

BEYOND BOOM OR GLOOM

On 2 May 2012, Senator Rachel Siewert (Australian Greens spokesperson for the Kimberley and Northern Australia) gave a presentation to the Kimberley Society. Her subject was the Australian Greens' position on the selection of James Price Point as the location for processing gas from the Offshore Browse Gasfield.

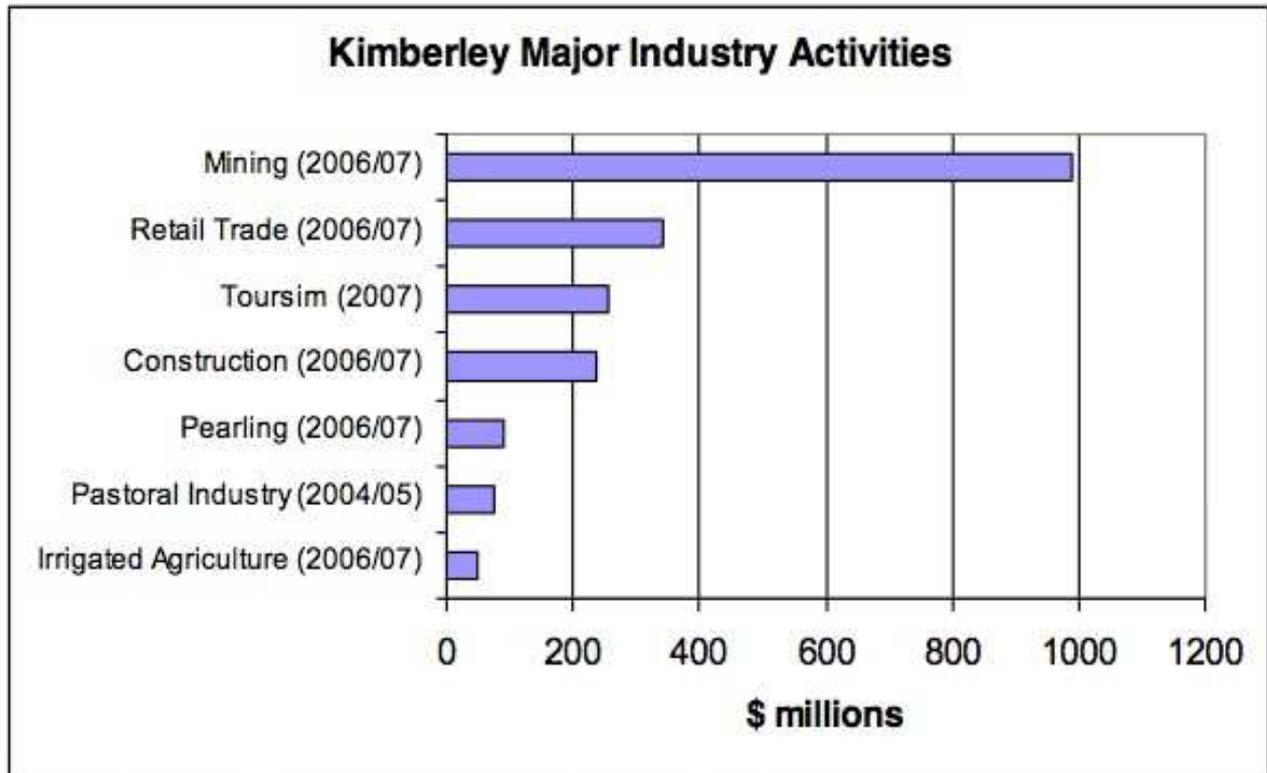
The issue of where the Browse gas will be processed is important because there have been on-going protests at the James Price Point site, as well as courtroom dramas between the Traditional Owners of the land and the State Government. The Kimberley Land Council has brokered a billion dollar package of benefits for the local Aboriginal communities, but under the threat of compulsory acquisition. Meanwhile the State Government has promised that this development will help extend the resource boom. Environmentalists and locals are concerned that this is the first move towards industrialisation of the Kimberley. A Federal Heritage Assessment Process has further complicated the picture by deciding that the dinosaur tracks which run along the edge of the site are Heritage protected but leaving the rest of the site open for resource extraction.

