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.

Jennifer Marohasy & Alan Ashbarry

Jennifer Marohasy is a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs.
Alan Ashbarry is a researcher for 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 Cousin’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’ 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.