



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON TREATIES

Reference: Impact on Australia of the UN Convention to combat desertification

BRISBANE

Thursday, 1 May 1997

OFFICIAL HANSARD REPORT

CANBERRA

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON TREATIES

Members:

Mr Taylor (Chairman)

Mr McClelland (Deputy Chairman)

Senator Abetz	Mr Adams
Senator Bourne	Mr Bartlett
Senator Coonan	Mr Laurie Ferguson
Senator Cooney	Mr Hardgrave
Senator Murphy	Mr Tony Smith
Senator Neal	Mr Truss
Senator O'Chee	Mr Tuckey

For inquiry and report on -

1. the domestic ramifications of Australia having ratified the Convention;
2. Federal and State progress in complying with the Convention;
3. the difficulties and concerns arising from implementation in its current form;
4. possible inconsistencies between domestic jurisdictions and the need for agreed national standards;
5. the need for a mechanism to promote, monitor and report publicly on compliance and to implement public consultation processes;
6. the adequacy of the administrative, legislative and legal infrastructure in addressing the needs of children;
7. the adequacy of programs and services of special importance to children; and
8. any further action required in relation to the Convention.

WITNESSES

**McTAINSH, Associate Professor Grant Harvey, Director, Centre for Land
Conservation, Faculty of Environmental Sciences, Griffith University,
Nathan, Brisbane, Queensland 4111 115**

JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON TREATIES

The impact on Australia of the UN Convention to combat desertification

BRISBANE

Thursday, 1 May 1997

Present

Mr Taylor (Chairman)

Senator Abetz

Mr Bartlett

Senator Neal

Mr Hardgrave

Mr Truss

The committee met at 9.10 a.m.

Mr Truss took the chair.

ACTING CHAIR (Mr Truss)—In the short absence of the Chairman, I declare open this public hearing of the Joint Standing Committee on Treaties. This morning we continue taking evidence on the United Nations desertification convention. This morning we are to hear from Professor Grant McTainsh.

So far the committee has held one public hearing in Canberra. Last week it visited Boorowa in New South Wales, where it visited a number of properties to see first hand the problems of land degradation and how they are being tackled. The committee also took evidence from a number of landcare groups.

This inquiry is different because the government has not yet decided to ratify the convention. This morning we would be interested to hear Professor McTainsh's views on this matter.

McTAINSH, Associate Professor Grant Harvey, Director, Centre for Land Conservation, Faculty of Environmental Sciences, Griffith University, Nathan, Brisbane, Queensland 4111

ACTING CHAIR—Welcome, Professor McTainsh. We have received your submission. It has presumably been authorised for publication. Are there any corrections that you would like to make to the submission?

Prof. McTainsh—No, there are not.

ACTING CHAIR—Would you like to make an opening statement?

Prof. McTainsh—Yes. Thank you for the invitation to come along. I have had a research interest in land degradation for perhaps 20 years and, in particular, wind erosion of arid and semi-arid areas. This research interest emanated from a now youthful experience in northern Nigeria in the late 1970s when I was fortunate enough to stumble on the end of the Sahelian Drought. I say ‘fortunate enough’ because I think it gave me some perspectives on desertification and land degradation in arid and semi-arid areas, which I suspect a lot of people do not have. Perhaps had they had it, the issue of desertification, it would not have had such a controversial and less than satisfactory history.

I was given the transcripts of this joint standing committee as part of an invitation to submit. I could not help but notice that the information that the committee was getting was not conveying the difficulties, the definitional problems and, in particular, the scientific problems, because that is where I am coming from, that have beset the desertification issue over the years. It was crystallised in a sense by having received a copy of a book by David Thomas and Nicholas Middleton, which was quite a controversial little book, raising some issues in relation to the controversial history of desertification. I felt that perhaps the committee should be aware of this because it is not all straightforward. I have summarised the book very briefly.

What is more important—I hope you will agree—is that the history of it has some good news for Australia. This is bad news for everybody in terms of the fact that the problem is getting worse rather than better. As to whether Australia should ratify it, it has some good news. If you would like to ask me details, I would be happy to explain.

ACTING CHAIR—Thank you for the introduction. Since you have invited yourself the first question, you might like to explain the benefits to Australia of ratifying the convention.

