

## Australia Dossier by Robert Barwick

### Greenies don't give a dam

*Plans for water projects for the world's driest continent are being opposed by radical environmentalists.*

**B**eginning on April 21, soaking rains fell across much of the eastern states of New South Wales and Queensland. Some areas received up to 125 millimeters (5 inches), ending another extended drought. However, many areas received no rain, and have been bone-dry for much of the past six years. This crisis highlights, yet again, the urgent need for water development projects to sustain rural industry, Australia's second-largest export earner after minerals.

Some major water projects have been planned, particularly in Queensland under the National Party government of Premier Rob Borbidge, but a coalition of radical environmentalists ("greenies," who prefer brown to green) and free-market economic rationalists is attempting to scuttle them.

Borbidge's plans for water projects center around the Nathan Gorge Dam, to be built on the Dawson River in central Queensland. The dam will hold 1 trillion liters of water, two times the volume of Sydney Harbor, and is expected to cost \$120 million. Borbidge's government gave the go-ahead for the project in January, 70 years after it was first mooted in the mid-1920s. The president of the Dawson Valley Development Association, Ted Jago, outlined its benefits to the Brisbane *Courier-Mail* on Jan. 10. "The bottom line is that we are talking about 6,000 direct and indirect jobs flowing from this dam project over time," he said. "We are talking about projects with four times the value of Century Zinc," a billion-dollar mining project in North Queensland.

But the prospect of development

has made the greenies see red (or, more accurately, brown), and they have opened a bitter campaign against the Nathan Dam and other Queensland water projects. The campaign is being coordinated by the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), which was personally founded in 1963 by Britain's Prince Philip, and has since given birth to all of Australia's environmental and "indigenous" movements, whose purpose is to stop development. The late Dr. H.C. "Nugget" Coombs, a former boss of the ACF and longtime governor of the Reserve Bank, once bragged that he shelved virtually all large-scale water projects, including the Nathan Gorge Dam, planned for the continent following World War II as part of the country's Post-War Reconstruction Program.

The ACF attack has not been based on environmental arguments, but economic ones. It claims that because the projects require government subsidies for the construction costs, they breach the National Competition Policy guidelines.

Like the ACF, Australia's National Competition Policy is a British spawn, generated by the 1992 Hilmer Commission. Then, two assets of the British mining giant Rio Tinto, Rio Tinto consultant Fred Hilmer and Mark Rayner, a longtime director of Rio's CRA subsidiary (since merged into its parent), wrote guidelines to force a comprehensive imposition of British Mont Pelerin Society economic policies, such as deregulation and privatization, on Australia—all in the name of "competition." ACF executive director Tim Fisher has accused

the Queensland government of displaying blatant disregard for the Hilmer "reforms." He told the Dec. 9, 1997 *Australian*, "If we subsidize water resources, we will simply encourage its overuse."

The greenies are trying to dismantle the one Post-War Reconstruction project which Coombs couldn't stop: the Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Scheme, an internationally admired feat of engineering. It generates electricity and provides irrigation water to thousands of square kilometers of farmland in New South Wales, by diverting 99% of the headwaters of the Snowy River. Greenies have been lobbying to have the Snowy River restored to its original condition, as it was before the construction of the scheme's Jindabyne Dam in 1967. This has enraged Australia's rice farmers, among many others, who rely on the diverted water for irrigation. On April 15, the New South Wales and Victorian state governments buckled to the greenies and launched a Snowy Water inquiry, to examine the "environmental, economic, and social consequences of diverting the Snowy River."

Besides the Nathan Dam, a number of other proposals for water projects are also in the advanced planning stage, just waiting to be built. These include the Clarence River diversion scheme in New South Wales (which has also been planned for decades), the Fitzroy Scheme in northern Western Australia, and the Finch Hatton Dam in Queensland. Prince Philip's army of greenies is threatening to stop all of them, just as they stopped the Franklin River Dam in Tasmania in 1982. Then, they mounted an international mobilization, and succeeded in getting the federal government to invoke an international treaty to override the Constitution (which grants control over water resources to the states) to stop the dam.