

Protecting the Northern Rivers from Damaging Development:

An essay five years after the Bentley Blockade

Dr Wayne Somerville

B.A.(Hons.), M.Clin.Psych., D.Psy



Final Dawn at the Bentley Blockade
(Photo courtesy of R J Poole, www.rjpoole.com)

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email: drwaynesomerville@gmail.com

www.drwaynesomerville.com

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End fossil fuel, draw the line
Before we build one more pipeline
End fracking now, let's save the water
And build a life for our sons and daughters
Who's gonna stand up and save the Earth?
Who's gonna say that she's had enough?
Who's gonna take on the big Machine?
Who's gonna stand up and save the Earth?
This all starts with you and me
Neil Young *'Who's going to stand up'*¹

It's half a decade since the Gasfield Free campaign in the Northern Rivers climaxed at the Bentley Blockade, but few are celebrating. These are tough times for people who care about Mother Earth and her dependents. The past five years have been the hottest on record worldwide with temperatures rising as concentrations of atmospheric carbon dioxide and methane continue a relentless upward trajectory. As human-induced climate catastrophe unfolds, nature is taking a beating while politicians fiddle and many folk feel desperate. But I'm writing this essay to celebrate and build on what our community achieved when it drove the unconventional gas industry out of the region.

There's much despair and too little optimism about nowadays. I'm not suggesting we be optimistic like Pollyanna – there truly is a cascade of frightening challenges coming our way – but I think we need to be realistic and practical as we respond to our predicament. A story I heard long ago has stayed with me: a teacher holds up a fine crystal glass and tells the student that the glass 'is already broken', which, the teacher says, makes the glass even more precious and enjoyable. Look far enough into the future and you'll see that everything is already broken. The Sun will consume the Earth in 5 billion years and, like every creature that's ever lived, we all die someday. That's the existential bottom-line – there's no life without death.

It makes no sense to live our lives consumed by worry about death; we'll deal with that when we have to. Until then, life is for living. There's no need to immerse ourselves in distressing accounts of Mother Nature's plight unless they teach us something new and useful. Seek out information that supports your efforts to make things better; books such as Damon Gameau's *2040: A handbook for the Regeneration*² and Charles Massy's *Call of the Reed Warbler*³ are a good place to start.

We follow a long, unbroken line of ancestors that goes back to the first life on Earth. We know that our ancestors were resilient and persistent. They lived through millions of years, endless ages of ice, planet-busting asteroid strikes, climate chaos, wars, pestilence, and did so with no internet.

¹ Neil Young (2019) *Who's going to stand up?* From *Storytone*, www.warnermusic.com.au.

² Damon Gameau (2019) *2040: A handbook for the Regeneration* based on the documentary *2040*. Pan Macmillan, Australia.

³ Charles Massy (2017) *Call of the Reed Warbler: A new agriculture, a new Earth*. Chelseagreen.com

No matter what happens or how the world changes, we can tap into the ancient strength that got our kind from deep time to now. No one knows how this will play out. The future is worth fighting for. It's up to us to do what we can to protect Mother Earth and create as good a future as we can.

I want to share my thoughts, five years after the Bentley Blockade, about what we can do to 'build a life for our sons and daughters', as Neil Young puts it. Saving the Earth has to start with us, where we live. When we figure out how to protect our country and community, we can share what we learn. And where better to begin – the place where people pushed back against the 'Big Machine' and changed history?

This essay is my attempt to answer a question that my friend Brendan Shoebridge posed at a Lismore 'Stand-up 4 Forests' meeting. Brendan asked, in effect, 'Do we have to go through the gruelling process of building a social movement – as we did with the Gasfield Free campaign – to counter every new development that threatens the Northern Rivers?' I have no easy answer to Brendan's profound query, but I hope these ideas help you think through what you can do to make the world better for your being in it.

I reckon Neil Young is right. This has to start with you and me. And we do have to take on the Big Machine. But how do we do that? First, we need to understand the beastly Machine. Then we can work out how to defeat it.

The Big Machine

Corporations have long worked to subvert democracies and control nations. Back in the 19th century, US President Abraham Lincoln (1808–1865) could 'see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country'. Lincoln predicted that 'corporations have been enthroned and an era of corruption in high places will follow'. In his dystopic vision, Lincoln saw that 'the money power of the country will endeavour to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudice of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the republic is destroyed'.

The recent report by judges on the United Nations-sponsored Permanent Peoples' Tribunal Session on Human Rights, Fracking and Climate Change⁴ (hereafter referred to as 'the UN Tribunal') established that the unconventional oil and gas industry is a lead player in the corporate takeover of nation states that so troubled Abraham Lincoln all those years ago.

