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SPIN CYCLE

Sharon Beder, *Global Spin: The Corporate Assault on Environmentalism* (Revised Edition), Melbourne, Scribe Publications, 2000.

At times during the 1990s, the war between corporations and environmentalists to win the hearts and minds of the general public glowed white-hot. Corporations, responding to the environmentalism upsurge of the 1980s, marshalled their financial and public relations resources in an attempt to claw back the moral high ground and continue their business unfettered. The tactics they used have been well documented in books like Andrew Rowell's *The Green Backlash* and John Stauber's *Toxic Sludge is Good for You*. The first edition of Sharon Beder's book *Global Spin*, published in 1997, examines the state of play in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom, but it is unique in giving an Australian perspective. The book presupposes no technical or expert knowledge of this area of research, so it is accessible to the layperson; but it is also useful to the researcher, as a descriptive and critical piece rather than a theoretically sophisticated analysis. The revised edition of *Global Spin* has been expanded to include three new chapters. Given that the rest of the book is, disappointingly, identical to the first edition, I have chosen to focus only on the new material.

The chapter 'Global Warming: Corporate Sponsored Confusion', opens with a cursory account of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change held in Kyoto in 1997. Beder analyses the outcomes of the conference, with specific reference to each country's approved emission rates of greenhouse gases. This is a useful introduction to the issue; but for a more comprehensive and sophisticated treatment of the double dealings, double crosses and recriminations by the various parties at the conference, see Jeremy Leggett's *The Carbon War*, which goes into con-

siderably more detail. Like most environmentalists, Beder believes the conference was a failure: the agreement that was secured has too many loopholes, allowing intransigent countries to avoid their commitments. Australia is trying to convince the world that planting new forests as carbon sinks should count towards emission reduction, although scientists argue that such sinks hold gases only temporarily. Schemes to trade pollution credits as proposed by the Protocol, will do little to reduce the real rate of emission and are an area of research which needs a great deal more analysis.

Beder blames the failure to secure a better agreement on the strength of the industry opposition to an effective treaty which might have curtailed their profligate activities. The business lobbies had their work cut out for them since opinion polls in Australia and the United States prior to the conference indicated that the general populace was in favour of greenhouse gas emission cuts. Beder argues that business, particularly the fossil fuel industry, adopted a deliberate policy of obfuscation and confusion to downplay the general consensus on the science of greenhouse emissions and alienate the public support for reductions, and it targeted key politicians. The business lobbies attempted to shift the question from what should be done to one of whether the cost was too great for a problem that may not even eventuate. She goes on to detail the tactics adopted in pursuance of this strategy. For instance, Beder charges that a number of scientists who disagree with the overall scientific consensus on global warming are having their dissident opinions amplified by business interests trying to negate scientific arguments or at least to so muddy the waters that it is impossible to say who is right. This is then eagerly seized on by business advocates to argue for the status quo.

In many instances these scientists are funded by conservative think-tanks, themselves funded by business, which organise conferences to support the case against global warming and argue that the costs inherent in cutting emissions are too heavy to bear.

In the case of Australia and the United States, such groups have also funded economists who have been very influential in shifting the terms of the debate: economic models were attacked by environmentalists for having serious methodological flaws, they served to confuse the situation since they were seen by the community as authoritative, at least initially.

In her chapter 'Greenwashing' an Olympic-sized Toxic Dump', Beder argues that Sydney's bid to win

the 2000 Olympics by proclaiming itself to be the 'Green Games' was essentially fraudulent and that the environmental group Greenpeace Australia has been complicit in perpetuating this calumny. She argues that the Olympic site at Homebush Bay was, and is still, an enormous toxic waste dump, yet Olympic organisers sold it as capable of being transformed into a green showcase. The International Olympic Committee had made it clear that the Games had to be 'green' and the Sydney bidders knew that they had to co-opt Greenpeace to give their bid green verisimilitude. Greenpeace was invited to draw up environmental guidelines for Olympic sites generally, particularly the Olympic village, despite knowing that remediation efforts to clean up Homebush Bay would be insufficient. Rather than adopt the more environmentally sound approaches to segregate and treat waste at the site or to seal and wall in the contamination, the Government decided on cost issues to allow the waste to be disposed of by letting it leak over time into the surrounding environment. The public was informed that this was the only feasible option (which Beder argues was untrue) and were afforded limited opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. The remediation has since been described by the Olympic Coordination Authority (OCA) as 'world's best practice'.

Once the bid was won, it quickly became apparent that the Games would not be a model of ecological harmony. The Government discarded the winning environmental design, forcing Greenpeace and its architects to denounce the decision. The new village contained plans for the use of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) as a building material, despite the fact that Greenpeace had campaigned vociferously against it internationally. The Homebush site contained high levels of dioxin which Greenpeace highlighted, only to be accused by the OCA of 'damaging Australia'.

The author goes on to argue that the Olympic organisers have been aided and abetted by the Australian media who practised rigorous self-censorship to ensure that the bid would be successful: many stories were not covered in the mainstream media. She also details how corporate business practices and changes to legislation like the Freedom of Information Act are conspiring to reduce the flow of information about the

Olympic process available to the public to a trickle. She gives her own experiences when her article for *New Scientist* about the remediation process at Homebush was spiked after complaints by senior officials from the Homebush Bay Development Corporation. When the article was eventually published in the *Australian Current Affairs Bulletin* it was savaged by the Corporation and in the mass media. In a postscript she shows how the Government, fearful of negative international press coverage of issues like Australia's treatment of Aborigines, have decided to put in place a million-dollar strategy to 'handle' the media and place a positive spin on Australia and its Olympics.

