

# SETTING A NEW POLICY AGENDA FOR THE URBAN FOREST

## (or SORTING THE POLITICAL WOOD FROM THE TREES)

HON DR BOB SUCH MP

In politics timing is critical as is awareness and perception which means we now have the ideal setting and framework for a new, reinvigorated policy agenda for the urban forest.

With all the talk and publicity about global warming, greenhouse gas emissions – it is a fantastic time for the managed tree – it is tree time. The tree has finally arrived after 370 million years!!

The challenge – for all of us is to create an appropriate urban forest. There has never been a better time to sell the importance of trees; in streets, in parks (creating an Urban “Kyoto” Forest). Urban dwellers and others need trees as never before.

The political climate for action is good – despite some “doubters”. We are seeing a greater recognition of global warming and greenhouse gas emissions. Even Politicians are realizing the imperatives for environmental change (that’s partly to do with potential voting change). We need to plant and re-vegetate and make sure that whilst we are fixing the earth’s “roof” (greenhouse gases and global warming) we don’t overlook protection of the existing biodiversity. We need to sell the message of managing the urban environment and that includes the urban forest!

It is much easier now to argue for street trees, trees in parks, trees in front yards, trees in backyards, trees in car parks – there’s hardly a place now that is safe from the tree! Tree hugging is almost acceptable!

Trees are highly visible; most commonly recognised part of the environment (surveys); strong feelings – majority are for trees, a minority is against (don’t like leaves, tree may fall etc.).

But first – I have to declare a conflict of interest. My ancestral name is de la Zouche – Old French, meaning tree stump, from the tree (or unkindly translated by the noted French scholar, David Lawry, to mean thick as a plank!)

What does a tree have in common with Politics and MPs? Not much.

A tree is straight, doesn’t tell porkies. What you see is what you get – it doesn’t spin you along.

You always know where a tree stands!

You are horticulturalists, arborists or in related fields of endeavour. Your outlook, work and practice is based on science. The basis of your knowledge is via the scientific method – research, thesis, objectivity, evidence.

Politics is about conflict – about power – not necessarily objective, not necessarily based on research – often based on prejudice, folklore, ideology, economics and other self-interest.

Politics involves spin – selling a message.

Politics equals more than Party Politics. Whenever you have conflict you have politics. Not all governmental activity is political, eg selling a stamp – but if there is disagreement it is political – politics is everywhere – part of life – unavoidable. Ranges from oral persuasion to warfare (killing).

Why raise this?

Need to know arena you are dealing with. Know thy enemy! Need to know how to deal with issues which means engaging in politics and government at various levels!

Members of Parliament – poor scientific background in the main.

Minister for Water Security has expertise as a brewer – now that's vital science!

You, as arborists, horticulturalists etc, need to explain, educate, “campaign”. Part of the message, not all green is good! (eg weeds, feral plants). Need to explain why!

Not all trees are equal (but is any tree better than no tree?). Need to explain why!

Despite global warming, greenhouse gas announcements, an ecology movement which fired up in the 70s, Departments of the Environment, an Environment Protection Agency, environmental impact statements etc etc, we still have some people who just don't get it. The green environment has not been saved. It is and always will be under threat. We will always have an environment but the question is what kind of environment! There are those who don't understand and sometimes don't want to understand! Electric shock therapy will not help – but education and explanation will!

Therefore you need to lead – not just represent and replicate the present (otherwise we would still be living in caves!). For example, because we planted European trees in certain streets in our colonial past – is it still appropriate to do so today? Maybe – but at least look at alternative plantings?

MPs should also lead but they will often follow the lead of scientists, eg global warming, greenhouse gas issues.

The public expect you, as Professionals, to provide leadership (you have the knowledge and the skills and expertise) but you need a strong spine and resolve to remain committed and withstand attack, ignorance and self-interest.

You need to stop worrying and focus on how to influence MPs and other policy makers via the political process:

- Don't be too modest by selling yourself and your message short!
- Face to face is best.- talk to MPs, Councillors, in person.
- Publications – eg Council publications re plantings, what are we planting and why? Leaflets to new residents.
- Media – newspapers – less influential for younger audience but still important.
- Don't be media shy – talk to your local journalist.
- Talkback radio – very powerful medium – you need to be in it to win the argument.

- Talk to community groups, school groups. Use tree plantings at schools (any excuse will do), Arbor day, etc
- You will need to show “passion” as well as your scientific/other knowledge and skills. Don’t be frightened to show some feeling – what you know and what you do is important.

