



Cassy O'Connor MP

House of Assembly

Date: 22 July 2008

Electorate: Denison

Election of Ms Cassy O'Connor

Motion by **Mr McKim** proposed:

That the House note the election of Ms Cassy O'Connor.

Ms O'CONNOR (Denison - Inaugural) - Mr Speaker, for many thousands of years before the European invasion, the Palawa tribes - the Letteremairrener, the Tyerrenotepanner and the Panninher people - lived and roamed across this land we occupy today. The Tamar Valley was their home. The original and traditional owners of this land hunted and gathered along the banks of the South Esk and Tamar rivers. They danced and sang their storyline at places like Cataract Gorge, Corra Linn and the hills around Launceston. Their connection to the land was deep and strong. For the Aboriginal people of Tasmania it remains so to this day. I wish to pay my deepest respect to those who have passed before us and those descendants who are now the custodians of this land. I also express my sorrow for all that was taken from them and all the indigenous peoples of Australia. May these continue to be healing times.

I thank all members, my new colleagues, for their presence in the Chamber to hear my inaugural speech. I warmly return that respect and extend it equally to members of the audience. It is great to see you here. To my family, dear friends and colleagues who have made the journey to Launceston from as far away as Sydney and Queensland, thank you, and thank you again for coming. You give me strength, as do all my friends who are here in my thoughts. None gives me more strength than my children: Lachlan, Connor, Mara and Stella. It is for you that I fight; it is for you and the future of all Tasmania's young people that I am proud to stand up here as a member of the Tasmanian Greens - and a parliamentary member at that.

There are words that I have waited a long time to speak before a captive audience of powerful Tasmanians who are in a privileged position to make change for the better. All of us present today in the Chamber, I am certain, love Tasmania and care for its people. That is surely why we have sought public office. I do believe that members elected to this place share more

common ground than is ever expressed in the political discourse. It should be so because we are after all just human.

Perhaps that which sets us at odds comes down to differences of philosophy, in how far we are prepared to look into the future and the extent to which we dare suggest in today's political environment actions to address the future we foresee. And of course it comes down to the value judgments we apply to debate and decision. All the better that this moment to speak has arrived in the beautiful Tamar Valley, in this splendid meeting place before the people of Launceston and its surrounds.

While I do believe that members have more in common than not, on the subject of Gunns pulp mill Tasmanians well understand that the two major parties and the Greens are planets apart. The Greens will never ever support that mill or anything like it. Given the circumstances, I think that it is worth reiterating the point up front, and how could I not.

If there is one book that lit the fuse on the global environmental movement it is Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. So meticulously researched and published in 1962, the book laid bare the unthinking chemical poisoning of humanity's life support systems, of its water and soil, of song birds, of wild and domestic beasts. *Silent Spring* was a catalyst for change. It speaks to us still to this day. Forty-six years ago Rachel Carson said:

'We must all have a great sense of responsibility and not let things happen because everyone takes the comfortable view that someone else is looking after it.'

Someone else is not looking after it. I feel a profound sense of responsibility to this place and the trust that is vested in me as a member of parliament, trust that I will always have the best interests of the people we are elected to serve in my heart, trust that I will conduct myself with integrity and selflessness and recognise my duty of care to every Tasmanian and to the children of our children and theirs into the future, trust that with my Greens parliamentary colleagues I will be true to Tasmania and respect those priceless wild qualities that set it apart from any other place on earth.

We know some of these places as the South West Wilderness, the Blue Tier, the Weld and the Florentine, Cradle Mountain, Lake St Clair National Park, the Tarkine, the Bay of Fires, the Tasman Peninsula, Bruny Island, and of course, dear to the heart of my local community, the sweeping sand flats of Ralphs Bay looking out to Mt Wellington. At all points of the compass we are the parliamentary caretakers of a landscape that is unbelievably special. We can breathe some of the cleanest air in the world at Marrawah. There are

timeless forests on our doorstep and untamed rivers spilling pristine waters into the sea.

