

— Editorial —

Alpine protest should go on

A few dozen riders on Victoria's High Country made national news this month, but not because of their numbers or their cause. National news editors jumped at the chance to show off real Australian drovers, complete with stock whips, amid the natural grandeur of Victoria's Alpine National Park.

The riders made news also because a larger issue was at stake than their fight to regain grazing licences in the High Country. This is the right to engage in protest, or what is sometimes called demonstrating, and sometimes urban terrorism. Activists everywhere believe they stand for individual rights and civil liberties.

Protesters are right or wrong depending on our point of view. Marchers for causes we detest are agitators, or worse. Motorists have unprintable names for cyclists who ride en masse onto roads, causing traffic mayhem.

Protest has powerful symbolic force, and especially for governments which fear massive displays by large noisy crowds. When Environment Minister John Thwaites suggested that the high country cattle drive might result in heavy fines, he aligned himself with the forces behind the withdrawal of grazing licences last year.

This was no surprise. Environment is his portfolio, and across Victoria there is a larger anti-grazing lobby than there are supporters of the cattlemen's traditions. Green voting power explains the ban on grazing licences, but does not explain what is meant by 'cleaning up' the High Country. Does Mr Thwaites want to make the Alpine Park a wilderness, or a vast manicured garden?

Numbers do not decide whether the Government is right or wrong. Each side in the dispute has arguments to support its case, and \$7.5m. of projects does not mean the Government is on the side of the angels.

Answers needed

This newspaper believes we need some answers before we can be confident that the park will be in any better hands than hitherto. Possibly, the impressive projects listed by Mr Thwaites, to be tackled by volunteers, would be better achieved if cattle were allowed to resume travelling through the High Country, foraging as they go.

Volunteer manpower is notoriously unreliable, after the initial enthusiasm wanes. It is not a continuing resource. On the other hand, mountain cattlemen have historic links with the region that are likely to continue far into the future.

So one good reason for Mr Thwaites to revisit the grazing licence question is that the high country must be preserved for many years beyond the present Government's stewardship. This is why last year's ban need not be the end of the matter.

Nor should the cattlemen abandon their promise of annual protests, or the Government threaten unnecessary and unwarranted penalties. The cattlemen's protest was a modest declaration of resolve. It had none of the violence, personal injury, or high cost to business of many other recent actions by massed urban (and rural) demonstrators.

Significantly, these latter actions attracted no serious retribution nor threats from those in authority. Yet their instigators displayed arrogant disregard for the rights of others. That cannot be said of the High Country riders.