A Bad Case of Barnacles:
Bellingen, NSW.

[Another piece from *Nation Review*, this one about the northern NSW town of Bellingen, not far from where, after an absence of several years, I have subsequently returned to live. The article stands as a historical impression. Relations between the sections of the community referred to in the article are a bit more conciliatory these days.]

Coming into Bellingen off the Pacific Highway is like stepping into a tourist postcard. Perched astride the dark river from which it derives its name, the town cradles in the palm of the Dorrigo ranges amid lush pastures of browsing dairy cattle, a scramble of picturesque buildings and tree-lined streets less than an hour's drive inland from Coffs Harbour.

No doubt it was this kind of scenic appeal, combined with a benevolent pastoral climate and a thriving local timber industry, which helped attract settlement to the area in the first place. For the best part of a century the town enjoyed a slow and steady growth, largely unaffected by the external influences such as tourism that impacted upon its coastal neighbours. Symbolic of the community's social torpor, the local Azalea Festival was one of the highlights of the local events calendar.

All that changed in the mid-'Seventies, with the arrival of a wave of refugees from the affluent urban mainline, serious alternative lifestyle seekers with enough cash to collectively buy up cheap land and set up communal settlements. Such real estate wasn't difficult to find; in the narrow valleys behind the town, high interest rates and the relentless war against the bush had exhausted the resources of many farmers, and they were ready to cut their losses.

Despite a high initial failure rate, enough of the new migrants survived to provide the basis for a small but viable communal network. This in time became a centre of gravity for other like-minded individuals, further enhancing the local counter-culture, which within a short time had developed into a viable and vocal force in community affairs.

'New settlers', the migrants called themselves. They don't like the word 'alternative' much, because no one seems sure what the alternative is. It's far easier to identify the members of the 'alternative community' by the values they reject – large-scale technologies, conspicuous consumption, environmental destruction, and so on – than by those they embrace, which range from extreme militancy to transcendentalism.

There are other names for them, names commonly heard in the conversations of farmers, townsfolk and the local chamber of commerce. The term 'hippie' encompasses a vast array of

negative attributes – indolence, dishonesty, lack of hygiene and even, according to one line of public-bar philosophy, 'sleeping with your dog'. At a public meeting called to discuss the 'illegal housing' problem arising from hamlet development in the district, a prominent member of the Shire Council likened the presence of hippies in the community to that of 'barnacles on a ship'.

You didn't have to be in town long, however, to realise that the barnacles were in fact helping to hold the ship together. Like many rural towns, Bellingen was in economic trouble before the new settlers arrived, and it was hard to find a shopkeeper who'd deny that business had picked up since the settlers' arrival. The hippies have established a number of cooperative craft and cottage industries that coexist with and complement other enterprises in the town, helping to maintain a healthy turnover of cash.

Be that as it may, it's the tensions between the two groups that dominate local politics. One issue that polarises the community is the operations of the local timber mills. Bellingen is cedar country, and although most of the surviving operators are small by north coast standards, they're still big enough to enrage the new settlers, most of who live on the fringe of the rainforest and see themselves, rightly or wrongly, as frontier defenders of the bush.

They may have a point. Even from the Kalang Road, ten minutes out of town, it's hard to miss the landslides and broken skyline along the North Ridge; but it isn't till you get up to where the action is – an hour's gut-busting climb onto the tops – that a true picture emerges. One D-9 and a good team can clear a lot in a matter of days, and it's evident that they're not fussy about putting things back the way they found them when they've finished. The results read like something out of a geography textbook: subsoil instability, down-slope erosion, re-growth suffocation and, with the onset of the wet season, river siltation and consequent lowland flooding. Which is ironic, when you think about it, because the prospect of thousands of hectares of prime flatland pasture going under water doesn't exactly thrill the farmers either.

But emotive arguments hold sway, and the possibility of an alliance between new settlers and the rest of the community seemed as unlikely as any other kind of compromise during the time I was there. The strategy of passive disobedience that the new settlers had adopted to frustrate the logging industry had found expression in a refusal to participate in the annual burn off, incensing both their neighbours and the local council. Parts had been stolen from heavy earth-moving equipment belonging to one of the local timber contractors.

When I was there the flash point wasn't forestry, however, but the local Community Centre in the main street, which the Shire Council wanted to demolish in favour of a new, modern Council chambers. The Centre had been a social hub for the settlers, providing a casual atmosphere for gatherings, cheap and wholesome food, and space for a variety of craft and lifestyle workshops. The building also housed a library that boasted an extensive range of information on alternative lifestyle, environmental matters and non-destructive technologies.

The fact that much of the funding for these activities came from the local support scheme for unemployed youth located in the Centre had been seized upon by the advocates of demolition, in

support of the view that the current occupants of the premises were 'dole bludgers'. My own observation, based on the workshops I conducted with people using the scheme, was certainly not consistent with such a judgment, which I believe ignores the strength of commitment that underpins the new culture. Most of the people I talked to had clearly thought their decision to abandon a conventional existence through, and had consciously decided to pursue an alternative lifestyle only after a long history of negative experiences within the mainstream system. "People have got this idea that we've rejected society," one of the workshop participants told me, "but they've got it wrong. Society rejected us."

The truth is hard to work out. There are bigots and extremists on both sides of the cultural fence, and whenever the issues were talked about in my presence there was always a bit of a 'day of reckoning' quality about the conversation. Compromise still seemed a long way off. A couple of weeks after I left, things took a turn for the worse when the council bulldozed the old centre in an unannounced dawn operation. I've heard the war against the burn-off resisters has escalated to new levels, and there have been a number of large-scale aerial drug raids against the alternative communities, assumed to be hotbeds of subversion.

There are some hopeful signs, though. A few months after the community centre affair, a 'freak' candidate ran for Council on an environmental platform and gained a seat. Local resistance to hamlet development is crumbling in the face of legislative precedents elsewhere. The trade in tourist products, largely stimulated by 'hippie' input, is booming.

The seas may be choppy, but the barnacles cling on.

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