The UN Tribunal concluded that:

'Around the world today extractivist industries' activities abound with consequent serious violations of human and nature's rights. Such violations, committed by mega corporations for the most part, are done either under what have become symbolic environmental laws that have been implemented to allow UOGE (i.e., unconventional oil and gas extraction), or are done in violation of such laws but with impunity from the

⁴ Permanent Peoples' Tribunal. 2019. Session on human rights, fracking and climate change, 14–18 May, 2018: Advisory opinion. *General Secretariat*. www.permanentpeopletribunal.org.

state. Nation states have invariably been “bought off” by the extractivist industries in the name of ersatz “development”.’

Further, the Tribunal warned that:

‘The industry is being driven not by necessity but the desire for profits by mega corporations with the complicity of governments and others who believe it will bring benefits to them ... Today there is a “silent war” by the industry, with its political, financial and media allies, against the ecosystem. The assault is directed at Mother Earth while people are the indirect “collateral damage”.’

The frackers cause damage way beyond anything Lincoln could imagine. The UN Tribunal found ‘overwhelming’ evidence that unconventional oil and gas extraction is a ‘major contributor to the crisis the world is facing’. The UN Tribunal’s judges concluded that ‘by its very nature’ fracking operations attack ‘all the components of natural ecosystems’, and the resulting ‘ecocide’ threatens ‘all human rights of the present and future generations through its direct contribution to climate change’.

So, the Big Machine is powerful and it controls nations around the globe.

All social and political power derives from the thoughts and actions of likeminded people working together. If the people of the Big Machine prevail, they will propel the world towards nightmare scenarios. If the people of Earth come out on top, they can achieve genuine prosperity and solutions that promote the interests of all. I can think of two forces that might counter the mega corporation Big Machine: the older, traditional ‘people power’ of the State and the new power generated when the people of Earth band together.

The State (Traditional People Power) versus the Big Machine

In democracies, the State is supposed to represent the will of the people and embody Abraham Lincoln’s phrase: government of the people, by the people, for the people. Is there any arm of our Australian State – law and courts, governments, regulatory agencies, political parties – that is likely to resist the fossil fuel mega corporations and their assault on Mother Earth?

Law and the Courts

The UN Tribunal doesn’t believe that any laws or courts can save the Earth. The judges concluded that ‘The time for relying on the State and its juridical apparatus for comprehensive solutions is gone. That goes also for the international community and international law’. The judges aren’t saying that citizens shouldn’t exercise ‘whatever rights they may have’ under the law, but rather that ‘the future of the planet is not going to be determined in the courts’.

Regulatory Agencies, Inquiries and Scientists

Regardless of the submissions they receive, most all scientists who head up inquiries and advise governments on the unconventional gas industry inexplicably or intentionally remain ignorant of two areas of uncontested scientific research that prove this technology has no place on the planet and should never be allowed.

The gas industry has two Achilles' Heels – fugitive emissions and the air pollution created by gas mining and processing – and no one in authority wants to know about them.

Fugitive Emissions

Gas companies and regulatory authorities don't measure methane concentrations in the air above gas fields; they only estimate fugitive emissions with formulae that calculate leakage from valves and seals and such. But there are predictable consequences when water from deep underground is brought to the surface. As intended, previously bound gases move up the well, but fracking and removing water from gas bearing seams also creates an unknowable network of new and existing cracks and faults that act as conduits for the liberated gas to vent into the atmosphere.

In 2012, Dr Isaac Santos and Dr Damien Maher recorded atmospheric methane concentrations as they drove from Lismore to the gas fields in Queensland's Darling Downs.⁵ They found methane concentrations about the current global average of 1.8 parts per million until they approached Tara, where methane and radon readings increased threefold. Australia set a new world record with methane levels of 6.89 parts per million, exceeding the previous highest reading from a Siberian gas field. In a public seminar, the researchers explained that 'In natural conditions, methane is contained within the coal seam by water pressure', but when CSG mining reduces that pressure, there are 'leaks through the soil' which 'are not counted in any fugitive estimates'. Hence the methane bubbles that have turned sections of the Condamine River into an inflammable spa. Then Federal Labor Minister Martin Ferguson ignored the science and attacked the scientists. Funding for follow-up research has been cut off, but the findings stand as uncontested solid science.

In 2016, US scientists found that the 'global burden of atmospheric methane has been increasing over the past decade'.⁶ When they examined measurements of methane in the air above the US, they discovered that from 2002 to 2014 – the period corresponding to America's shale oil and gas boom – the increase in methane emissions accounted for up to '60 percent of the global growth of atmospheric methane in the past decade'.

