

From botox to Bell Bay

The cultural divide of forest politics

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Goeffrey Cousins, a well known Sydney businessman and confidante of the Prime Minister, ran a campaign against a pulp mill planned for Bell Bay in Tasmania. He enlisted the support of famous Sydney actors, playwrights, sports stars and business tycoons. What hope did the democratically elected government of Tasmania have of getting the proposal up, when Sydney's elite decided they knew what was best for Bell Bay?

Tasmania has long been the central battleground of forest politics and, as a result, the State has some of the highest environmental protection measures in Australia. In 1989, the proposed Wesley Vale pulp mill was scrapped when the then Federal environment minister, Graham Richardson, intervened. The government has since increased the area of forest reserve almost four-fold. The State now has 42 per cent of its land area reserved, up from 13 per cent in 1982.

Stringent regulations for the construction of pulp mills have been developed. In 2004, the Tasmanian Government revised the existing guidelines and approved a new set following recommendations from the Resource Planning and Development Commission. The guidelines were developed over a nine-month period and in-

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The pulp mill is planned for the most significant industrial estate in Tasmania with an operating aluminium smelter and powder plant, a ferro-alloy processing plant, seafood processing facility, power station, sawmill and export woodchip facility.

involved the Federal Government, the public, regulators and experts.

The guidelines specify that any pulp mill needs to be either elemental chlorine-free or totally chlorine-free and operate on a hierarchy comprising waste avoidance, waste recycling/reclamation, and waste re-use. Any marine discharge at the end of these processes must have no significant environmental impact. Any proposed mill must adhere to the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants while applying the principles of best practice environmental management, best available techniques and accepted modern technology.

The Tasmanian Minister for Planning contracted two independent consultants to undertake an assessment and review of the proposed Bell Bay Pulp Mill against the 2004 guidelines and the Pulp Mill Assessment Act 2007.

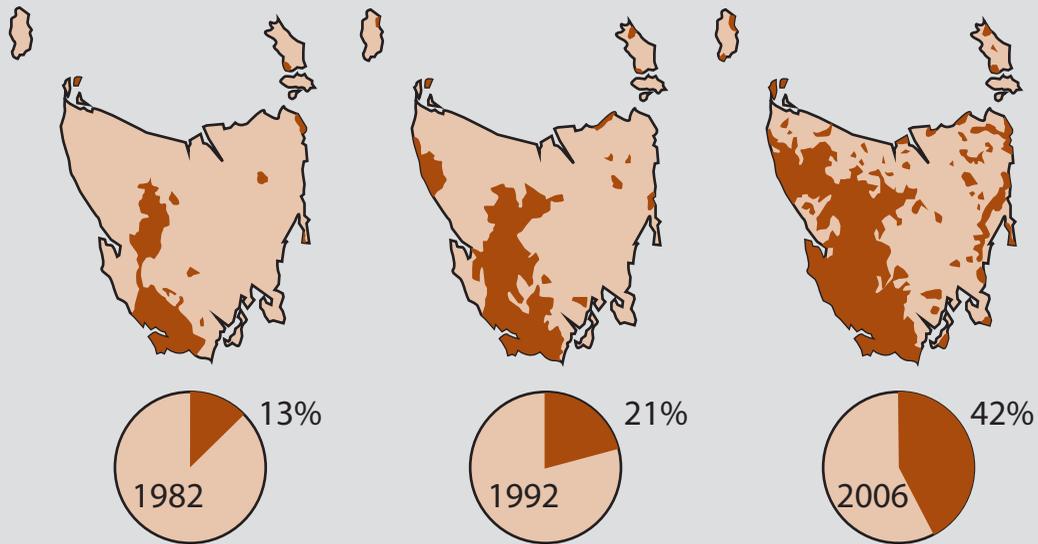
SWECO PIC, a Swedish-based con-

sultancy, concluded that 92 per cent of the guidelines are met by the project, with the remaining able to be addressed through permit conditions.

ITS Global undertook a review of the net social and economic benefits of the proposed mill and concluded that the mill will add approximately 2.5 per cent to annual Gross State Product which, in lump sum terms, is equivalent to \$6.7 billion in net present value terms to 2030. The pulp mill was also assessed as broadening and strengthening the industrial base of the Tasmanian economy.

Contrary to claims that the mill will be built in 'classic Tassie wilderness country', it is to be located in the Bell Bay Precinct. This is already the most significant industrial estate in Tasmania, with an operating aluminium smelter and powder plant, a ferro-alloy processing plant, a seafood processing facility, a power station, a sawmill and an export woodchip facility.

Figure 1: Reserved forest in Tasmania, 1982–2006



Source: Timber Communities Australia

On 10 August, a Federal Court judge rejected claims by the Wilderness Society and a group calling itself Investors for Tasmania's Future that there were problems with the Commonwealth's assessment process for the Bell Bay pulp mill. The judge concluded that the process had been fair and reasonable and that the public had ample opportunity to state their views.

The Federal Department of Environment and Heritage has not identified any likely significant impacts on the marine environment from the pulp mill, but has suggested that it is 'desirable' (not essential) to force the developer, Gunns Limited, to do more modelling and more monitoring over and above the requirements in the 2004 guidelines, which have since been accepted as the national standard.

The mill will also help in the struggle to reduce greenhouse gases. By reducing shipping and by producing surplus power, it will remove 1.3 million tonnes of CO₂ each year. This is more than will be removed by the first four years of the Commonwealth's light bulb replacement plan.

Until late August it looked likely that the pulp mill would be built—the

development was being debated in the Tasmanian Parliament and appeared to have passed all environmental hurdles.

Then Geoffrey Cousins decided to run his campaign, which gained traction in the national media on the basis that the pulp mill had been 'fast tracked' and that the mill should be relocated to a less pristine site! Without mentioning the Federal Court decision, the report from the Swedish consultants, or that Bell Bay is already an industrial precinct, the national media have repeated Mr Cousins's assertions.

Mr Cousins claimed that he was forced to act after being told 'the truth' from a Tasmanian fiction writer. While Mr Cousins does not claim to have a particular knowledge of the Tasmanian forest industry or the timber communities dependent on it, he is considered an expert on Sydney high society. In July 2007, he published a book called *The Butcherbird*. It is being marketed by Allen & Unwin as a boisterous thriller set in the boardrooms, yachts and waterfront mansions of Australia's most decadent city.

Geoffrey Cousins's campaign against the Bell Bay pulp mill is targeting Malcolm Turnbull, the Federal environment minister, because voters in his Sydney

seat of Wentworth are very concerned about environmental issues, including those in Tasmania.

But if *The Butcherbird* reveals anything of its author's attitude towards Turnbull's Wentworth constituents, then he has a rather narrow view both of pulp mills and Sydney's social elite. Cousins's fictional Wentworth residents, with their penchant for fast cars, Botox and casual sex, don't seem the sort that would be greatly concerned about environmental issues in far-away northern Tasmania.

Nonetheless, Turnbull delayed giving approval for the mill for another six weeks, pending yet another review.

In other words, a long and tedious approval process for a pulp mill planned for an industrial precinct in Tasmania was put on hold because Sydney's elite believed that they knew what was best.

On 4th October Mr Turnbull approved the pulp mill, but as a consequence of Mr Cousins campaign there will be an extra twenty-four conditions at a cost of \$2 billion. Perhaps it would be easier to build the pulp mill in Sydney.

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