Prof. McTainsh—Let me backtrack before I give you specific information on what I think are the benefits. One of the reasons why I think it will be of benefit to Australia is that Australia can come to this issue with minimal historical baggage in terms of our

involvement. I would disagree with some of the information that you have raised so far, which is that Australian scientists have been at the forefront in the desertification issue. I do not think we have. I think we have almost been hiding, considering that we are an arid continent with a history of scientific investigation as distinct from most of the countries that are being affected by desertification now.

I think we have not had very much impact at all. I am talking at a scientific level here. Because of that relatively small impact, and given the experience that land degradation researchers have had over the last 20 years since the issue has been around, I think we can come to the issue with a level of confidence, a level of expertise and, as I said before, a pretty clear conscience. Therefore, we can take some leadership here.

ACTING CHAIR—When you say ‘a clear conscience’, do you mean that Australia’s record is pretty good in managing its land?

Prof. McTainsh—No, I do not mean that at all. I mean that, in the particular context of the controversies associated with desertification, Australians have not contributed to the problems which are highlighted in the book. The issue is unresolved, and the problem is now probably worse than it was in 1977 when they first started to get at it.

ACTING CHAIR—Are you saying that we have not contributed to the arguing and the lack of action?

Prof. McTainsh—That is right.

ACTING CHAIR—What would you say about our own record in dealing with desertification?

Prof. McTainsh—As to our own contribution to the argument, there is at least one—there are more obviously—particular Australian who has played a major role in this: Professor Jack Mabbutt, formerly a professor of geography at the University of New South Wales. He was a very important figure in this. In retrospect, he did a very good job. He was cautious, and he was not prone to encouraging outlandish statistical statements about the extent of the problem.

In terms of Australia’s achievements in dealing with desertification, firstly, Australians do not use the term desertification. So, literally speaking, that is hard to answer. From what is termed desertification, I interpret land degradation, which is the way I think most Australian scientists would interpret desertification as a result of human activities or land use activities.

In the 20 years that the rest of the world has been fighting with desertification, Australia has also been fighting with it on its own ground. I think we have made

significant advances—some significant technical advances—but I think they are probably not as significant as the proliferation of the problem. Even though we have done pretty well over the last 20 years, not only in terms of technical advances but also in terms of raising awareness at the land user level, in particular, with pastoralists and agriculturalists—and there are some examples of significant successes—I think the problem is still getting ahead of us.

ACTING CHAIR—What advantages are there to Australia in ratifying a UN convention to Australia?

Prof. McTainsh—I think there are lots of advantages. One obvious one is that, if you are not in the system, you cannot modify the system. So in the future, given its chequered history, if Australia is not part of this international cooperation to deal with this problem, we are going to be less capable of contributing. If we do not contribute, we will lose the opportunity of taking international leadership. We have a potential niche here which we are not exploiting. This is not necessarily directly an economic niche, but I think indirectly in the short term it is an economic niche, and in the longer term it is directly an economic niche.

Basically, Australia has not exploited its position as a developed country with an arid environment, because we have got fantastic potential to market that expertise in the short term in promoting our state government organisations as well as our Commonwealth government organisations, and in consultancies in Africa in particular. In the medium and long term, I think Australia has a lot to gain from this. I think one of the problems with Australians and Australia is we do not think medium and long term; therefore, we do not think in terms of commercial advantages in the medium and long term.

To give you an example of where we are different from other countries, a few years ago—five or six years ago—a small group of us in the land conservation area were approached by a very, very large international construction organisation. I will not name them because at the time the proposal was commercial-in-confidence. The issue has dissipated anyway, but just to be sure, I will not name them.

Their plan was to provide a very significant input of money to projects involving the desert. They really did not seem to care what sorts of projects they were, but what they wanted was expertise from a construction point of view of working in our environments. They said, ‘Have you got any projects going on in your arid zone? We can come along and give you heaps of money as long as we utilise the potential of using the Australian arid zone as a large experimental area.’

The reason they wanted to do this, I found out subsequently, is that they had tried to do it in Africa and they had come unstuck because of the political difficulties of doing that sort of thing. But they and their country had a long-term view that, whilst Asia was the continent of the present, Africa was the continent of the future—the 40-plus year

future—and they wanted to be positioned right to exploit that commercial possibility.

It seems to me that Australia does not think in those terms, so when we think about the commercial possibilities of being involved in this treaty, I think that is relevant. If in the years to come we were not involved in this treaty—I think it is inevitable that our arid zone is going to not only be placed under greater pressure but also offer greater potential as our population increases; you only need to compare us with the US to see how they use their arid zone—if we do not ratify this treaty, it might be an impediment to our capacity in the long term to contribute and gain in economic terms.