Our coastline is washed by seas that reveal a stunning diversity of marine life. Where else in the world, for example, would you find a creature as peculiar and endearing as a spotted handfish? Nowhere else. Critically endangered on the IUCN red list, it lives only in the River Derwent and its near waters. If you go looking in the right places, the spotted handfish can be found walking along the seabed of Ralphs Bay. I have never been lucky or brave enough to see one in situ but I am very glad to know they are there and that they endure despite the threats posed by human impacts and such absurdities as Walker Corporation's 500-home canal estate plan. The Sydney-based developer's stated intention is to destroy an internationally significant bird habitat at Ralph's Bay on the river Derwent, to destroy the southern resting grounds of the tiny red-necked stint, that amazing bird which I am told by the bay's champion, Priscilla Park, weighs no more than a tablespoon full of flour. They fly here for our summer across 10 000-plus kilometres of land and sea from the Arctic circle to flicker in their dozens like sparkling light on the sand flat.

It is this elemental Tasmania and the wellbeing of its people, for the two are inextricably tied, that the Greens will always defend. I am so deeply honoured to represent Denison for the Tasmanian Greens, to walk the path pioneered by our past leaders - Bob Brown, Christine Milne and Peg Putt. I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the presence in the audience of our national climate change champion, Senator Christine Milne, whose leadership continues to inspire.

Not all Tasmanians will admit it, of course, but we owe these Greens leaders and their Greens colleagues in Parliament a great debt for standing shoulder to shoulder with their fellow concerned Australians for the Franklin, for Wesley Vale and the Tamar Valley, for our wild forests and coastline, for tackling head-on corporate greed and abuse of political power, and always for defining and upholding the virtues of a natural brand that now delivers billions of dollars into Tasmania's economy every year. It is the Greens' unerring vision of a Tasmania unspoiled yet prosperous, an island where people and places are truly valued, that inspired me to join the party.

Now, that continuum towards a sustainable future for Tasmania has a new leader with his own vast stores of courage, intellect and sensibility. I have great faith, and justifiably so, in the member for Franklin, our Leader, Mr McKim. As we confront the near overwhelming challenges of climate change, the new generation of leadership across all three parties in Tasmania has an unprecedented responsibility to work together and with every member of this House. It is also, of course, a great opportunity to finally

break free from the shackles of Tasmania's political past, the jamming brake on its future. Just as we urgently need new governance structures to ensure the highest standards of integrity in public office, so also we need a new environmental ethic to be allowed to flower in this place and across the island.

Members will not, of course, always agree, nor should we in a healthy Westminster democracy, but just imagine what could be achieved if we could build on the three parties' combined strengths to create a genuinely sustainable future: the Liberal Party's belief in individual freedom; Labor's proud history in Australia of looking after people; and the Greens' deep ecological empathy towards the web of life. One person can change the world for the better, but as Tasmanians, we need to stick together to look after each other and we need to look after Tasmania's ecosystems a whole lot better to prepare for climate change.

If we want to hand a resilient Tasmania on to our children, we have no choice but to act without any further delay. So much time has been wasted. We must be brave enough to commit to a Tasmania that leads by example. We can do this by setting far-sighted, mandatory emission reduction targets of 40 per cent on 1990 levels by 2020 and 90 per cent by 2050 by investing heavily in renewables, public transport and sustainable fuel alternatives, by redesigning our buildings and by providing incentives to households and businesses to save energy and be part of the climate change solution. We can transform our cities and towns into sustainable, highly liveable urban villages.

Members who take an interest in the most up-to-date science on forests and climate change would be aware that we could slash our annual emissions immediately by millions of tonnes of carbon by ending the obscenity of an industrial forestry apparatus that is eating and poisoning our island's future. The Tasmanian people are all the poorer for Gunns' rapacious need to clear-fell, burn, chip and ship Tasmania's wild forests, all made possible by thick-headed management from Forestry Tasmania and successive Tasmanian governments. Climate change now makes such folly all the more inexcusable.