Air Pollution

We know that levels of exposure to air pollution correlate with rates of birth defects, autism, low intelligence, cancer, heart disease, stroke, dementia, autoimmune disease, and much else.⁷ We've known for a decade that expectant mothers living in areas of higher air pollution in Brisbane have smaller foetuses.⁸ Brisbane isn't heavily polluted and the air looks clear enough; pity those families who have to raise children in Darling Downs gas fields.

⁵ Maher, D.T., Santos, I.R., & Tait, D.R. 2014. Mapping methane and carbon dioxide concentrations and d13C values in the atmosphere of two Australian coal seam gas fields. *Water, Air, & Soil Pollution*, 225, 2216. doi:10.1007/s11270-014-2216-2.

⁶ Turner, A., Jacob, D., Benmergui, J., Wofsy, S., Maasackers, J., Butz, A., Hasekamp, O., & Biraud, S. 2016. A large increase in U.S. methane emissions over the past decade inferred from satellite data and surface observations. *Geophys. Res. Lett.*, 43, 2218–2224.

⁷ Schraufnagel, D., Balmes, J., Cowl, C., De Matteis, S., Jung, S-H., Mortimer, K., Perez-Padilla, R., Rice, M., Riojas-Rodriguez, H., Sood, A., Thurston, G., To, T., Vanker, A. & Wuebbles, D. 2019. Air pollution and noncommunicable diseases: A review by the Forum of International Respiratory Societies' Environmental Committee, Part 1: The damaging effects of air pollution. *Chest*, 155(2), 409 – 416. Part 2: Air pollution and organ systems. *Chest*, 155(2), 417 – 426.

It takes a lot of electricity and diesel to pump water and chemicals into and out of kilometres of wells and fractured seams, and then to treat and transport the gas. These industrial processes create massive amounts of air pollution. National Pollution Inventory data show that over a one-year period (2013–2014) CSG facilities in the Darling Downs emitted 24,973.25 tonnes of dangerous pollutants into the atmosphere. These toxins included 1,383 tonnes of volatile organic compounds (VOCs), 13 tonnes of acetaldehyde, 2.2 tonnes of BTEX (benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene and xylene), 241 tonnes of formaldehyde, 8,788 tonnes of carbon monoxide, 12,189 tonnes of oxides of nitrogen and 2,325 tonnes of particulates.⁹ Much of this air pollution occurs in a narrow industrialised corridor where people live and work. To get a sense of the scale of this pollution, for the VOCs alone, imagine that a convoy of trucks in one year dumps 69,150 20-litre drums of a paint solvent type substance near where you live.

In 2018, Dr Geralyn McCarron found that from 2007 to 2014 annual admissions to Darling Downs hospitals increased 133% and 142% respectively for circulatory and respiratory symptoms. Over the same time period there was a huge increase in annual CSG-related air pollution: nitrogen oxides went up 489%, carbon monoxide 800%, PM10 particulates a whopping 6,000% (to 1,926 tonnes).¹⁰

The science is uncontested, the implications are undeniable – the unconventional gas industry creates massive amounts of dangerous air pollution and uncontrolled, unmeasured, landscape scale venting of methane into the atmosphere. This industry seriously damages health and the environment and adds unknown quantities of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere.

Nonetheless, for no legitimate reason and with no explanation, these two inherent, fatal flaws in unconventional gas mining technology were ignored completely in the reports prepared for the NSW Government by then Chief Scientist Prof Mary O’Kane and in inquiries conducted for the Western Australian and Northern Territory governments. All three inquiries received and ignored multiple submissions outlining the air pollution and fugitive emission problems. Each inquiry came to the nonsense conclusion that all risks associated with the industry ‘can be managed’. How could you possibly ‘manage’ the venting of methane across the landscape and the massive air pollution that necessarily comes with this industry?

You should be able to rely on a ‘chief scientist’ to give you an informed, evidence-based opinion on the impacts of the unconventional gas industry, but you can’t. In January 2018 I sent an open letter to Dr Alan Finkel, Australia’s Chief Scientist, after I heard him speak on the radio. Dr Finkel broke from urging scientists to read more science-fiction to offer some fictional science of his own. He said citizens’ concerns about gas mining-related ‘fugitive emissions or contamination of aquifers’ were examples of ‘wiki net’, anti-scientific thinking that was ‘rampant through many communities’ even though ‘there’s actually no data to support those concerns’. Dr Finkel did not reply to my letter or the research papers I sent to bring him up to speed on the science.