“And he gave it for his opinion, that whoever could make two Eucalypts or two Corymbias to grow upon a spot of ground where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service to his country than the whole race of politicians put together.”

From *Voyage to Brobdingnag*. With apologies to Jonathan Swift, 1667 – 1745, p 288

- Use Kyoto as part of the urban forest message!
- Use message of street trees and park trees and trees generally – amenity, habitat, shade, increased value of properties.

I am an evangelist for the environment! Why?

Our native vegetation has been seriously denuded and degraded. In 200 years and in some states in less than 200 years “we” have cleared much of the land (less than 30% left in the Mount Lofty Ranges) and in many agricultural areas less than 10% is left). This is an appalling record of environmental destruction. Can we address this – not easily – will need major revegetation programs.

We have lost in Adelaide area alone:

2 native freshwater fish (locally extinct)

*Gadopsis marmoratus* (River Blackfish) and *Mogurnda adspersa* (Southern Purple-spotted Gudgeon)

21 native birds (locally extinct)

eg *Alcedo azurea* (Azure Kingfisher) and *Ninox connivens* (Barking Owl)

102 native plants (locally extinct).

eg *Correa glabra* (Rock Correa) and *Dipodium roseum* (Pink Hyacinth Orchid)

Can street and tree plantings help repair the damage? Can street and tree plantings help save further extinctions of fauna? Probably not in any pure sense.

However, the value is partly as a demonstration effect – shaking off the European cringe factor. This is Australia – we are unique in respect of several things – Aboriginal culture, flora and fauna and unique social history! So we have a responsibility to do all we can to protect, preserve and enhance indigenous flora and fauna. My hit parade: indigenous first, natives second, appropriate exotics third.

By planting appropriate indigenous trees, shrubs and grasses ‘we’ show a commitment to Australian ecology (environment) and to water conservation (yes, some exotics are also water misers) and in so doing encourage the wider populace to follow suit, for example via their back and front yards, where these actions can be beneficial in terms of helping to save threatened bird species, butterflies etc.

Need to explain why we want to rehabilitate creeks – why remove exotics?

Need to explain why we need to manage trees in the urban environment.

I’m not advocating a pure indigenous or native tree planting program but rather a better balance than what we currently have.

We can mix 'n match exotics and natives and indigenous but in some areas, like Adelaide's CBD, we have an exaggerated focus on exotics. Of course exotics can and do play a role in absorbing carbon dioxide so the argument is not about that aspect of the role of a tree.

However, exotic trees generate 'fast food' leaf litter for our creeks and whilst the jury is still out to some extent and yes we can and do sweep streets for leaf litter – why add to the burden of our already heavily degraded urban creeks and rivers? Do we need to be more careful in regard to what we plant and where we plant? But the task again is always explain to the people what you are doing and why!

My initial feeling is that exotic leaf litter in waterways is not likely to be as ecologically desirable as indigenous leaf litter which has been part of the evolutionary process over millions of years. So why compound an already existing problem – the Torrens and other urban waterways struggle now – why give them another ecological headache?

My view is that almost any tree is better than none but some are more appropriate than others! Hence my quest for indigenous plantings!

Trees can't vote but you can and you should take political action in the broad sense of that term beyond mere voting. You can have all the ideas, solutions in the world but you need to translate that into political/governmental action! Otherwise your view remains just that - a view or opinion! My view is that we need to change things for the better!

Ms E – botanist – lovely lady, professional. Last week told me that she only talks to the media if she knows what they'll print (result – little or no media!). We need to work with the media, even if there is a risk of distortion etc. Keep it simple – remember most people don't know much about botany or horticulture! Talk up the benefits!

Darrell N Kraehenbuehl's wonderful but "sad" book on the loss of remnant vegetation in Adelaide highlights vegetation losses because they were not translated into political action – obviously not his fault. The scientific study of trees is important – but it needs to result in an outcome – eg saving remnant vegetation, getting trees planted etc.

Your knowledge and skills need to be translated into governmental action so that it is effective and results in positive change!

You have a triple role: role 1 - scientific/professional; role 2 – "implementer" through your work, eg arborist, horticulturalist, and role 3 - activist! (sometimes a quiet one and often after 5 pm).

