

WE ALL TOOK A STAND

David Ritter

NOBODY LOOKS VERY comfortable. There are four faces, angled inelegantly, only one inclined to engage with the camera, the attached bodies mostly submerged in a hot, foaming tub. There are two men and two women. The picture is from an age before digital cameras were everywhere, so the image hasn't been altered and as far as I know exists only in slowly fading semi-gloss hard copy. It is a scene more awkward than salacious: only one drink is in evidence and the expressions of the four twenty-somethings reflect self-consciousness more than any release of inhibitions. Everyone is wearing bathers and there's nothing scandalous to see here. As one of that group, I remember the night wryly.

I can't remember much else about that weekend, probably pleasant enough, with a dozen or so other young lawyers from Perth who had travelled the three-hour drive 'down south' to a rented spa retreat somewhere around Margaret River, a little over twenty years ago. Apart from the few photos, all that remains is an eclectic grab of memory fragments spread over a couple of days: my first-ever 'lunch at a winery', the grounds of which were bedecked with ornamentation of faux European antiquity, as if to suggest that there had once been a period of 'Roman Western Australia'; a preciously rare taste of marron, from a hamper brought along by one of my colleagues; a late-night game of Pictionary, in which an angular crown prosecutor managed to draw a remarkably accurate likeness of Fidel Castro.^[i] Above all, I recall an abiding sense of my own gaucherie as an outsider to the storied place that is Margaret River: metonym for a good red, signifier of good times, world renowned.

I WASN'T EXPECTING to begin this essay with the account of a half-recalled mini break. But that is the thing about Margaret River among people from Perth; *everyone* has an attachment, a memory, a story – or, if not, can at least nod with understanding at the town as a geo-cultural reference. There are the true locals, of course, but the population swells massively during holidays and the collective memory of anecdotes and recollections continues to accumulate as a result.

I don't remember visiting Margaret River as child, because for our own psychologically and financially idiosyncratic reasons my family had no history of holidays 'down south'. I had teenage friends who'd been going to 'Margs' or 'Martrivr', as they'd say, for years, armed with surfboards and wetties, ready to direct their pubescent energies at the solace of the waves. I'm no surfer, and so didn't join any of these excursions, but then at the very tail-end of my teens, I did make a couple of rite-of-passage trips with my girlfriend and mates, heading down the South Western Highway in broken-arse cars. We mostly hovered on the Chiko Roll and Corn Jack periphery of camping grounds and old-school delis, experiences that were most unlike the literally and figuratively immersive spa weekend of five years later.

The core truth of Margaret River is the beauty and fertility of the place: the rolling hills and valleys of rich earth; the shades of green of bush and pasture, so rare in an immense and mostly red and brown state; the early mist rising above the small waterway, the Margaret River itself.

The Wardandi language group of the Noongar people owned the country since time immemorial, and it wasn't until the 1830s, that the waterway hitherto known as 'Wooditchup' was dubbed 'Margaret River' by coloniser John Bussell, named after a distant relative. Murderous violence ensued, with Bussell himself being party to one massacre.^[ii] The town site of Margaret River wasn't gazetted until 1913, and successful viticulture didn't begin until the establishment of the Vasse Felix Estate in 1967, followed by half a dozen other leading wineries over as many years.

In July 2010, the town of Margaret River was faced with a new wave of radical displacement. The state government of Western Australia revealed that mining contractor LD Operations planned to seek approvals to extract a significant coal resource in the Margaret River locality of Osmington. While LD Operations were set to develop the project, majority funding was to be provided by New York billionaire Hans Mende's private equity group, American Metals & Coal International, with the remaining share to come from Perth businessman Norm Taylor. [iii] The proponents no doubt felt confident that the project would get up; after all, Western Australia is a famously pro-mining state. Mountains have been blown up, sacred sites demolished, farms ripped away, creeks and billabongs lost forever, and vast swathes of country dug up and dynamited for the dollars that come from minerals and fossil fuels. Law and administration have evolved to meet the structural imperatives of a political economy that privileges resource extraction wherever prospective deposits are found.

