

Submission to Legislative Council

The lesson of the last two decades – and especially the period since the beginning of the 21st century – in relation to matters forestry in Tasmania is the lack of a holistic approach across the economic, social and environmental inter-relationships at virtually every level. If anything, the failure to adopt a systematic approach – even a simple cost-benefit framework – has created a life of its own, a paradigm self-reinforcing in its antipathy to rational analysis.

Consequently, all decision-making, policy development and strategic direction has occurred within an adversarial context, where issues are not addressed through a holistic lens at all but through the prism of compromise, wheeling and dealing, secrecy and exclusion of stakeholders.

Most important of all, such a reductionist approach has created its own dynamic of inflexibility, where focus has been concentrated on single silos of special concern to vested interest groups, not only to the detriment of the whole, but also entrenching ever - increasing dislocations from external realities.

The last three years have demonstrated this very thoroughly. The world is currently in the middle of a profound technological revolution which has already dramatically reshaped the way that information is shared. The 20th century was the age of paper, but the 21st century is already the age of digital communication. At the very time when most Tasmanian politicians threw their whole-hearted support behind a massive pulp mill plan for the Tamar Valley, which required massive monocultural plantations, massive use of fresh water and an equally massive belief that the world's digital revolution was a mirage, the evidence was already conclusive that this was the entirely wrong direction for the Tasmanian forestry industry.

A narrow band of opportunity may still exist for the Legislative Council to have some positive influence, but only if they have the capacity to understand that the future must focus on high quality and high value, not low value bulk commodification. Any other approach will ensure that the Legislative Council's decisions will actually be irrelevant to what takes place in the future, because any other approach will ensure that outside forces will determine the future.

A continuation of past practices and a continuation of the current model, albeit on a smaller scale – as envisaged by the roundtable of vested interest groups and also by many who oppose the roundtable in order to continue the failures of the past – offers little hope for a viable forestry industry into the future because it merely locks in static inflexibility instead of creating circumstances which ensure adaptability in a rapidly changing world.

Historically, Tasmania's rural economy has always been most successful when based on quality. This has been shown again and again, whatever sector of the rural economy comes

to mind, whether it be in fruit, wool, cheese, wine, meat and so on. In the end, wherever the focus has shifted to bulk low value production, the result has not been pretty. Nor has it ever been sensible for Tasmanian rural industries to ignore external realities. Those who have done so in the past have often paid a heavy price. The history of the Tasmanian rural economy at its most successful has always been a story of change. The lesson has always been that those who get stuck in visions of the past perpetuating into the future become redundant.

The forestry industry is not the only sector of the rural economy which faces massive challenges into the future, but for various reasons the gap between where the forestry industry is now and where it needs to be to stand on its own feet is widening by the year and will continue to widen without necessary large-scale reforms. Unlike the forestry sector, most other areas of the rural economy which survive and are productive do so on the basis of continuous review and reform. The fact that the taxpayer has subsidised the forestry industry for years has discouraged processes of review and on-going reform to such an extent that minor reforms will now make no difference.

A small window of opportunity does exist for the Legislative Council to play a constructive role in encouraging a new direction focusing on high value. The vested interests which dominate the way that policy development has taken place, particularly in the last generation, makes it difficult to be optimistic that visionary leadership on this issue will occur.

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