⁸ Hansen, C., Barnett, A. & Pritchard, G. 2008. The effect of ambient air pollution during early pregnancy on fetal ultrasonic measurements during mid-pregnancy. *Environ Health Perspect.* 116(3), 362–369.

⁹ Somerville, W. 2015. How could CSG air pollution in the Darling Downs be an acceptable risk to health?: The elephant that can’t get into the room. Independent report, available at www.drwaynesomerville.com.

¹⁰ McCarron, G. 2018. Air Pollution and human health hazards: a compilation of air toxins acknowledged by the gas industry in Queensland’s Darling Downs. *International Journal of Environmental Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/00207233.2017.1413221

Governments and Political Parties

The UN Tribunal argued that an ‘axis of betrayal’ between corporations and governments has allowed the unconventional gas industry to go beyond ‘regulatory capture’ to ‘state capture’. The judges portrayed mega corporations as wielding ‘a new form of sovereignty’ that ‘does not derive from the people’. The sole aim of these companies is to make profit. They do not ‘exercise their power on behalf of the people’ and their actions often ‘conflict with the interests of the citizenry and nature, even of the governments who are beholden to them’.

The Big Machine’s gas and coal arms have captured some – but not all – Australian governments and political parties. The degree of capture ranges from total capitulation at the Federal level and in Queensland where both political sides push unfettered coal and gas development, to Victoria where the Liberal and Labor parties united to permanently ban the onshore unconventional gas industry. In 2019 the Northern Territory government opened much of their state to fracking following threats from the then Treasurer Scott Morrison to withhold GST revenue. Western Australia and South Australia have banned fracking in some areas, while Tasmania’s ban on the practice runs until 2025. In New South Wales the bag-a-state drama is playing out – no new licenses have been issued since a post-Bentley state-wide buyback, there’s a Gas Plan in place, a gas import terminal has been approved, and a decision on Santos’ Narrabri gas project is imminent.

The May 2019 Federal Election was a case study of state capture and how political parties manipulate media to attract voters with false hope. The deceptively labelled ‘climate election’ pitted a coal-spruiking Liberal/National Coalition, which made no bones about its commitment to fossil fuel mega corporations, against a Labor Party that pledged to address the climate crisis while disguising their unalloyed support for gas and coal development.

In June 2018 at a small meeting of farming folk in the Northern Rivers, Mr Mark Butler, then Federal Labor’s Shadow Minister for Energy and Climate Change, told me that he had not heard about landscape-scale methane emissions from gas fields. Mr Butler expressed concern about the climate crisis so, at his request, I sent him the relevant research. I don’t know how Mr Butler reconciles what he now knows about fugitive emissions and air pollution with Bill Shorten’s election promise to give mega corporations a \$1.5 billion taxpayer-funded subsidy to help develop huge new gas fields in the Northern Territory and Queensland. These developments would create greenhouse gas emissions that dwarf those of any Adani-type coal mine. After they lost the election, Labor’s Joel Fitzgibbon said that the Party had made a big mistake by being coy and they should have made it clear that they were committed to the coal and gas industries.

Perhaps ‘no’ is the best answer to my earlier question about whether we can expect any arm of our Australian state to save the Earth – the regulatory capture and state capture is too entrenched. Even though there will be some courts, agencies, governments and politicians that remain capable of acting in the best interests of the people, these are not the places where we should focus too much effort.

The People of Earth (New People Power) versus the Big Machine

‘Through the actions of the people, those corporations and states that oppress the rights of people and nature must be brought to understand they can no longer do so,’ declared the judges on the UN Tribunal. They argued that ‘the direct, active resistance of the people’ is ‘justifiable’ given the ‘unjust, even murderous, destruction of communities and plundering of nature’s resources aided and abetted by governments’. But how would that work?

Reflections on the Gasfield Free Campaign

The history-making Bentley Blockade is a source of inspiration, but cannot be a template for future action to protect our region from damaging developments. A repeat of a Bentley-type event is unlikely: Draconian anti-Protector laws are in place, pro-gas forces are better organised and we could never repeat the unique circumstances that led to success five years ago. But there are important lessons in the story of how the people of the Northern Rivers defied the Big Machine and its political minions to forge a new version of people power.

Numbers Count

From the Gasfield Free actions at Glenugie and Doubtful Creek, we know that police acting for the gas companies can brush aside a few hundred determined citizens. But at the Bentley Blockade we learned that if enough people of goodwill take a stand, they can succeed. When Northern Rivers folk learned the truth about invasive gas fields, 10,000 turned up to march, thousands stood at dawn in the Bentley mud ready to defy riot police, and hundreds were prepared to put their bodies on the line.