Margaret River, though, is not an anywhere.

IT'S ALWAYS SLIGHTLY odd when you make the acquaintance of someone whose face is part of your mental furniture. Ian Parmenter's *Consuming Passions* screened on the ABC for ten years – an extraordinary 450 episodes – between 1992 and 2001. My parents were loyal ABC watchers and so Ian seemed to always be there, in the corner of the sitting room, talking across a big woollen rug that had been made by my mother, instructing on recipes in five-minute increments. Born in London, Ian was a Fleet Street journo who only ended up in front of the camera later in life, long after he'd migrated to Western Australia. His distinctive raffish appearance contrasted with the primed stars of commercial television – bald on top, thick, shaggy lower locks, pyramidal moustache, brown eyes switched on to lambent warm, the look completed by the addition of a beret when outside. With the gentlest of schticks, Ian would convey culinary visions that were straightforward enough for any watcher to confidently imagine imitation, and which drew widely on the variety of cuisines being delightedly eaten by a multicultural nation. No recipe was complete without the recommendation of an accompanying Australian wine. *Bon appétit*. Early in the new millennium, Ian and his partner Ann moved to Margaret River and embedded themselves within local society.

When I meet Ian in person for the first time in 2018, he's aged a little from his younger televisual self, but all the essential ingredients of the persona are still in evidence, along with an avuncularity that is every bit as warm as one of his winter casseroles. My wife, Frances, and I are visiting Ian at his home, to hear the epic story of how plucky little Margaret River had taken on the coal industry. It is hard to imagine a man more suited to the place: the generous *bon vivant* living *la belle vie*.

If humanity is to have a flourishing future, it is essential that we transition away from fossil fuels as quickly as possible. Most of the coal, oil and gas still in the ground cannot be burned if we are to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees or less.[iv] Accordingly, the grain and texture of every decisive win against the tyranny of the fossil fuel industry deserves study and celebration as a milestone on the emancipative road to a clean energy world. Curiously, though, what had been a local *cause célèbre* – Margaret River versus the coal industry – seems comparatively little known outside of Western Australia. Given the battles raging against the coal industry across the eastern and southern seaboard, from Adani and the Galilee Basin in the north to the fly-ash scandal at Port Augusta in the south, via any number of other conflagrations in between – and throughout the slough of policy despond in Canberra, where coal has poisoned our political system as profoundly as our air – it seems weird that Margaret River isn't widely referred to as an instance of progress, of common sense clearly prevailing.

I'm in Margaret River both to learn about and to celebrate an extraordinary win. As a movement it is so important that we narrate and remember every success. There is power in our stories if we choose to tell them.

We retire to Ian and Ann's patio, which looks out onto a small valley with its own vineyard. Near neighbours Neil Garnett and Peter and Jann Lane have already arrived for the conversation. Ian disappears for a moment before reappearing with a grey cardboard file with 'NO COAL MINE' written on the spine. I open the box and find a sheaf of newspaper cuttings, which convey the public story of the campaign. Plucking out the top few to read, I think how rare this experience has become, leafing through paper to find out what happened, rather than just finger-tipping a search engine. Ian himself is ubiquitous among the clippings, eminently photogenic and instantly quotable.

Spokesman for a residents group formed to oppose the proposal, Ian Parmenter said locals were outraged that their rural lifestyles could be violated...[v]

Good talent, as they say.

TOGETHER, WE ALL head out to the site at the locality of Osmington, where LD Operations drilled deep into the pasture to establish the commercial prospects of the ore body. The site looks down over a gentle slope of verdant pasture, bracketed by low forest. There's the odd big tree left in the paddocks. Some weird-looking sheep are grazing in the middle distance. A new breed, Neil tells us with the excitement of an agricultural entrepreneur; farmed for their meat, virtually wool free.[vi] We hear no cars, just the sounds of birds and insects. With one hand shoved in his side pocket, Neil gestures spiritedly with the other, taking single steps in different directions: 'Fundamentally', he says in a voice of crunching gravel, 'this was going to be it. All of this would have been destroyed.' Looking around, I feel nauseated at the thought of all that was almost lost.