South Australia has produced plenty of fine reds over the years but one of the top reds *Eucalypt camaldulensis* has faced and still faces a challenge especially in the urban environment.

The experience of significant tree law here in South Australia has been mixed. The Committee which I chaired (Urban Trees Reference Group) was established with representatives from Government, local government, the development industry and a lone MP (me). It reported in 2000. The original intention was to save big River Red Gums (*E. camaldulensis*) but by the time the Committee reported it had become universal in terms of all big trees (using circumference as the measure of significance).

Initial significant tree protection applied to all trees with a girth of 2.5 metres 1 metre from the ground; later reduced to 2 metre girth 1 metre from ground level.

Some councils wanted to protect smaller trees (1.5 metre trunk circumference) and were able to do so for a while (until 2003) although this measure was resisted by some sections of Government and some private interests. The tree controls have certainly saved some large reds, but smaller trees, eg *Eucalyptus microcarpa* have suffered, along with other trees with a circumference less than 2 metres.

How effective has the law been in protecting significant trees? I would argue that the controls have been partially successful, but on a bright note I see some recent evidence of positive gains, even though we still have some commercial and governmental tree vandals out there. Many significant trees are now being saved because of good professional advice and good management including using the pruning option!

Saving significant trees, like planting trees, costs time and money. I would argue that we need to look at the ecological aspects of a tree – a tree is more than just a tree! (As habitat? A “statement” of and commitment to conservation? A means of helping to deal with CO<sub>2</sub>? Amenity, ie shade, visual beauty, enhanced property value?)

What we do need is more properly trained and appropriately qualified professionals to help manage the urban forest. The days of guess work are over! This is the age of the managed tree and the managed urban forest, based on science and accumulated experience and skills.

What are some of the problems that need to be addressed? First of all we need to improve the definition of what is meant by significant.

What is “significant” – anyhow? Why limit the definition to size? Is the elephant more significant than the cheetah?

I would argue that we need to go beyond circumference as a measure. Need to look at other attributes – eg ecological.

There have been issues arising out of the significant tree debate regarding indigenous versus native versus exotic, for example *Pinus radiata* in inner suburbia. There have been (and still are) issues arising from what many would regard as incorrect, ill advised plantings of certain natives and certain exotics - Tasmanian Blue Gum at the door step!

However, as indicated above we are seeing some light at the end of the tunnel in regard to significant tree management! The City of Onkaparinga has “saved” a large river red gum at Aberfoyle Park (Heatherwood Drive) because of skilful pruning and sensible advice from arborists. Recently the City of Onkaparinga set a protective zone around a significant tree in a housing development at Aberfoyle Park based on advice from an arborist

Part of the lesson being learnt is that we need professionals to assess – developers, councils and government agencies need to use qualified arborists!

Mt Barker Council recently had a mega controversy re a significant tree. Once again the tree was saved by pruning, based on the advice of an arborist, although it took a third arborist and an anonymous MP to help tip the scale towards retention.

The State Government is currently seeking to change significant tree protection laws via new legislation in the Parliament.

I also ask when we plant should we be looking at one tree at a time, avenues of trees, or “streets and parks of habitat” ie trees plus other plantings? Do we need “military” style plantings or more random plantings?

Why not plant more native grasses along with shrubs – for reason of amenity and conservation (eg for butterflies).

That is, why not trees, plus understorey? Are we so scared of criminals jumping out from behind a grevillea?

Let us be innovative and create urban natural burial grounds – forest(s) of memories, with trees as a living memorial as an alternative to the conventional cemetery!

In Adelaide and no doubt elsewhere there is the issue of what you can plant in the street, and in particular under powerlines? Should we keep street trees as amputees and casualties of the “electric prune” or should we replant other more suitable species under powerlines? Representations have been made to the State Government to update their approved planting lists. We await their response!

All of these issues come together nicely at this time because of a community and governmental focus on carbon sequestration, on global warming and related issues. For all those who love trees (emotion, please note) and who manage trees (skill and science) now is the ideal time to push the message of trees in streets, parks etc.

I conclude with two classic observations:

I think that I shall never see  
A poem lovely as a tree  
(Joyce Kilmer, 1886 – 1918)

and

I think that I shall never see  
A Billboard lovely as a tree  
(Ogden Nash, 1902 – 1971)

The era of the urban tree has well and truly arrived! Let us strike while the tree iron is hot and before Mother Earth itself gets too hot!!

Trees r us.

## REFERENCES:

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