So it is with our marine environment, already threatened by overfishing, pollution, bad developments and marine pests. Tasmania's coastal waters will need all the help governments, communities and business can provide to make sure we build resilience into our marine ecosystems. The establishment of marine protected areas that are more than 'paper parks' is critical to this goal. If the incredibly valuable ecosystems of Tasmania's nine bioregions are to have any chance of adapting to warmer, more acidic ocean

waters, then we must protect them, guarding their biodiversity against their ability to withstand the coming impacts.

The science is in. No-take marine protected areas protect marine environments and therefore the benefits they bring to our own health and wellbeing in the form of ecosystem services, fisheries included. The Commonwealth understands the value of no-take MPAs. The Federal Environment department's own web site says:

'The potential of no-take marine reserves to protect genetic quality is great, considering the fact that fishing can remove most of the population and that densities of individuals, ages and sizes can be much greater in no-take marine reserves than in fishing grounds.'

The RPDC has consulted widely with experts and scientists and recommended that some parts of the beautiful Burnie bioregion exclude recreational and commercial fishing. After coming under intense pressure from the Department of Premier and Cabinet in particular to slash its draft recommendations, in March this year the commission delivered its final report with a plea to government to countenance no further watering down. I am aware that since then certain assurances have been made to Tasmanian fishers. I urge the Government to stick with the science and look to the future rather than the next election and, at the very least, accept the RPDC's minimalist final recommendations. Such a sensible change of position will only help Tasmania's marine environment to have some chance of adapting to the changes ahead. It is, quite simply, the right thing to do.

The reality of climate change demands that we change. From humanity, nothing short of a triple-bottom-line transformation is required, and it can be done. What is needed most is leadership. From government and parliament, from business and community, leadership is needed.

Mr Speaker, my journey to Tasmania and here today began in Queensland, where I spent most of my childhood living on Stradbroke Island and in Brisbane. If there is one politician who might be credited with shaping my young activist spirit it is the late Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, the Sunshine State's Premier from 1968 to 1987. His premiership inspired a generation of activists. I have no choice but to speak ill of the dead. Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen was a rotten premier and an environmental vandal in the first degree.

Greens members - Hear, hear.

Ms O'CONNOR - What Sir Joh and his coterie of crooks did to Queensland can never be reversed. They gave new meaning to the words 'crass' and

'corrupt', in the rush to dig it up, chop it down and ship it off; to exploit a rare beauty by lying, cheating and stealing. The white-shoe brigade thrived in Joh's Queensland. They built edifices of concrete, steel and glass and obliterated mangroves, the fish nurseries and water filters of the coast, for yet another resort or ugly boxes on wholly unnatural gridded canals full of stagnant water.

They wanted to build a bridge from the Gold Coast to my beloved Stradbroke Island. The Premier wanted it too; he just loved the idea of pushing Surfers Paradise through to Point Lookout along a ribbon of concrete. My family and I stood among the locals and marched from the pub, of course, to Point Lookout. The great poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal stood overlooking Frenchman's Beach and spoke of country and of battle. The bridge never was built.

Having bludgeoned the principles of the Westminster system and the separation of powers to his purpose, and having distorted the vote through a pernicious gerrymander, the all-powerful Sir Joh saw to the relentless persecution of those brave citizens such as Fraser Island conservationist John Sinclair, who tried to stem the feeding frenzy. Well, history tells its truth. The *Courier Mail* newspaper's Phil Dickie was one of the few brave journalists, including my father, Shane O'Connor, from the ABC, who in their reporting or commentary revealed some of the slime beneath the surface of sunny Queensland.