Mr BARTLETT—Thomas and Middleton argue that there has been little, if any, progress from the billions of dollars spent under UNEP. Do you agree with their contention?

Prof. McTainsh—Generally, yes. I say ‘generally’ because I think you can probably find specific examples, and they mention that non-government organisations have been particularly effective in some local areas. But generally it has been difficult. The other reason I am being tentative here is that one of the fundamental issues is the quantification of the extent of the problem and therefore the extent of the progress.

Mr BARTLETT—Yes, I notice they raise some serious doubts about the accuracy of measurement. How would you suggest that those billions of dollars may have been more effectively spent in combating desertification?

Prof. McTainsh—By moving much more slowly. In the 1970s the Sahelian Drought thing was very interesting. It was a convergence of circumstances in which the world confronted its first big environmental problem. Now we have the greenhouse effect, et cetera. We have big environmental problems. This was the first one, and I think the scientific community leapt into it rather naively and expected to achieve much more than they should have. Had they been more cautious and had they had more experience in the arid zone—the important point here is ‘they’ being mainly Europe; and they don’t have a lot of experience in the arid zone—they would have said, ‘It’s going to be very difficult for us to quantify accurately the nature and extent of this problem. Let’s spend the first 10 years on doing that and, when we’ve done that, let’s move on to the next stage.’ But they tried to move much too far and much too fast.

It’s possible that, had all of that money been spent on merely modestly quantifying the problem, people would have said, ‘Oh, what a terrible waste of money,’ but at least at the present time they would know what the problem is and where it is most serious, and have a clearer idea of where to go.

Mr BARTLETT—Given that history of waste or inefficient use and that that pattern may well continue, is it a plausible argument that Australia’s interests might not be better served by using that money ourselves to combat our own problems rather than

contributing it to an organisation where the money is not being used effectively?

Prof. McTainsh—Yes, I think you could put that argument but I would counter it by saying that, as far as I know, and I don't have detailed knowledge of this, Australia hasn't spent a lot of money so far and it's probably unlikely that Australia would be expected to spend a lot of money in the future. But, even that aside, Australia, I would argue, would gain more from spending the same amount of money on a desertification project in West Africa than it would on a local problem. One of the things that people don't realise is the commonalities between Australia and Africa are amazing—they are incredible—and the potential to apply technologies from one continent to another is very significant. In fact, I have personal experience of that. The only reason I basically am interested in wind erosion is I spent that time in Africa. I came back to Australia in 1980, when people didn't even know anything about wind erosion. I started looking at it and thought, 'Hey, we've got a problem here and nobody realises it.'

Getting back to your point, I think by Australians being involved in that international forum not only are they being seen to be taking leadership but the experience that they gain from that environment can be applied directly back, will feed back, to their own environment.

Mr BARTLETT—But don't we achieve those same benefits of experience by working in our own environment in addition to reaping the other benefit of preventing degradation of our land, therefore halting the decline in productivity of some of our own marginal lands?

Prof. McTainsh—Yes, but we don't get the benefit of that international collaboration, and I don't think we have had the benefit so far because Australia hasn't been part of this action to the extent that it should have or could have, and that is very important. Even though in the 1970s European scientists basically cut their teeth on this issue in terms of being involved with arid land degradation, they now know a lot as a result of that experience. Australian scientists, during the same period, had not been so involved in that problem. We have been doing our own thing, and to a certain extent we have been, in my experience in the wind erosion area, sort of marginalised. Whenever I go to international conferences—in fact, in June I'm going to one commemorating the 50th anniversary of the United States Department of Agriculture wind erosion research program—I've been invited because they want to find out what's happening in Australia. It is a bit of an idiosyncrasy of 'Let's see what those Australians are doing'. We are marginalised in many of these areas. I think it is valuable for us to be part of the action because the transfer of information can go both ways.

CHAIRMAN—Professor, first of all, I apologise that I had to rush away. I welcome you to the committee. The paper that you wrote I found interesting.

Are you aware that there is a lot of emotion out there in the community,

particularly in rural and regional Australia, about the potential ramifications of this? I think this is the first issue that this committee has addressed which is really the preserve of the states; land use is a states issue. In academia, how much debate is going on? I guess I am asking you: are you aware of the broader debate, albeit muted, in the community?

Prof. McTainsh—Had I not read the transcripts, no. I got that impression very strongly from reading the transcripts—not only from the questions asked by members of the committee but also from the themes of submissions, such as that of the National Farmers Federation. No, I had not realised that this was a problem. I can only give a personal rather than a professional response here. I cannot see it as being too much of a problem in the future. But you are not really asking an informed person that question.