The drillholes are now covered by knee-high, cement-capped metal pipes set in concrete squares, three in a row about twenty metres apart. Looking like bollards, they stand mutely – tiny cenotaphs to a successful episode in Australia's long and fitful emancipation from the fossil fuel industry. We listen as Peter Lane – once a petroleum geologist by profession, now with a long pedigree as an effective environmental campaigner – begins to narrate the geological and hydrological story of the area.[vii] Standing wiry and upright with his silver hair shining in the late morning sun, Pete carefully and deliberately explains why the coal is here and the reasons, quite apart from global warming, why mining coal here would have been an act of insanity. First there's the question of the vast amount of water used – and polluted – in the washing of the coal, 'in our driest state, on the driest continent... It was just bizarre.' Then there's the risk to the actual river itself. In a region of groundwater-dependent ecosystems, if the coal seams are hydraulically connected to the aquifer then the consequences of mining could be disastrous. Pete explains:

If there's a mine collapse it's catastrophic... And if it was under the river, which is where it was going to go, and it collapsed then the whole river would just go – *pshhhh*.

'And then', Jann echoes, 'there'd be no Margaret river.' Neil chips in contemptuously: 'It has taken millions of years to make this and what happens then...? The company just goes, *Oh, sorry!*' I ask about the mechanics of the protest: who was driving things? Neil answers emphatically for the group: 'We *all* took a stand. We would have lain down in front of bulldozers. There was just no way it was going to happen.'

LD Operations had run into a formidable posse, a crack team with distinctive skills and personalities coming together to undertake a mission against a more powerful adversary: Ian with his showbiz and media savvy; Pete's profound expertise; Neil, a determined landholder with some great connections; and Jann, with her community networks. The four of them seem uncomfortable taking any special credit, though, and are very quick to name others, including another neighbour, Felicity Haynes, who holds property adjacent to where we are standing. Special mention is made of Brent Watson, who had been the most prominent public face of the landholders who would have been directly impacted had the mine gone ahead. Credit is also given to lawyer Craig Wallace from the firm Lavan Legal, who was a staunch source of effective advice. Local print journalists such as Warren Hatley and Georgia Loney had also been crucial, breaking stories and giving boldly objective and informed coverage to the issue. 'Everyone was *wonderful*,' says Neil. It is an expression of comradeship echoed by Brent Watson, with whom I later correspond:

...for me everyone who was in our foxhole with us is forever wonderful. We met people of all persuasions – all politics, capitalist and socialist alike. All seemed persuaded by the common need to defend water and all could share some indignation about surrendering the region to coal mining.

We finish our site visit with a group photo, and I feel my soul swell for this gang of unlikely protestors, who combined their talents and abilities with creativity and tenacity to defend the place they love.

THE PROTEST UNFOLDED over the course of 2010–12, coinciding with the driest year on record for the south–west land division of Western Australia, which includes Margaret River. [viii] Local, state and federal politicians were lobbied and petitioned, while LD Operations was mocked and challenged at every turn. The unlikely romantic couple consisting of former Western Australia Liberal leader Troy Buswell and Greens–turned–independent MP Adele Carles were among those who worked closely with the protestors. Buswell, who was then the local member of the state's lower house, had gone to the backbench after a series of wildly inappropriate antics achieved public notoriety, but the disgraced ex–leader revealed a very different dimension to his character in the course of the campaign to stop the mine. [ix] According to Brent Watson, 'In the context of our coal advocacy Troy was wonderful; he was a warrior and took political risks.'