History is Unpredictable as it Plays Out

How different things would be if Metgasco and pro-gas polities hadn’t underestimated the people of the Northern Rivers.

Before the Bentley Blockade, Metgasco had it sewn up. They drilled more than 50 wells in the Northern Rivers before anyone noticed, and despite the brave persistence of Protectors at Glenugie and Doubtful Creek the company operated freely and had secured government approvals for a gas field and a gas-fired power station near Casino. The tide only turned when Metgasco had to suspend operations for 12 months because the then-NSW Premier Barry O’Farrell out of the blue announced a two-kilometre CSG mining exclusion zone around residential areas; Metgasco had planned to drill right up to, and even under, Casino houses.

Metgasco CEO Peter Henderson told me that he was interested in two gas ‘sweet spots’. When Premier O’Farrell mucked up plans for the Doubtful Creek gas field, the company’s gaze shifted to Bentley. Metgasco was after gas two kilometres down in a ‘tight sands’ seam that ran south to where a Casino well had spectacularly blown out after they fracked it. The company figured they could avoid the problematic exclusion zone because the Bentley gas would be ‘natural’, not that nasty coal seam stuff. In their dreams, the gasfield would be declared ‘state significant’ and their vile vision would be realised. But the idea was ‘courageous’ – or perhaps just stupid – because they’d have to drill in the heart of the Northern Rivers and they gave us a five months heads-up.

The Gasfield Free campaign succeeded due to the efforts of thousands of people over more than half a decade and the playing out of you-couldn't-make-it-up circumstances. Even so, right to the end, the government was poised to sic 900 riot police onto peaceful Protectors. The Big Machine backed off only because it was in its interest to do so.

Polls are Potent

Opinion polls tell us what others are thinking, and they let us know where we fit in society. There are good reasons why you still see well-maintained '87% voted against CSG' signs around Lismore – the 2012 Electoral Commission poll helped define the character of our region. That simple statistic demolished gas company propaganda and proved to everyone who didn't want to live in a gas field that a massive majority shared their sentiment. Follow-up polls in 2013 confirmed the king tide of anti-CSG sentiment in Lismore and Casino. But perhaps the most productive and potent polling was conducted by the Gasfield Free Communities campaign.

At country hall meetings across the region, citizens voted on whether they wanted gas fields on their roads. Volunteers followed up to survey every household in the district. These community surveys broke down the isolation of neighbours. It took courage for the mostly female surveyors to go door-to-door, but as they went their confidence grew. It seemed remarkable at first, but then it became obvious and inevitable. The vast majority of people in the Northern Rivers did not want to live in gas fields. Only a few were for the industry. Who would've thought it? The pro-gas advertising had failed. Celebrations across the region proclaimed Gasfield Free Communities determined to protect themselves.

Dodgy Science

Spruikers for the gas corporations attack real scientists and pervert the scientific method to hide what they're up to. They reverse the usual 'burden of proof' – the obligation to prove a case – that applies when a company introduces a new product or process that might harm the community. Instead of showing that what they are doing is safe, they insist that the community prove beyond all doubt that the company is harming people or the environment. The tactic works in court, where a litigant might claim that their cancer was caused by smoking or asbestos or coal dust, because it's nigh on impossible to prove that a specific outcome is due to a single factor that occurred in the past. But in the real world, science routinely uses probabilistic data to predict the future, as does the insurance industry when it assesses risks using epidemiological and other research.

If a child in the Darling Downs is born autistic or with birth defects, or an adult there dies of cancer or a stroke, you can't prove beyond doubt that these outcomes were due to their exposure to gas industry air pollution. But we know for certain that as a result of the 24,973 tonnes of toxic pollutants vented by the CSG industry into Darling Downs air in one year (2013–14) more children will suffer autism, cancer and birth defects, and more adults will die from cancer, strokes and a host of other maladies. That was five years ago – the pollution is much worse now.

And yet, the air pollution produced by CSG processing has been ignored by all government inquiries and chief scientists.

When Cultures Collide

What is the environment? It is an ill-defined, amorphous, quasi-religious mass with no intrinsic dollar value but is instead invested with a completely spurious, bogus emotional value.

Former NSW Liberal Parliamentarian Dr Peter Phelps¹¹

Back then I couldn't believe what they were telling me, the gas company executive who said he'd happily put a gas well next to a kindergarten and the Liberal politician – a self-professed Christian – who said he was not concerned at all for the health of children living in Darling Downs gas fields. As a clinical psychologist I have met some mad and bad people; I know about delusion and psychosis and the suffering inflicted by sociopathic evil and narcissistic depravity. But like most folk, I expected that when privileged, well-educated, high-functioning sane people in responsible positions understood the facts, they would naturally be concerned about the risks of forcing people to live in gas fields. I also naïvely thought that they'd care about Mother Nature. I now understand that the casual cruelty, intentional ignorance and belligerent bastardry of pro-gas politicians and corporate executives are natural consequences of the culture they inhabit.