CHAIRMAN—How many land use centres do we have around the country? For example, I know we have a well regarded one at the University of Southern Queensland in Toowoomba.

Prof. McTainsh—Land use centres?

CHAIRMAN—Yes.

Prof. McTainsh—Do you mean in our university system?

CHAIRMAN—Yes—

Prof. McTainsh—Probably just about every university has got some—

CHAIRMAN—or the equivalent.

Prof. McTainsh—equivalent area which looks at land management issues, land conservation issues. Perhaps not all of them but most of them would, yes.

CHAIRMAN—Would your university be at the top of the pecking order?

Prof. McTainsh—Absolutely.

CHAIRMAN—I would be disappointed if you did not say that.

Mr HARDGRAVE—I can vouch for that, Mr Chairman.

Prof. McTainsh—We are a small university, but we have a 20-year history of being involved in this. So, yes, I think we could say that we have made a fairly significant contribution.

CHAIRMAN—I think Brian Roberts has established quite a credible centre at the USQ and it is well regarded internationally as well. There are a number.

Prof. McTainsh—Yes.

CHAIRMAN—‘Desertification’ in a lot of people’s view conjures up a draconian thing which comes, I suppose, from Third World connotations. Would a change to ‘land degradation’ or something like that help a bit perceptually, or would it not?

Prof. McTainsh—Yes, massively. Titles and names are in a sense trivial but in another sense very significant. Had the term ‘desertification’ not been used, I think Australia up to this point would have made a much more major contribution. You can talk to people who are actively involved in desertification research, but they do not use that term. Therefore, in an international context Australia is not seen as doing anything. For example, I have only ever published one paper with the word ‘desertification’ in its title, but I have published dozens which are actually about desertification.

So the definition of the term is very important. It has been a problem, if you like, for Australians because Australians have said, ‘This is an unnecessary term.’ The term reflects more the fact that the issue was first being looked at by Northern Hemisphere, mid-latitude, humid environment scientists who said, ‘Hey, that’s distinctive, that’s unusual, we’ll give it a new name.’ But in Australia we say that it is not distinctive, it is not unusual. It is just land degradation in semi-arid and arid environments, and we have it all the time. So the issue of the term is an important one.

CHAIRMAN—Also, it would be fair to say that this committee has been flat out since the middle of last year keeping up with the requirements of the tabling of ongoing treaties. As you would know, we deal between the signature and the ratification processes, and report back to the parliament before the government finally ratifies and therefore accepts the international legal ramifications.

Desertification and the Convention on the Rights of the Child—which we will deal with for the rest of the day and in preliminary hearings in Canberra early in the week—are a bit different. Each of those are different in that desertification, as you would know, has been signed by the previous government but has not yet been ratified nor, importantly, has a national interest analysis been completed. Desertification is a preliminary issue, but it is an important issue. I thank you for your contribution to this because, although we have not discussed it yet as a committee in detail, it may well be that that national interest analysis is proving impossible for government to move towards ratification.

Over the next few months we may have to table an interim report to the parliament which may give some sort of lead-in to the preparation of that national interest analysis. The point I am making—and I hope one or two of my colleagues comment further on this—is that we are looking for as much advice as we possibly can. It is obviously a very

difficult subject. It is a very emotional subject, as you would have seen from the evidence by the NFF. Out there in the electorate it is an emotional subject. I am sure all of us here would agree with that.

Mr HARDGRAVE—I wonder why we have been told that Australia is a world leader as far as this particular research and application of the research is concerned when you are telling us today that we are not.

Prof. McTainsh—It depends on how you define it. If you look at the contributions of the individual scientists and you look at whether they are looking at land degradation in arid and semi-arid areas and you add them all up, you would find that Australians are up front with a lot of other researchers. But let us think of it in terms of desertification. I have just given an honours student a project to look into this. She has come up with two folders this thick of references. I think there are probably only two or three in there from Australia. In terms of the desertification scientific politics, Australia has not made a particularly significant distribution. In terms of the on-ground research on land degradation on arid and semi-arid areas, we have. Because of our reluctance to use the term, we basically have not had as high a profile as we could have.

Mr HARDGRAVE—Because previous evidence has suggested we were highly regarded and, by implication, much sought after, the obvious question is: why do we need a convention? If our expertise is so great, people will seek us out, as the United States people have sought you out, for instance.