Beder points out that Greenpeace was still promoting the Games as green until mid-1999, despite the con-

tentious issue of landfills on site, the use of PVCs and ozone depleting substances in the venues, and the site's waste plant emitting toxic fumes. Yet one suspects that Beder, while presenting a case that Greenpeace Australia has been compromised by its association with the Sydney Olympics, has overstated the proposition that Greenpeace has been totally co-opted. By her own admission Greenpeace is still speaking out over various environmental issues and taking Olympic authorities to task, though the matter provides a salutary lesson in the Nietzschean proposition that 'if you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back', a point amplified in the chapter 'From Green Warriors to Greenwasters'.

It might be argued that Greenpeace's role in the Sydney Olympics is a case

study of an NGO experiencing 'agency capture', and Beder goes on to develop the thesis that Greenpeace, with its new solutions-oriented approach, has essentially sold out its primary mission to bear witness to environmental destruction and take direct non-violent action to prevent such exploitation. She traces this change in philosophy to the early 1990s when Greenpeace was undergoing an organisational crisis with falling membership and revenues. She neglects to mention, however, that this was common for all environmental organisations. Greenpeace, she argues, had become typecast, at least in the general public's eyes, as too negative or radical. So it recast itself as offering solutions in constructive partnerships with business. This is not just confined to Greenpeace Australia but



has become standard practice among the other branches of Greenpeace. Beder is critical of this approach, arguing that it sometimes requires the organisation to turn a blind eye to local environmental problems, leading to compromises that Greenpeace would formerly never have entertained. Those within the NGO unwilling to follow this path have either resigned or been pushed out, leading to an organisation evolving from its idealist roots to a realist position emphasising co-operation with business. However, Beder does not offer any solutions for Greenpeace to prevent its membership and revenue losses. Environmental NGOs of all persuasions need to tackle this perception of being too negative and of not providing a way forward — Beder does not provide any advice here.

The revolving door, where people transfer between industry, government and public relations firms, has become entrenched in the environmental sphere as well: people transfer from business to NGOs and vice versa in what seems like an endless merry-go-round. Greenpeace personnel are leaving the organisation to become consultants advising business on how to deal with environmentalists. Beder gives a surfeit of examples where this is occurring and argues that the financial rewards for individuals and NGOs willing to forego confrontation for co-operation can be immense. However, she fails to acknowledge that such cross-pollination may lead to an increase in understanding differing positions on both sides. But her point is valid when she observes that such solution-oriented approaches must of necessity exist within the existing business/market paradigm and can provide minimal challenge to the dominant ideologies and interests.

Further editions of this text would benefit from a more comprehensive review of the original chapters of the book. Much has occurred in the three years since the book was first published and a more thoroughgoing analysis or retrospective is warranted. An overhaul of the conclusion on declining democracy, with particular emphasis on the implications for environmentalists, would also be valuable. Beder offers no solutions for her claimed impasse between business and environmentalists which, in her mind, is the current status quo. There is much academic research being done on the concept of social justice coalitions which include environmental groups. Future editions could critically examine this and other proposed solutions to provide a way forward for environmental NGOs and business, rather than becoming enmeshed in past enmities. Lastly, the book, in both its incarnations, could be improved by tying the case studies to a broader theoretical perspective. Both *Taking the Risk Out Of Democracy* by Alex Carey and *Manufacturing Consent* by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky provide theoretical approaches which would illuminate the case studies in this book immeasurably.

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WAYNE SANDERSON

TRACKING THE THIRD WAY

Race Mathews, *Jobs of Our Own; Towards a Stakeholder Society*, Sydney, Pluto Press, 1999.

For most of us, the 'third way' is a recent political idea whose time seems to have come, judging by the way in which it is picking up powerful advocates and practitioners around the world. But it has a surprisingly long and colourful history, with a cast of characters that includes popes, cardinals and priests, as well as decidedly secular writers and thinkers including some of the best known literary figures of their time. That history is tracked and recorded in Race Mathews' recent book *Jobs of Our Own*, a work which will give new meaning to current political debate and new policy approaches to welfare and the issue of social alienation. It also offers a wealth of practical advice for anyone working in the field of community empowerment or active as a social entrepreneur. Its practical value comes from Mathews' recording of some of the pioneering efforts in these fields and his evaluations of their strengths and weakness, and of the reasons why some continue while most have failed.

But the book's strength is as an historical record which shows that what is widely and often loosely referred to as 'the third way' is anything but new — it has been around as an idea for at least a century. Mathews focuses on the political philosophy known as 'distributism', a strand of thought that emerged from the political and intellectual ferment that followed the 'rediscovery' of poverty in England in the 1880s. At the time Great Britain was truly great — at the height of its power both economically, as a result of the Industrial Revolution, and militarily, as demonstrated by its vast empire. The realisation that there were, in Disraeli's words, 'two nations' in Britain — the haves and the have nots — sparked a reaction that saw the rise of socialism, Christian socialism, guild socialism, and ultimately distributism. The parallels with modern Western economies and with similar concerns now being raised around the globe lead Mathews to suggest that this may be the reason for the current focus on this century-old idea.

The similarities between the 1880s in Britain — to which distributism was a response — and the 1990s cannot be too strongly emphasised. What is being witnessed currently is a managed reduction in the living standards of working people ... recreating the permanently dispossessed strata within society which late-Victorian Britain referred to as, respectively, the working poor and the residuum.