



St Columba
Anglican School



Dr Gordon Burch
MRurSci, PhD, FAIAS, MAIFST

The Burch Sustainability and Environmental Centre Opening 5th March 2021

The funding support of the Commonwealth Government has been essential for the School to complete this project and we express our gratitude to the Federal Member for Cowper, Mr Pat Conaghan, who is celebrating the opening of this building with us today.

This is a moment for reflection but also to cast our thoughts into the future.

Concern for, and interest in protecting the environment that supports all life on earth has been threaded through my entire career.

The science that leads to understanding life's complex processes and how this understanding can be used to better protect this planet has been my consuming passion.

St Columba has created this building to educate and excite our students to germinate this same passion in their lives. We pray it will be their 'lives' and the contribution they make in years to come that will collectively better sustain this planet.

As I discovered, our students will need to be able to step beyond their comfort zone once they gain an insight into the trauma being imposed by human impacts on this planet.

After my PhD studies I joined CSIRO in 1977. I was funded by the Department of Defence to investigate the deterioration of their many defence training areas.

In the early 1980s, there emerged a much wider concern for the degradation of the Australian landscape, particularly in the Murray-Darling Basin. In 1982 and 1983 devastating dust storms hit Adelaide, Melbourne and Canberra.

On 5th March 1983, the Labour Party swept into power and Bob Hawke became Prime Minister. John Kerin was also elected and then appointed as Minister for Primary Industries, and then elevated into the Hawke inner Cabinet in recognition of the serious problems facing agricultural lands.

Hawke faced some serious economic issues in 1983. I got a very valuable lesson watching Hawke negotiate a consensus between his government, industry and the unions to develop his landmark "Prices and Income Accords". These became the foundation of the Hawke-Keating Economic Reform program.

I believed the same approach could be applied to the issue of land degradation. If we could develop a consensus between the scientists, industry and government an exciting opportunity existed for us to provide the funding and commitment urgently needed to reform land management practices in Australia.

I then immersed myself in the politics of science, the rural and mining industries, and the government of the day. I was definitely out of my comfort zone.

In 1983 I became President of the Australian Society of Soil Science and an Executive member of the Australian Geoscience Council.

This Council included membership of all the major mining and petroleum industry associations, including the Australian Mineral Industry Council. The Mineral Industry Council was a very powerful lobbyist to the Hawke Government.

With a coalition of the minerals and petroleum industries, the National Farmer's Federation and the Australian Institute of Agricultural Science we were able to gain the support of John Kerin, Minister for Primary Industries, for the Government to take some important initiatives.

We convinced John Kerin to establish a new scientific bureau, the "Bureau of Rural Resources", to give the Government independent scientific advice on combating land degradation and on the more sustainable management of the nation's rural resources. It became a sister Bureau to the existing and much respected "Bureau of Mineral Resources". In 1987 I was appointed as a Director of the new Bureau, with responsibility for agriculture lands, native and cultured forests, crops and pastures, and establishing a high tech data inventory and analysis facility (which began monitoring climate change).

One visible and enduring achievement of this initiative has been the "Landcare Program", funding and promoting sustainable land management practices nationwide for over 30 years.

Now we wind forward to the present day. Last week, Sir David Attenborough addressed the UN Security Council to alert all world leaders that climate change is now the most urgent environmental threat ever faced by humanity, and it is directly the result of human impacts.

Deforestation and excessive exploitation of natural resources, particularly in areas such as the Amazon basin, is diminishing the earth's capacity to rectify the imbalance in carbon dioxide emissions.

The world urgently needs a consensus to take action on climate change and achieve a more sustainable balance between economic development and care for the environment.

This building will be a symbol in this School of the teaching and learning needed to equip our students with the skills required to combat climate change and create a sustainable planet.

It is very encouraging to find the Environment Minister for the NSW Government, Matt Kean, negotiating with all sides of the political spectrum to build a consensus for achieving sound environmental outcomes for the coalition parties of the NSW Government.

As the leader of the moderate faction of the NSW Liberal Party, he could have an important future influence in encouraging the Commonwealth Government and other States and Territories to develop policies to address climate change and environmental degradation.

Australia has a unique opportunity to establish a green economy based on its scientific and technological capability, and the abundance of land for solar energy generation, which could be used to manufacture alternative and emerging fuel sources such as hydrogen.

We have a growing number of entrepreneurs willing to invest in these industries. The steel magnate Sanjeev Gupta, Andrew Forest, and Veena Sahajwalla. Veena has already commercialised the recycling of car tyres for green steel production which is achieving worldwide adoption.

At Coffs Harbour, the Federal Government is providing financial support for a start-up company, "Plastic Collective", to reduce plastics entering the ocean.

I have seen commercial solar and wind installations being built around Wellington NSW, on land previously owned by my forebears.

We can be optimistic about the contribution Australians can make to create a more sustainable future, and reverse the trend of CO2 emissions driving global warming, which will be an impending disaster for the whole of humanity.

As a nation we have achieved world-wide recognition for taking careful notice of the scientific and medical advice needed to control the COVID pandemic. It has saved the lives of our citizens and preserved our economy in readiness to rapidly recover as vaccines control the virus.

Let us also achieve world-wide recognition by accepting the substantial scientific evidence around climate change and take the urgently needed actions to limit its progression.

I highly commend this School's initiative to construct a facility for nurturing the scientific endeavour of future generations of students to create real environmental changes which might well sustain this planet as a viable environment for all forms of life, especially human life.

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