

Three Shades of Green

John O'Brien, Australian CleanTech

December 2008

In a recent interview, the Chief Scientist of Great Britain, John Beddington, stated that the biggest obstacle to moving towards a sustainable future was the actions of committed environmentalists. As a committed advocate to creating solutions to climate change, this seems like an interesting position. However, his vision of future driven by technological adaptation, by cleantech, stands in contrast to the anti-consumption rhetoric of traditional environmentalists. It also stands against the incremental greening of many large industrial companies who provide token support for environmental issues whilst still operating unsustainable businesses. Cleantech provides a shade of green that is both sustainable and attractive.

In late October, the Queensland Government held its Sustainability Awards on the Gold Coast. That the dinner was held in one of the least sustainable developments in the country was not lost on many of the attendees. There were many awards for good work being undertaken by companies in varied industries. Improved agricultural practices, smart battery technology and the climate change campaign by the Courier Mail were all feted. There were however many examples of heavy industrial companies merely greening around the edges. The evening started with an acknowledgement of Xtrata's \$3m support for hairy nose wombats. In a wonderful display of cognitive dissonance, the company movie showed rescued wombats without any acknowledgement of the damage the company's coal mining does to the natural environment. One guest commented that it was like celebrating a tobacco company's donation to lung cancer research!

Following this dinner, I was lucky enough to spend a few days in Byron Bay. On the local radio and in the local rag, we were encouraged to embrace the 'counter-culture' of the region and save the world by reducing consumption, eschewing technology and going back to basics. In the profit centre of Byron this felt as much of an oxymoron as sustainability on the Gold Coast. John Beddington would not have felt comfortable sipping his latte on Jonson Street.

Cleantech offers so much more: far more than greening around the edges and so much more attractive than heading into the mountains in rags. Cleantech provides

technologies that enable ongoing development in a way that improves the planet's ecosystems – it does not require sacrifice and it is more forward looking than mere 'end of the pipe' or incremental solutions. It does, however, require new ways of thinking, an ability and willingness to view the world through a different lens and a commitment to the making of lateral connections that have not been made before.

An article in the Time magazine of October 2008, Michael Grunwald profiled Arnold Schwarzenegger as one of the world's Heroes of the Environment. Arnie has been a driving force behind cleantech development adopting the ethos that 'you don't have to be a girly-man to help save the planet'. The article tells us that '[he] ridicules traditional environmentalists as prohibitionists scolds who want us to drive wimpy cars and live like monks; he's selling a future of a clean environment and a booming green-tech economy with all the gizmos that anyone could want.'

Incumbent emissions intensive companies, who fear that change and technological innovation will lead to a decrease in profits, are the obvious opponents of cleantech. What many in the cleantech world may not yet have realised is the danger posed by the self proclaimed 'pure' greenies of Byron Bay and elsewhere.

In a three way fight for the ascendancy between greening, greenies and cleantech, the smart money can only be on cleantech. In the end, 'greenwash' will always be seen as the superficial marketing exercise it truly is. The attraction towards a positive message will always be stronger than negative messages that prohibit what is harmful. To quote Arnie in his drive to cement California as a global cleantech leader 'guilt doesn't work'. To develop sustainability does not require counter-cultures or clever marketing: rather than rebelling, we can enable a great future through adopting cleantech solutions.

John O'Brien is Managing Director of Australian CleanTech, a research and broking firm that provides advice to cleantech companies and financial institutions. Australian CleanTech publishes the ACT Australian CleanTech Index