As the campaign drew on, there were fundraising functions, and rallies attended by local kids and families. The then Premier Colin Barnett let it be known that he was not in favour of the proposed mine, but would let process take its course. Ian, Brent and others continued to work the phones, and a few global celebrities started taking an interest. The comedian Ben Elton, now a resident in Western Australia, became a patron of the Margaret River No COALition, calling the proposed mine 'an act of monumental, millennium–shaping stupidity'. [x] Michael Palin delivered a short sharp video message asking, '[W]ho in their right mind would want to put a coal mine in the Margaret River region?' [xi] Various wineries surfaced with a refined pugnacity, and the Margaret River Wine Industry Association formally opposed the proposed development. [xii]

In due course, the matter came before Western Australia's Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) and, in a rare victory for conservation, it ruled against the mine. Nonetheless, rightly fearing that they had only won a temporary respite, the defenders of Margaret River maintained their political pressure. In July 2012, ultimate victory was achieved when Norman Moore, WA's veteran Minister for Mines and Petroleum, terminated all pending applications for coal exploration activities within a 230–square–kilometre zone in the Margaret River region. [xiii]

THE DUTCH-AMERICAN SOCIOLOGIST Saskia Sassen has written extensively about shifting 'frontier zones', the new boundaries and borderlands of late capitalism that are analogous to the frontiers of the expanding empires and nation-states of old.[xiv] The process of financialisation is the primary dynamic in driving the creation of these zones, as shifting capital seeks to extract value and to police privatised places. The defence of Margaret River can be read as an exemplar of spatial politics of this kind, an affirmation that the beautiful town and its vineyards were part of the socio-political core, not the periphery, and should remain closed to the predations of finance capital. LD Operations is not a publicly listed mining company with an established place in the Australian imaginary. Perhaps Rio Tinto or BHP may have stood a better chance of persuading the good folk of Margaret River that there was nothing to be worried about.

The Canadian writer and political activist Naomi Klein describes those places that bear the brunt of extractive industries as 'sacrifice zones'. According to Klein, these are usually 'Poor places. Out-of-the-way places. Places where residents lack political power, usually having to do with some combination of race, language and class.' Such places don't have the multifaceted capital of the Margaret River community.

I've been to some of Australia's sacrifice zones, including vast mine sites veiled by their remoteness. Few Australians ever visit these giant gouges into the body of the country, while those displaced have most often been the traditional owners, or a few farmers and the residents of (often declining) rural and regional towns. Indigenous peoples' objections were ignored or violently repressed for most of the first 200 years of colonisation, and only more recently have been somewhat palliated with Aboriginal heritage legislation and limited negotiation rights, but only rarely any right of veto. The wealth extracted has been enormous, mostly to the handsome benefit of owners and shareholders who generally live, play and enjoy lifestyles a long way from where the earth's flesh is open-cut in the pursuit of profit. It was a point made archly by Norman Moore in the Western Australian Legislative Council in the context of the disputes over proposed coal mining in Margaret River:

Ironically, many of the vineyards of the South West that the member wants to protect have been built on the proceeds of the mining industry – probably most of them, if the truth be known.[xv]

Moore's irony, though, gained little traction. Sacrifice zones are meant to stay where they are, well away from the beneficiaries of that good fortune purchased with the martyring of someone else's future. It was not for Margaret River to be led to the altar. But the Minister for Mines and Petroleum was adamant that the mercy should not be shared any further. The rest of Australia generally tends to exhibit a fairly moderate interest in Western Australian doings, but beyond some habitual indifference there's a clear institutional reason why Margaret River's win over the coal industry is less known about than should be the case. Moore explicitly disavowed the idea that he was setting any kind of wider precedent: 'I would emphasise that this decision is based on unique and local circumstances...' This is no doubt why the resources sector Australia-wide was so restrained in its response. It is likely that in the business lounges, everybody understood that a kind of bargain was in place. Margaret River would stay off limits, but Moore's intention was that everything else would be business as usual.

The notion of Margaret River as a rare exception would be reflected in the continued operation of the system of law and administration governing mining in Western Australia and the rest of the country continuing on as before. And there's the rub: for all the obvious insanity of a coal mine in Margaret River, the campaigners came to understand with frustration that technical hooks were required to create a basis for blocking the project. In the system as it stands, the willingness to stand and fight is a necessary but insufficient condition. As Brent Watson tells me:

The EPA found a genuine catastrophic risk to water... All the rest, politics and even love of place and homeland are firmly in the genre of indignation, but we soon learned that indignation is not empowering to decision-makers. Only water saved the region.

