

Viewpoint

Minister slumbers as Blinky dies out

THE Queen, bless her, chose not to pat the two koalas trotted out during her recent visit to South Bank while Prince Philip asked if all koalas belonged to the same species.

Had he been better informed, he might also have asked why the Australian Government seems content to allow the koala to slide towards extinction rather than offend the vested interests of developers.

By the time the next British monarch favours the Antipodean masses with a visit, there will be several thousand fewer koalas in the wild and Their Majesties would be well advised to give one a cuddle while they have the chance.

In politics, if you are going to make an announcement that you would prefer to see lost in the media clutter, releasing it on the eve of the running of the Melbourne Cup is a good strategy.

Federal Environment Minister Tony Burke must think so, last Monday quietly revealing that he was postponing a decision on whether to list the koala as a threatened species.

You probably thought they were already thus protected but they are not, and the latest procrastination is yet another example of the peculiar unwill-

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ingness of the Government to come to the aid of our most dearly held national symbol.

The likely demise of the locally made Commodore in 2014 made the headlines last week but of Burke's decision to further delay any decision on the fate of the koala until February, there was nary a whisper.

There has already been an exhaustive Senate inquiry into the status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population. It released its report on September 22 but the Minister now feels he needs more time to consider.

The Australian Koala Foundation told the Senate inquiry it believed there were between 43,515 and 84,615 koalas left in the wild. This was supported by Professor Clive McAlpine, spokesman for the Koala Research Network, who said that while there once were millions of koalas, now there were between 50,000 and 100,000.

A 2008 survey by the Queensland Government of the koala population on the



Koala Coast – covering an area of about 375sq km embracing Redland, Logan and Brisbane cities – found a 51 per cent decline in three years and a 64 per cent decline over the past 10 years.

This meant numbers had dropped from an estimated 4611 in 2005-06 to 2279 in 2008.

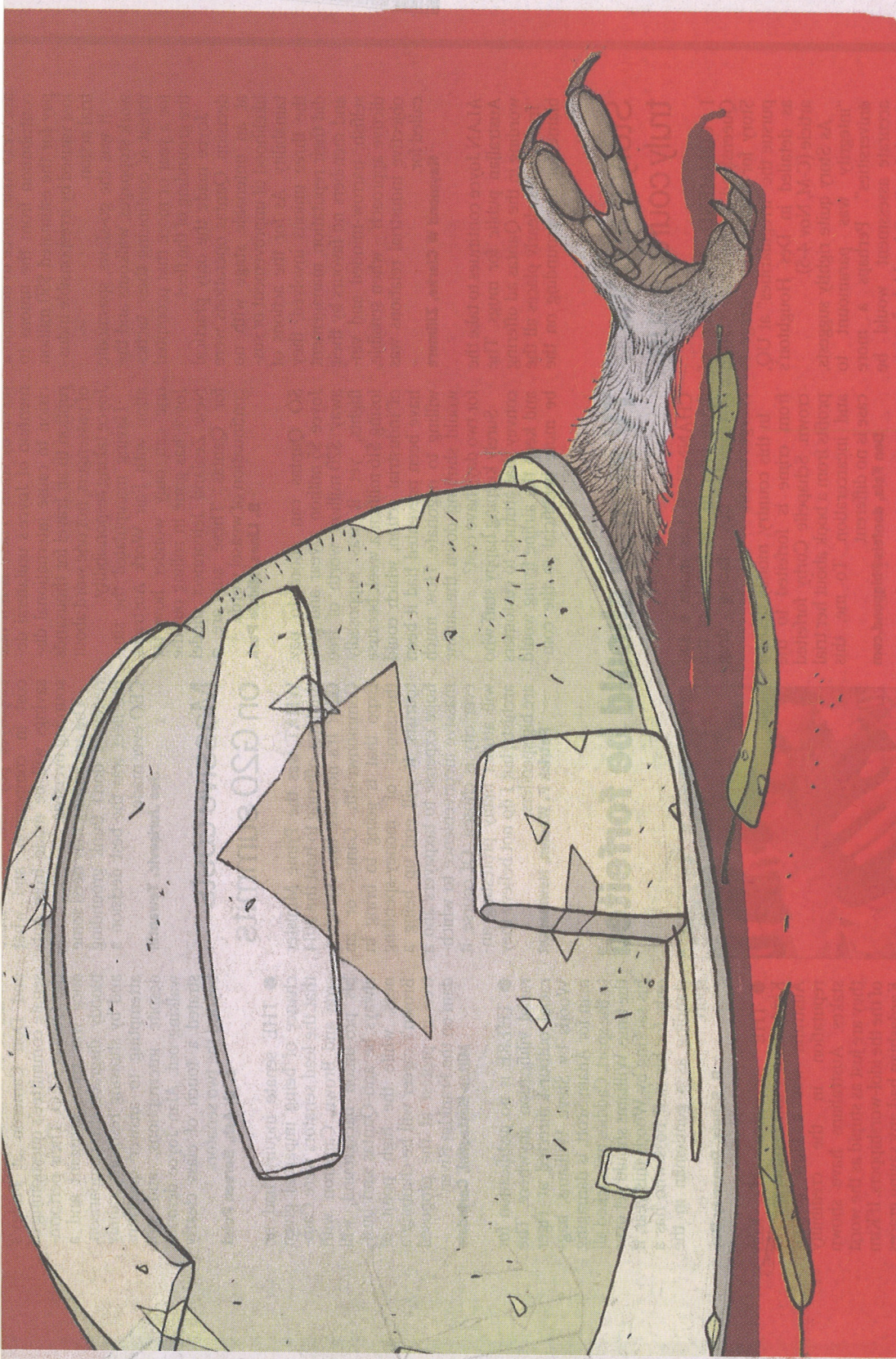
Mapping and surveying in the Pine Rivers region showed koala populations had fallen by 45 per cent in urban areas and 15 per cent in bush areas.