'Culture' is shorthand for all the knowledge, beliefs and values shared by a group of people. The Gasfield Free campaign set up a clash of cultures. Two irreconcilable world views with diametrically opposed morals and ethics met head on. The wants of the few threatened the needs of the many. There was no common ground in how each group thought about themselves or saw their responsibilities to other people and the world around them.

The people of Earth understand that they are a part of the world and the environment in which they live. They feel a responsibility to care for and protect, or at least not harm, Mother Earth and her dependents. If they know the Bible, they probably remember Genesis 2:15, 'The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to till it and care for it'.¹² They have empathy and believe in the traditional Golden Rule – 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'.

By contrast, the people of the Big Machine do not understand that they are a part of the great system that makes up life on Earth. They are alienated from Mother Nature and feel no obligation to protect other people or the environment. If they know the Bible, the people of the Big Machine probably recall the 'subdue' part of Genesis 1:28, 'God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase, fill the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish in the sea, the birds of heaven, and every living thing that moves upon the earth"'.¹³ They lack empathy and have their own version of the Golden Rule – 'Do unto others what suits you'.

The people of the Northern Rivers achieved moral maturity during the Gasfield Free campaign. They accepted their shared responsibility to conserve what is truly precious – the water, air and earth that sustain all life. Fighting a common foe, they found unity in diversity.

¹¹ Phelps, P. 2013. Debate in NSW Legislative Council on the environmental movement. *Hansard of the Legislative Council*, NSW Parliament. © State of New South Wales through the Parliament of New South Wales

¹² The New English Bible. 1970. Oxford University Press & Cambridge University Press.

¹³ The New English Bible. 1970. Oxford University Press & Cambridge University Press.

Old divisions based on age, wealth or appearance gave way to a new social cohesion; it doesn't matter who you are, what you look like, or what you do for a living, if you love this country and are willing to fight to protect it, then you're a friend. They realised that Australia is common wealth that belongs to all. They refused to let gas miners lay waste to the country. The slogan 'non-violent, non-negotiable' captured their commitment to ethical, non-violent action in defence of principles that could not be compromised or negotiated away. They drew a line – under no circumstance was it acceptable to kill, injure or rob people or the environment.

The people of the Big Machine were ethically untroubled by the Gasfield Free experience; they remain as morally bankrupt as ever. The NSW Government called off the riot police and cancelled CSG licenses because it was in their interest to do so, not because they realised what they had done was wrong. The Labor and Liberal/National parties at the State and Federal levels have never apologised for the damage that their wildly inappropriate gas mining policies inflicted on our community. Any proper accounting for the costs and productivity lost would run into millions. And they're unlikely anytime soon to grow a conscience or adopt policy based on principles.

The NSW Government's North Coast Regional Plan to 2036 (hereafter referred to as 'the Plan') puts expediency above ethics and profit before principle. Everything is negotiable and nowhere is off-limits when it comes to 'development', a word which translates to a corporation wanting to make money.

Take for example, the Plan's action point 2.1 'Focus development to areas of least biodiversity sensitivity in the region and implement the "avoid, minimise, offset" hierarchy to biodiversity, including areas of high environmental value'.

That is to say, nowhere is off-limits to development. Just where are the areas 'of least biodiversity sensitivity' in the Northern Rivers? The Coles' parking lot perhaps? Why should any area of 'biodiversity sensitivity' be fair game for developers? And what does applying the 'avoid, minimise, offset hierarchy' to 'areas of high environmental value' mean? I get 'avoid', but why should any development be allowed to degrade our natural heritage just because a corporation pledges to 'minimise' the damage, or if that's not possible, they promise to do something nice for nature somewhere else?

When it comes to the future development of 'resources', the NSW Government's Plan signals out coal seam gas mining for special mention: 'The NSW Government has no intention to revive coal seam gas on the North Coast'. So, the only guarantee that we won't get a rerun of the CSG debacle rests on an assurance about the psychological state of politicians, that is that they currently 'have no intention'. I'd prefer something substantial, like a statement based on principle along the lines, 'CSG mining will never be allowed in the Northern Rivers due to its disastrous social, health, economic and environmental impacts'.

CSG might be off the table for now, but the Plan enthusiastically supports other mining and extractive industries:

'It is important that these resources (i.e., 'raw materials') are not affected or sterilised by the encroachment of sensitive land uses, and that mining activities are undertaken

sensitively to minimise negative impacts on the environment, significant agricultural land, neighbouring businesses and the community.’