Peter Lane's assiduous research on the hydrology of the place proved to be a decisive factor. It had been no easy labour. Pete hadn't found departmental officials particularly interested in helping, and certain crucial evidence had only become available after it fell off the back of the truck. This is not how things should be.[xvi]

Australia's approval systems for fossil fuel mining are antiquated and loaded towards the interests of developers. Despite the urgency in phasing out fossil fuels as quickly as possible, there is no legal trigger for ruling out a fossil fuel mine on the basis of the inevitable contribution to global warming. It is extraordinary and unacceptable that there is no legislative basis for excluding a mine proposal because it is not in the public interest. The rules of the game are simply not fit for purpose – and that's without even factoring in the likelihood that any local community opposing a fossil fuel development will face off against a mining proponent with broad influence and deep pockets. Given what we know about the urgency with which the world must stop using all fossil fuels and coal in particular, it cannot be in the public interest for any new mines or extensions to be approved. There is no sane justification for any new coalmine. The best public-policy approach would be a nationwide moratorium on any new fossil fuel developments accompanied by a fair transition package for all impacted workers and communities.[xvii]

Yet although the law remains unreformed, as a matter of political logic Margaret River nonetheless marked a profound watershed with broad ramifications. In Western Australia – that mining-est of mining states – the political and business elite decided, emphatically, that *some things are more important* than the extraction of fossil fuels. One of Troy Buswell's combative sprays is illuminating:

It [the proposal for a coal mine] is ridiculous. There is no rational justification for it... It's not just about protecting a pristine part of the state for a few people... It's about protecting it for everyone in Western Australia who have and will continue to enjoy it.[xviii]

Buswell claimed he'd not met a single politician who thought the LD Operations mine proposal was a good idea.[xix] Mining magnate Michael Wright – who also happened to own the Voyager Estate winery – went on record as saying that coal mining in Margaret River should be ruled out as a matter of principle.[xx] Local Coalition federal MP Nola Marino had described the coalmining proposal as 'not consistent with the existing wine and tourism industries or community perceptions of the Margaret River region' and later went so far as to congratulate the anti-coal groups on a successful campaign.[xxi]

A collective view also developed that LD Operations' promises of environmental safety and community prosperity *were not to be believed or trusted*. The letters pages of the local paper dripped with contempt. In the midst of the controversy, prominent Western Australian journalist Liam Bartlett wrote a long feature that is significant as epitomising what was the widespread feeling.

According to Bartlett, LD Operations' assurances were nothing more than 'spin' and 'smokescreen', because there was no way you could 'plonk a big, foul-smelling, high-impact mining operation right down, alongside some of the world's best vineyards...[and] pretend it doesn't matter'. In any event, Bartlett went on, 'coal is not exactly the product of the future'.^[xxii]

After Margaret River, nobody could ever say again that some things were not more important than coal, or that the industry's claims should be accepted at face value. Often overlooked, Margaret River's repelling of the coal industry should be understood as a profound turning point; the end of the beginning.

Oasis though it is, Margaret River is not on another planet. The most recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change made it clear that if we are to have any chance of holding global warming to 1.5 degrees, we must eradicate coal from global energy systems as quickly as possible.^[xxiii] Unless the global coal, oil and gas industries are rapidly shut down, to be replaced by clean energy from sun, wind, wave and geothermal, the celebrated town will – like everywhere else on Earth – be subject to forces likely to destroy the place as we know it today. Although Margaret River is not among the worst affected areas at this stage, globally the wine industry is already under pressure from the rise in temperatures and is ultimately as vulnerable as the rest of the biosphere.^[xxiv] Among the human race, our poorest and most vulnerable are experiencing the consequences of climate change first and worst, but if global warming spirals out of control, the whole planet becomes a sacrifice zone. It isn't just Margaret River. Everywhere and everyone we love is jeopardised by the coal industry and the rest of the fossil fuel polluters and we have to work like hell to stop the madness in its tracks.