It is within this context that this speech was delivered – it was intended to provide the view from ‘one side of the fence’, with an invitation also extended to Woodside, the main proponents of the gas hub project. Senator Siewert called her speech ‘Beyond Boom or Gloom – an economic alternative for the Kimberley’. She focused on presenting the Greens’ reasons for opposing on-shore processing of the gas at James Price Point, their concerns about the impacts that wide scale mineral resource exploitation would have on the Kimberley landscape and peoples, and their alternative vision for the economic future of the Kimberley – a future that is neither dependent on the boom, nor destined to be gloomy and depressed.

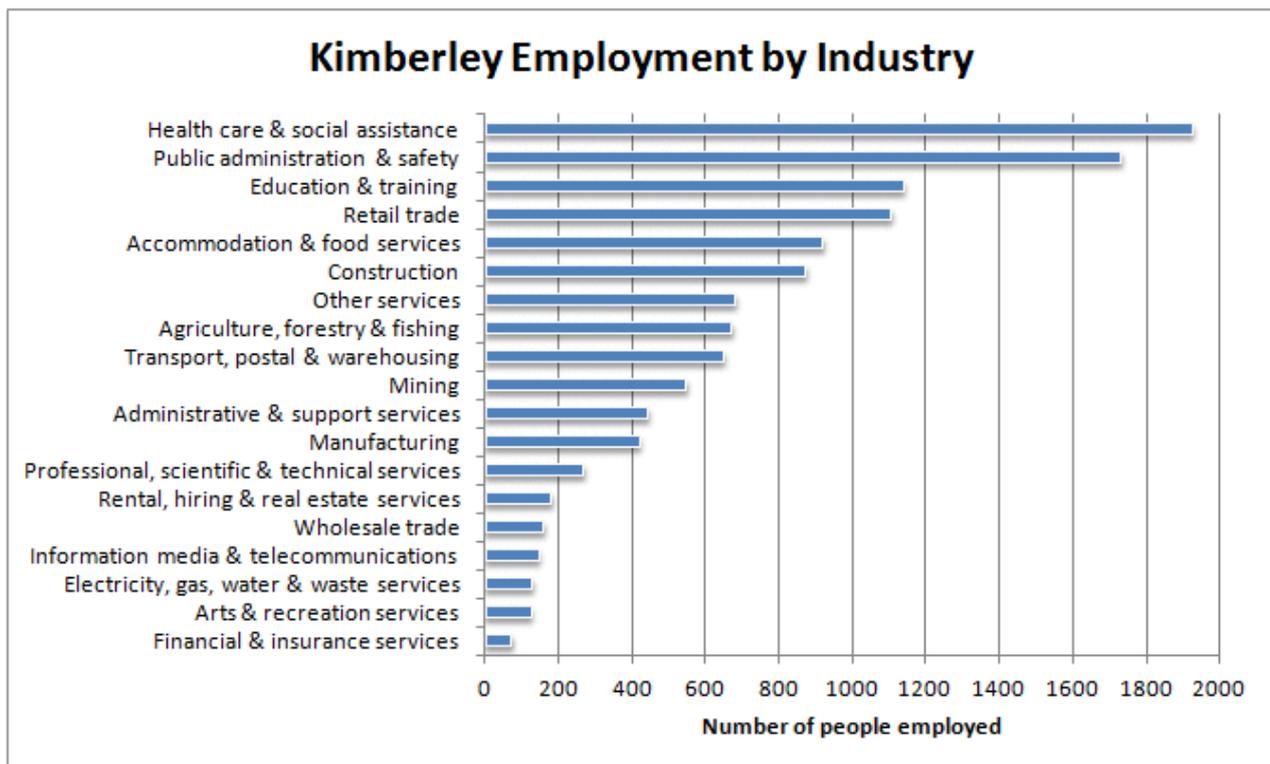
The speech covered the significant environmental values of the region that have been under-acknowledged in the Strategic Assessment, including the diverse marine life, the bilbies and the monsoon vine thickets. The cultural significance of the area was covered in terms of the continuous song line that incorporates the dinosaur footprints and a rich food bowl for Traditional Owners. Finally the speech outlined the Australian Greens' concerns that the economic benefits of full scale, mining projects such as the gas hub have been overstated.

