

The Greening of Tasmania

John Biggs

Tasmanians have long appreciated their environment, as the photographs of J.W. Beatty, Fred Smithies, F.S. Browne, H.J. King and many others attest. But appreciating the environment was for the most part a passion of the adventurous middle classes. It wasn't until the flooding of Lake Pedder in 1972 that love of the environment became *environmentalism*, a way of thinking about the environment in a holistic way that in turn gave rise to a political philosophy about humanity's relationship to the environment. This philosophy inspired the United Tasmania Party that later became the Greens, the first Greens party in the world. It was a philosophy that rejected the view, held by the Liberal and Labor parties, that nature was there primarily to be exploited for economic gain.

Since the flooding of Pedder, environmentalists directly or indirectly saved the damming of the Franklin River, prevented the construction of the Wesley Vale and the Gunns' Tamar Valley pulp mills. While all these achievements received support from the majority of the population, the word went out that these projects were undermined by a small minority of anti-everything Green extremists, and that any of these projects could have saved Tasmania's ailing economy.

More generally, a majority of Tasmanians would surely agree that the government should increase spending on health, education and public transport; support small business, including farmers, over giant corporations; engage in greater public consultation and transparency; legislate on the grounds of social justice; adhere to established due process in policy making; stop clear-felling old growth forests and establish a sustainable forestry industry that creates jobs for specialist craftsmen. Yet many who would agree to all these would never vote for the political party that uniquely stood for them. Something strange is going on.

Our two party political system was based on the assumption that we dwelt in a simple binary society, with employers in the right corner represented by the Liberal Party, and the employed in the left corner, represented by the Labor Party. Always a simplistic concept, it went completely off the rails when the Hawke-Keating Labor governments embraced neoliberal policies to become in effect a softer version of the Liberal Party. Today both parties adhere to this single over-riding policy: deregulate and let the market decide. This means that in practice we have bipartisan commitment to the proposition that the role of government is to further corporate interests if they clash with the public interest. For example, both Labor and Liberal parties support existing poker machine legislation, and a forestry industry that has been tooled up for woodchipping, an operation that sheds jobs and destroys farming communities. This leaves many people, probably a majority, disenfranchised – that is, if they are not interested in national and multinational corporations becoming ever richer. Enter the Greens Party and independents like Andrew Wilkie who fill this gap.

Third parties are the last thing both major parties want, for they have a comfortable two party system up and running and a third party only upsets things. More importantly, this third party stands for environmentalism – and that upsets the corporate sponsors of the two major parties no end, for

corporate profits depend on ever increasing annual growth that is based on the extraction of nonrenewables. And you can't do that if you have to take environmental sustainability into account.

Accordingly, both parties demonise the Greens as an anti-development, anti-everything bunch of far left extremists – except when they need the Greens' support to remain in power, which of course infuriates the party that is left raging in opposition. This brings us to the surprising present, and the Inter-Governmental Agreement on forestry.

What happened next depends on who is telling the story. Some sectors of the forestry industry would tell it differently from other sectors, likewise for different sectors of the environmentalists and of the Labor-Green government. All have their different interpretations of what happened.

My take is that Gunns, determined to get their pulp mill up, did a deal with one sector of the environmentalists. If they would agree to a pulp mill, Gunns would stop logging old growth forest. The pulp mill was an issue also dear to the hearts of both the Labor and Liberal parties, so talks were set up between representatives from the forestry industry and from environmentalists. However, it wasn't clear to other sectors of the forestry and environmental sectors, who weren't sitting around the table, who was representing who. A rickety agreement was at first achieved, very roughly along the lines of more locked up old growth forest in exchange for a pulp mill – but those on both sides who had been left out of the negotiations did not agree. And did *a* pulp mill mean *the* Tamar Valley pulp mill? Gunns and Labor politicians asserted that it did and this gave the mill the 'social licence' it needed. Other environmentalists and the Greens said that it didn't – and in any case ask the residents of the Tamar Valley about social licence. But it didn't matter, for Gunns couldn't find a financial backer for their mill – always one on the horizon, mind, but none ever eventuated. A major reason is surely commercial: Gunns had seriously misjudged the world market for pulp, which had halved in price, and their mill would be noncompetitive. And having shut down many of their profitable other operations, by September 2012 the once mighty Gunns was in the hands of the receivers.

With the forestry industry generally in stark decline, and more division looming over mining in the Tarkine, Tasmanians took a good hard look at themselves. Business and community leaders contributed to two special editions of the *Mercury*, 'Let's make our state great.' An editorial (*Mercury*, 21 September 2012) summarized thus:

Tasmania must drop its obsession with the "silver bullet" solution and the "one big project" promise of economic salvation. Instead ... Tasmania must focus on creating premium quality goods and services and target niche markets at home, interstate and overseas. Boutique en masse is big not small. We need a diverse economy with a versatile workforce.

Tasmania has always been attracted by silver bullets: the one big deliverer that would solve all our problems. At first it was transportation, making Van Diemen's land essentially a slave-based economy; later it was hydro-electricity but somehow that failed to the point where householders are now subsidising the power supply for industry; then it was forestry in its most unsustainable and destructive form: woodchipping and its bastard child, the giant pulp mill.

No, the way to go is what is uniquely Tasmanian: our wilderness, so unique, variegated and soul moving, together with that remarkable phoenix that arose out of the crass vandalism of Lake Pedder, recognition of environmentalism as a life affirming political philosophy.

It seems that the tide is turning at last. While there are still some in positions of power, including in the present government, who can't get their heads around the fact that in this century the old extractive paradigms of chop down and dig up are counter-productive, unsustainable and uneconomic, others and especially nonpolitical members of the community are saying that that is not the way to go in future.

Recent developments such as David Walsh's MONA, Tasmania's wonderful potential for gourmet food and wine, and Tasmania's tourism potential with more and more projects on the way, the international status of the Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, exciting developments in literature, arts and crafts, especially quality timber-based crafts, all point the way to a greener, progressive and a more peaceful Tasmania.

Our unique history, our towering mountains, rolling plains and jaw-dropping coastline, with their own unique flora and fauna, combine with our partial isolation to make us Tasmanians – native born as well as immigrant – ingenious, creative and proud of our heritage. That is our lode to be mined.

John Biggs is a Hobart writer. This article is based in part on the author's *Tasmania Over Five Generations* (Forty Degrees South, 2011).