In other parts of Queens-

land, Dr Gregory Baxter of the Koala Research Network told the Senate inquiry he estimated there had been an 80 per cent population decline in the western mulga regions.

The continued refusal of the Federal Government to take decisive action on the koala question defies belief.

It is worth noting, however, that the Urban Development Institute of Australia (Queensland) told the Senate committee that listing the koala as endangered "would create a difficult regulatory load that is



particularly of concern given the ailing state of development activities and construction employment in Queensland", dismissing the listing as "unnecessary".

The koala, then, is to be sacrificed to appease property developers.

Every time the question of the survival of the koala species is raised, the Federal Government, in the best traditions of being seen to do something while reinforcing the status quo of inaction, gets the Environment Minis-

ter's principal advisory body, the Threatened Species Scientific Committee, to hold an inquiry.

As the Senate committee noted, the survival of the koala is hardly a new issue, pointing out that the TSSC had held formal inquiries into it on no fewer than three occasions in the past 15 years. The result of these inquiries? Zilch.

In the light of this bureaucratic intransigence and political stonewalling, the Senate committee said, with more

than a hint of exasperation, that the question of the koala's threatened species status would continue to recur.

The committee agreed on the need for early conservation action. "It will be more cost-effective and, more importantly, improves the ability of species recovery to act now rather than allow the koala to drift ever closer to the threatened species list," it said.

The Minister, however, needs more time. Why? The Australian Koala

Foundation's Deborah Tabart believes she has the answer, predicting Burke will give the appearance of deliberating for several months and then list the koala as "conservation dependent".

"This sounds great but means nothing", she says.

The other possible cop-outs, says Tabart, are that he will claim that the TSSC needs to undertake yet more research, or announce a protection listing of a small group of koalas and ignore a national listing.

Any of these options would be a gift to the developers. There have been more than enough inquiries and deliberation.

Burke needs to list the species as threatened now.

And where are the Greens when they are needed? You might well ask.

And the biggest joke of all? In the US, the Fish and Wildlife Service lists the koala as a threatened species.

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