

## **BEYOND THE BOTTOM LINE**

### **There are no more prophets; only profits**

*The 1996 column that got me sacked.*

There is a nasty side to being rich. It is a side that can be shrouded in secrecy, buried in complex, subterfuge wheeler dealings, and protected by the letter of the law. Greed reveals its naked brutality, leaving observers to gasp, and then to shrug. Given half a chance, wouldn't I do the same thing? Politicians vote themselves a lavish retirement stash – what the heck, it's human nature. A group of Palm Beach householders, surely among the most the most pampered and rewarded people in the universe, conspire to extend their boundaries and gobble up a public beach in the process. For what? The buzz of infinite acquisition.

On TV we are sometimes treated to a spectacle of millionaires ripping out mangrove trees, subdividing rainforests and conniving in the death of species and ecosystems in order to erect ugly pleasure domes. It was one thing to do this in the 50's or 60's, when the world was viewed as a quarry and progress as a cure-all. To persist is a crime against the unborn. The ethos of the market is threatening to become the new world religion. It is already colonising the Third Millennium. Discussions over the true date of the transition are of little substance compared to the symbolism of entering this new period in history, a period that coincides with the great crunch. Can fast diminishing resources sustain fast-increasing appetites? Can social systems continue to tolerate galloping disparities between rich and poor? Will degrading the environment lead to a degradation of our behaviour, or will these threats - the intimations of catastrophe - inspire a psycho-spiritual renewal, a global blitz spirit?

It's these issues that give the dawning of the Third Millennium a significance beyond bumper stickers. We all need to make money, but some don't know when to stop. Many multi-millionaires have gold pouring out of every orifice and still want to leave the world a worse place. A lucrative development is often proclaimed to be "in the national interest", but it's usually the same old planetfucking. "The right of business to make a profit seems to have acquired the same kind of social justice status as the right of all citizens to free speech, shelter and the protection of government," notes academic Graeme Turner in his incisive study of larrikin capitalism, *Making it National*. "When business fails, it asks for government assistance. When it succeeds, it pockets the profits."

Biz-whizzes have acquired the role of community leaders, as we see in the run-up shambles to Sydney's Olympics, displacing civic officials, artists, intellectuals, elders, scientists and people of the cloth. The media support this shift, just as they promoted the elevation of folk heroes in the '80s – John Elliott, Christopher Skase, Allen Bond - and were loath to perceive that the interests they served were other than those of the nation. (As late as 1988, *Business Review Weekly* included Bond on its list of top businessmen and called him a "role model".) As Turner remarks: "It is pointless to accuse the media of bias towards business; they are business."

Still, not everyone on the long, strange trip from egocentricity to altruism is doing a U-turn. The outer journey might seem mundane, like that of a backpacker trudging the Hume Highway hoping to thumb a ride, but the inner journey, when unexpectedly exposed, can be illuminating. It is reported that the key witness in the gruesome backpacker murder trial, Paul Onions, is likely to receive the \$500,000 reward for his evidence against Ivan Milat, the convicted killer. "Surely there should be some morals left where you don't need any money to give evidence," Onions has said. He plans to donate the reward to the families of the victims. Not a wise business decision, perhaps, but wise beyond measure.

*The editor of Bulletin added a footnote: "This is the last appearance of Beyond the Bottom Line". Wonder why? The Bulletin has since expired.*