Prof. McTainsh—I would disagree with that view. Until now I do not think people have sought us out as much as they could have, because we have not really been part of the desertification club. I mentioned to a colleague the other day that I was coming to this meeting. This colleague deals with wind erosion. He looked at me as if to say, ‘Why are you doing that?’ He is a land degradation person and he raised the question of relevance because desertification is not considered a relevant concept. It is considered a concept applied to West Africa, not to Australia. It is very unfortunate because Australia is in a very important position: it is both a donor country and an affected country. The only other country like that is the US. We are a dominantly arid country, whereas the US is not. We have great potential to make a very significant contribution here.

I am stepping outside my expertise range here, but in international trade and activities in general, countries need to identify niches in things they are good at. Some countries will be good at computer software, et cetera. Because of its circumstances, Australia is an arid country with a history of scientific research. It has a niche and it is not exploiting that niche.

Mr HARDGRAVE—What you have just said actually proves those earlier points true in that if we were to focus on our own problems and prove ourselves capable of handling that then, by reputation, Australia would be much sought after because of its

capacity to deal with its own problems, the fact that we have our own problems, the fact that we are a donor country and all those things that you have just said. I submit to you—in fact, I could prove that point—that we do not really need this convention; rather, we should be getting on with our own problems and prove ourselves as an international community and, by consequence, perhaps export our services as a result of fixing up our own problems first.

Prof. McTainsh—But my point is that we have been doing that and we have not raised ourselves very high in the international community.

Mr HARDGRAVE—We have more to learn from them than we have to give.

Prof. McTainsh—That is right. In scientific political terms, we could make a much more important contribution. We have been doing what you say, but if we were to be part of this convention, we could be formally acknowledged up there in these big fora as being a major leader. It would have incredible economic medium- and long-term implications.

As I said before, quite aside from land degradation in arid areas, the reality is that, if Australia's population is going to grow, there will be more attention paid to the arid zone. You can make the comparison with the US. I have visited the arid parts of the US in Arizona, for example. It is amazing to what extent the Americans actually live in their arid zone. There are enormous up-market retirement settlements in Arizona, for example, where the most wealthy people go and live. We do not have that but we could well have it in the future. There are all sorts of pressures.

The proposal to grow cotton in the channel country last year, for example, is unfortunately an example of the thin edge of the wedge because people are starting to focus their attention on land now. We are in a bit of a fulcrum situation. If we were having this discussion 20 years ago, people would say, quite rightly, 'The desert is not a particularly important part of this country in terms of population densities, gross national product, et cetera.' But in the future it is going to be. Whether we like it or not, it is going to be an important part of our nation, much more than it has in the past, which makes this issue more important as a result.

Mr HARDGRAVE—For the record, I think this has been very interesting evidence, but I note especially the intriguing term of 'scientific political environment'.

Prof. McTainsh—I make that distinction because I do not actually belong to it. The international scientific conference circuit is an important forum for scientists to operate. I am talking about United Nations funded and other international organisations. It is a level of involvement which is important for us to have.

Mr TRUSS—One of the reasons why there has been community concern about

this convention is the view that the Commonwealth may take advantage of powers that might be granted to it to override the states in land management issues. Do you have any evidence that having six or seven states in Australia has damaged our management of land?

Prof. McTainsh—There are pros and cons. The negative side of state responsibilities for land management is duplication. You do get situations where different state organisations are doing the same thing, which could have been done more efficiently at a national level. Sometimes you get organisations moving in slightly different directions.

On the positive side, you get competition between state organisations. For example, I have just attended a meeting in Adelaide looking at environmental indicators for sustainable agriculture. The Queenslanders have a model on rainfall prediction, et cetera; the Western Australians have one too. In a sense, that is good because at a scientific level that sort of competition keeps everybody on their toes and it is good for progress and so on.

I personally think—this is a personal observation—that the involvement of the Commonwealth government along the lines of the landcare program and along the lines of the Natural Heritage Trust is a good thing.

Mr TRUSS—But we are doing that without a convention.

Prof. McTainsh—That is right. But from my not particularly well-informed perspective, I cannot see that the convention will cause any problems from the point of view of Commonwealth-state responsibilities. I qualify that by saying that I am not well informed in this area.

CHAIRMAN—Thank you very much for that summary and for coming before us this morning. It has been very helpful.

Resolved (on motion by Mr Hardgrave):

That this committee authorises publication of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

Committee adjourned at 9.47 a.m.