The Greens do not oppose alternative methods of processing the gas, such as a floating platform or piping down the coast, but strongly oppose the way in which the State Government and Woodside have tried to lock in James Price Point as the only possible option. Senator Siewert noted that the threat of compulsory acquisition of the site from the Traditional Owners significantly undermined the principles of free, informed consent, and she argued that there has not been enough discussion with Aboriginal communities in the Kimberley about their aspirations for the region. Noting that the Traditional Owners should benefit from any exploitation of the sea country, regardless of where the gas is processed, Senator Siewert also argued that this shouldn't pay for things that the State Government should already be providing, such as education, housing and healthcare. Another concern noted was the ability of the local Aboriginal people to take advantage of the promised jobs, given the current low levels of training and skills development. She highlighted the evidence from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research that the economic indicators for Aboriginal people in the Pilbara are no better than they are for Aboriginal people anywhere else in Australia.

Moving to the economic issues, Senator Siewert showed several graphs to demonstrate that, while you see that mining is already a significant economic factor in the Kimberley that contributes to the Gross Regional Product, it is not a major employer. Also, when the jobs are fly in, fly out, the economic value leaves the region through both returns to shareholders and wages.



Source: Department of Local Government and Regional Development



Applying this to the Draft Strategic Assessment – predicted jobs are very low, and very few of them will last beyond the initial building phase.

From the draft Strategic Assessment Report for the James Price Point gas hub	
Data	Value
Construction time frame	4-6 yrs
Construction jobs	6000
Operational jobs (low estimate)	400
Operational jobs (high estimate)	600
Estimated percentage of Fly-In Fly-Out (FIFO) jobs construction	85%
Estimated percentage of FIFO jobs operational	75%
Estimated local construction jobs	900
Estimated local operational jobs (low estimate)	100
Estimated local operational jobs (high estimate)	150
Employment multiplier	1.5
Estimated local indirect construction jobs	1350
Estimated local indirect operational jobs (low estimate)	150
Estimated local indirect operational jobs (high estimate)	225

The Australian Greens would like to see the same level of detailed planning that has been put into exploiting James Price Point go into thinking about alternatives for the Kimberley. It seems that the Government isn't encouraging Aboriginal communities toward sustainable development. Traditional Owners shouldn't have to exploit their land in order to receive basic services. Policy decisions that de-fund communities, withhold basic services and push people off land into growth towns are a clear example of the way in which the Government is trying to dictate the economic future of the Kimberley and ensure that it copies the Pilbara; rather than recognising that the Kimberley has the potential to be something completely different. The alternative would be to make the most of the natural beauty of the landscape and the rich cultural heritage to strengthen the Kimberley's culture and conservation economy, rather than focusing on just resource extraction.

Rather than seeking a few big ticket projects that contribute to Gross Regional Product, but leave little benefit for real local economic development, Senator Siewert argued that governments should focus much more clearly on those industries that are truly contributing to local economies which build on pre-existing strengths.

Suggesting that we need to examine social indicators, alongside dollars in the pocket, Senator Siewert concluded her presentation by discussing the opportunities to consider a Culture and Conservation Alternative Economic Model for the Kimberley. The types of industries and jobs that thrive in a culture and conservation economy are those that grow out of the unique features of the human communities in Northern Australia and its relatively low productivity landscapes, and integrate conservation of land with development.

The Australian Greens continue to believe that such a unique region as the Kimberley does not need the kind of industrialisation that has transformed places like the Pilbara into non-stop natural resource factories – at enormous cost to its environment and Indigenous communities.

The above summary is provided courtesy of Rachel Siewert's Office. Further information is available on the Senator's website (<http://rachel-siewert.greensmps.org.au>) where the Campaigns page contains a link for "Saving the Kimberley".