I don’t agree with the Government’s opinion that it’s important that mining and other extractive industries are not impeded. Nor do I believe that mining activities – regardless of how ‘sensitively’ they are ‘undertaken’ – should be permitted if they will have any significant negative impact on the environment, agricultural land, businesses or the community. I reckon that protecting those things is infinitely more important than helping mining companies make profits by further degrading our country.

A Proposal

My answer to Brendan’s question is ‘no’. We don’t have to build a new social movement to counter each damaging development that comes our way. Rather, we need to reawaken, reinvent and reinspire the great social and environmental movement that transformed history at the Bentley Blockade half a decade ago. I’ll outline what I have in mind.

Annie’s ‘Immune Response’ Metaphor

I’ll reframe the problem using Annie Kia’s immune response metaphor for a successful social movement. The gas companies’ threats to harm just about everyone and every natural system in the region provoked a powerful immune response in the community. The immune response grew stronger at Glenugie and Doubtful Creek and reached its full potency at the Bentley Blockade. With the invading parasites gone, the immune system settled down and has remained pretty much dormant for the past five years. But bodies remember and immune systems reawaken when they encounter similar pathogens again in the future.

Annie’s metaphor suggests an answer to Brendan’s question. We have to work out how to trigger the sleeping giant of an immune response created years ago during the gas wars and direct it so it attacks new threats that don’t (necessarily) involve gas. Such potential threats include a coal port in Yamba, offshore oil and gas fields, felling native forests, mining of ‘rare earth’ minerals (an antimony mine near Afterlee was stopped a few years ago), proposed copper mining in the steep terrain of the Clarence and Mann River catchment areas, uranium mining, a nuclear waste dump (a friend in a position to know warned me about this one), industrial water mining, coal mines, and our old CSG foe rebadged as natural gas and oil from tight sands or shale.

If we are to reawaken the old immune response, we need to define a set of non-negotiable principles that determine when, where and how we’ll use it.

Non-negotiable Principles

In the Gasfield Free campaign, folk from different backgrounds marched under the slogan ‘non-violent, non-negotiable’ – they were committed to peaceable action and their opposition to invasive gasfield was non-negotiable. What did ‘non-negotiable’ mean to you? What was it that could not be traded away under any circumstance? To achieve such broad-based support again, we need to specify a set of fundamental, non-negotiable principles that most people can agree with now.

Existing well-developed sets of principles such as the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights are arguably too comprehensive, complex and perhaps controversial for our purpose here.

We need to pare down our list of non-negotiable principles to a few that almost everyone can agree with. The principles also need to differentiate acceptable, even if very problematic, developments from those that are truly unacceptable and non-negotiable.

I propose the following: the people of the Northern Rivers will not under any circumstance permit developments that kill, injure or steal from citizens living now or in the future. Developments that degrade or diminish the common wealth, or leave our country and community worse off are unacceptable. I'll elaborate.

A prohibition against killing or injuring people is fundamental to almost all religions, philosophies and systems of ethics. These principles should be non-negotiable – they're forbidden in the Bible's Ten Commandments – but nonetheless are routinely violated by the Big Machine and lackey governments when they ignore the harmful impacts of extractive industries. These two principles would clearly rule out such lethal and harmful developments as operating gas fields and coal mines in populated areas.

Most people would agree with a prohibition against stealing. This principle would also mark out certain developments as unacceptable. For example, companies that operate unconventional gas fields in rural areas commit many acts of legally sanctioned theft. For the robbery victims, the losses are profound and can be tragic: falling land values; degraded lifestyles; loss of control over one's land and the right to the 'quiet enjoyment' of property; the end of clear skies, dark nights and sound sleep; pollution caused illness and suffering; the wrecking of economic prospects for nearby farming, tourism and other rural businesses. And this list does not include the losses due to theft perpetrated on Mother Nature and the natural environment.

As with killing and injuring, the prohibition against stealing would protect everyone living now and who will live in the future. No development should leave the world worse off. The principle also prohibits theft of the common wealth that belongs to everyone – our natural heritage of 'Nature's gifts of beauty, rich and rare', and the water, soil and air that all life depends on.

Distinguishing Negotiable and Non-negotiable Developments

The process I have in mind is meant to target developments that forever change people's lives and Mother Earth for the worst. Most of these developments will involve extractive industries that are pushed by the State or Federal Governments and are beyond the control of local councils.

