this changing environment?

If you work in a land mine factory you are part of the land mine industry, if you work in a coal mine, you are part of the CO2 emission industry. Does it make you feel good? Are you suffering from **sola-stalgia**? And yet, if you ask someone if they want

development in their community they say YES. We want development. We want growth. We want change that includes us. We want to be able to look to the future and believe it is going to be better than the present. We demand improvement.

The old vision that economic growth is automatically going to make us happy doesn't stick any more. For years we have not been counting correctly. We've not counted the true costs of economic growth. One of them is the ecological deterioration and the other is the social deterioration.

The threat of a coal mine at the head of the Hunter has brought so many people together intellectually and socially, but most of all in their minds, to think and ask some of the toughest questions around.

'If not a coal mine what?' The best agriculture in the world? The best water management in the world? The best community in the world? The safest place in the world? The freshest air? The most biologically diverse? What exactly are we imagining?

To create the best community we have to start dreaming it. So in another one of those quotes on my wall says George Bernard Shaw:

"I see things the way they are and ask, why? I dream of things that never were and ask, Why not?"

With Bernard Shaw's wise words I end. Thank you.