IN ONE OF OUR final conversations, Ian Parmenter tells us that when the campaign against the Margaret River coal mine was in the balance, he began imagining an altogether different kind of development. Instead of a calamitous pit owned by financial capital, why not a new peoples' forest? Ian duly sent the proposal off to the premier:

How about a positive alternative to the plundering of our land – something which actually does some good?... Create a children's forest and learning centre, where families could come to plant their own trees for the future, with plaques bearing their names. This would be perfect for West Australians who do not have gardens of their own, and somewhere they could contribute to something of value for the future... As part of the forest, there would be an open learning centre where children would come and be active in horticulture, art, writing, drama, hospitality and so on.^[xxv]

Facing the possible death of his community from the infernal coal pit, the good chef did more than say just no. He articulated an idea for the nurturing of community life, anchored in a precious sense of time and place. Sadly, but not unexpectedly, Premier Barnett was not attracted by the idea; but Ian's eyes still light with the excitement of what could yet be.

By promulgating practical visions anchored in the needs and dreams of our shared humanity, at every level from the local to the global, we can reveal the best recipe for nourishing the future as we confront the reality that is now upon us. It is too late for global warming to be altogether avoided, but in the face of what is now here we must redouble our efforts in building community and solidarity against the fire and storm, even as we belatedly take the urgent action to rapidly transition to a clean-energy world.

Our purposeful and practical efforts to halt climate damage are made infinitely more powerful and appealing by imagining and striving for what we can yet build together: a new forest for Margaret River; regenerative farms; cities reshaped for the common good; public institutions reclaimed for the people; a nation remade in the image of the best version of us; millions of lives dedicated to nurturing, inventing, building and creating.[xxvi]

Yet none of this can be accomplished without contest. We can only gain this future if, together, we are prepared to wrest power away from the vested interests leading us down the pathway to ruin. That is the great political movement that is now underway, as the collective effort of hundreds of thousands of Australian people.

EVERYONE IN WESTERN Australia has a story about Margaret River. A bottle of wine. An awkward weekend away. A day on the breaks. 'Do you remember that time?' 'There's nowhere else quite like it.' Stories of place teach meaning. Margaret River was saved from coal because a group of locals had the resources necessary to hold their ground and nobody really believed or accepted the rhetoric of the mining company. It is a precedent that matters and should be celebrated. Whatever the specific local circumstances, a spirit of resistance caught light and spread warmth, both enabling and illuminating certain possibilities in our new normal. Rather than an anomaly based on unique and local circumstances, the protection of Margaret River must become paradigmatic: no new coal mines anywhere.

There's just no way it's going to happen, said the people. And because of their actions, it didn't.

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[iv] See the latest IPCC Report for the best current summary of the urgency and scale of the challenge as it stands: <<<http://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/>>>

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[xii] See for example the quoted remarks of Vanya Cullen in L. Bartlett, 'Why a Margaret River Mine is Madness', *The Sunday Times*, 29 August 2010, 48-49.

[xiii] 'No coal mining for Margaret River', Hon N. Moore, Minister for Mines and Petroleum; Fisheries; Electoral Affairs Media Statement, Tuesday, 24 July 2012: <https://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/Barnett/2012/07/No-coal-mining-for-Margaret-River.aspx>

[xiv] Which she locates as most often occurring in the most globalised cities.

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- [xvi] Terry Barr, also a petroleum geologist, also helped with the hydrogeological report to the EPA.
- [xvii] These are matters that I discuss at greater length in D. Ritter, *The Coal Truth: The Fight to Stop Adani, Defeat the Big Polluters and Reclaim our Democracy*, UWA Publishing: Perth, 2018. I am forever grateful to John Chandler, my colleague at the University of Western Australia School of Law, for pointing out the fundamental problem of the lack of a public interest test.
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- [xxiii] See the latest IPCC report: <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/>
- [xxiv] For some poignant interviews about climate change with Australian wine makers, see *Four Corners*, 'Weather Alert', 5 March 2018: <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/weather-alert/9511070>
- [xxv] Correspondence, I.Parmenter to C.Barnett, Ian Parmenter's Private Archive
- [xxvi] One movement to create 'the best version of us' with which I have been involved can be found at Australia Remade <https://www.australiaremade.org/>

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