There are many developments that concern citizens across the Northern Rivers. It's important that the reawakening of the immune response I'm proposing is triggered only by developments that are truly non-negotiable – that is they kill, injure or steal. The immune response will quickly weaken if it is used too often for developments that are unlikely to leave our region and people permanently worse off. In this category, I would include such developments as car rallies, the fluoridation of water supplies and the operation of gravel pits. These are important issues, but we have the means for addressing these controversies through councils and with local actions. They are not examples of the kinds of developments we want to target here: the things that are likely to concern almost everyone in the region.

The Sentries – First Detectors

We need an early warning system, a network of appropriately placed Sentries who will be alert for and able to identify potentially damaging developments as soon as they appear on the horizon. We would need Sentries in local councils and government departments, as well as folk who watch for relevant items in the media.

When a Sentry thinks that they have found a planned development that could violate the non-negotiable principles adopted by the Northern Rivers community, they alert the members of what I'll call the 'Council'.

The Council – An Evaluation Group

The Council could consist of say 10 people who understand the nature and implications of proposed developments. Our community is fortunate to have well-informed Protectors who have the passion and ability to do the necessary research, evaluate what they've learned and discuss the issue with the rest of the Council.

Once individual members have considered a case, the primary task of the Council as a whole is to decide whether the development warrants activating what I'll call the 'Protectors' Parliament'. A referral to the Protectors' Parliament would indicate that the non-negotiable principles for development have been violated. It's then up to the Protectors Parliament to decide what happens from there and if it's time for the community to take direct action to protect the people and places under threat.

The Protectors' Parliament

With the Protectors' Parliament, I am not proposing that we set up any new active regional group or organisation; there are a number of motivated, skilful groups who already work effectively to protect and improve the social and natural environment in our region. Rather, the Protectors' Parliament would be a forum where the opinions of individual members would ultimately decide whether the proposed development warrants a social licence to operate in the Northern Rivers. The tally of votes on a proposed development would have no specific significance beyond letting everyone know how their fellows felt and indicating how many members were willing to take part in subsequent actions. Those who do not agree that the development is non-negotiable would be indicating that they won't be taking part in further action on that issue.

The Protectors' Parliament would (hopefully) be activated only rarely. In my opinion, it should not operate as a stand-alone group – I imagine that all members of the Parliament would probably also be members of other groups – nor should it hold regular meetings or routinely send out e-mails and other information. Rather, members would mostly come together online when the Council triggers the signal that a damaging development is coming our way.

When members of the Protectors' Parliament have been brought up to speed, they can consider whether the proposed development needs to be blocked. If members confirm that the development violates our non-negotiable principles, then the Protectors' Parliament can decide what to do from there.

Currently, governments and corporations essentially ignore the risks and damage that their policies and operations entail. In effect, they have passed on the responsibility for insurance to citizens who bear all the risks and costs. The community has become the de facto insurance underwriter for the Big Machine. The Protectors' Parliament might decide to offer a company who wants a social licence the option of paying for an independent actuarial report approved by the Parliament. Insurance actuaries draw upon research and data about past events to estimate future risk and costs. Such a report about the potential of the proposed development to kill, injure or steal would inform a debate about the true costs inherent in the operation.

The members of the Protectors' Parliament would be the heart, soul and muscle of a new form of people power that can awaken a full-blown immune response and direct it to every threat that violates our non-negotiable principles for development. If the Parliament decides to reject the development, individual members who agree would be expected to fulfil their pledge to stop it.

Hopefully, the membership of the Protectors' Parliament will grow until it includes many thousands of people who, when the need arises, will put aside other commitments for a while and take action. That's how it was during the Gasfield Free campaign. With the energy of the Bentley Blockade rekindled, anything is possible.

Sources for membership of the Protectors' Parliament could potentially include: GAG groups, Lock the Gate, NCEC North Coast Environment Council, the Northern Rivers Guardians and other organisations that are concerned about the environment; all the people who participated in marches, actions, phone trees and SMS alerts during the Gasfield Free campaign; everyone who voted against the gas industry in the Gasfield Free Community surveys; and anybody else willing to make the pledge and join the Protectors' Parliament. To prevent unwanted infiltration by the Big Machine, potential members would need to be seconded by a current member.

A Possible Pledge

As a member of the Protectors' Parliament, I pledge to protect the Northern Rivers from all developments that kill, injure or steal. I will not accept any development that would leave our community or country worse off. I respect the tradition of non-violent but non-negotiable resistance established by the Protectors at Glenugie, Doubtful Creek and Bentley. I will stand with my community to protect Mother Earth and her dependants from those who seek to harm her for profit. I will not shirk my responsibility. I will protect the country and people I love.

For Protectors everywhere.