In 1987, ABC legend Chris Masters finally busted it all open before a national audience on *Four Corners* in his masterpiece of investigative journalism, *The Moonlight State*. It presented irrefutable evidence of systemic corruption in the police force, judiciary and the Bjelke-Petersen Government. With the Premier very serendipitously out of the State, his Deputy, Bill Gunn, ordered a commission of inquiry. It proved to be a very brave move that purged Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland of some of its baddest apples.

As the most outrageous tales of official corruption were exposed by Commissioner Tony Fitzgerald QC, the National Party, thinking it might save itself, deposed Joh as Premier on 26 November 1987, but he refused to go, such was the arrogance of the man. After spending his last days holed up on the top floor of the executive building, Bjelke-Petersen finally resigned in complete disgrace on 1 December 21 years ago and Queensland was reborn. The Fitzgerald Inquiry ended 32 years of National Party government in Queensland.

Mr Speaker, I believe Queenslanders, and indeed all Australians who believe in transparency and decency in government, owe Tony Fitzgerald

QC an enormous debt of gratitude. His inquiry transformed Queensland. If Tony Fitzgerald could be persuaded to take it on, I can think of no better person to help restore faith in Tasmania's governance structures, in light of recent and recently past events. Queensland now has what are regarded as some of the strongest anticorruption and ethical governance structures in the country and it is served by a far more decent administration.

But for me, at the age of 20, the damage had already been done and I was ready to leave Queensland. I arrived in Tasmania on Valentine's Day 1989 to find a place where nature still ruled and I fell instantly in love. After a meandering journey through journalism, politics and motherhood, my path was set in March 2004, when our most recent past Premier of Tasmania, Mr Lennon, threw the Government's support behind Walker Corporation's plan for Ralphs Bay.

Mr Speaker, members will be aware by now that I am not going to let this subject rest. I hope there is some understanding that Ralphs Bay brought me to this place and I owe it to my fellow Ralphies, on behalf of Ralphs Bay and our community, to say it like it is.

In March 2004, I did see red. The nightmare had followed me south and it was still so tacky and so wrong. Six weeks later, Graeme 'Whatever it Takes' Richardson arrived on the scene with Lang Walker straight off the corporate jet and up to the eleventh floor for a meeting with the Premier. In four long years the Premier did not agree to meet any member of his electorate at the local community of Ralphs Bay. Not once, despite repeated requests from our group and others concerned with protecting the bay. But unlike the Queensland of my childhood, this time a community's visceral determination to protect their coastline would not be denied, and this time we were not politically alone. At our side were those honourable members from State and Federal parliaments and their hard-working staff who were prepared to stand up for community and conservation.

From day one my new Greens colleagues, our Leader, the member for Franklin, Mr McKim, and the Tasmanian Greens, never let the Ralphs Bay community down. Equally, Senators Bob Brown and Christine Milne have taken up the cause of the shore birds and the spotted handfish in Canberra and, in Christine's case, internationally through the World Conservation Union and my dear friend and former employer, the Federal member for Denison, Mr Duncan Kerr SC, whose patience, wisdom and practical support cannot be overstated. It says so much about the thoroughly decent person that he is. Again on behalf of Save Ralphs Bay Inc., I would like to thank the forthright and fearless retired Franklin MHR, Mr Harry Quick, who also gave generously of time and resources, and the former Liberal Senator and Senate President, Paul Calvert, who supported the community

in response to his small 'c' conservatism, that which shuns undue excess, aided just a little by the passionate feelings of his wife and daughter.

While I am on the subject of the Liberals I would like to acknowledge the personal support the honourable member for Franklin, Mr Hodgman, extended to Save Ralphs Bay. I appreciate that it became harder to hold the line within the Liberal Party and its extended influences but the Opposition did try and succeeded for a time before the 2006 State election.

In my heart I do not believe the Liberal member for Franklin, or for that matter his father, Mr Hodgman Senior, wants to see Ralphs Bay destroyed by Walker Corporation. Save Ralphs Bay is also deeply grateful to the independent member for Elwick, the very honourable Terry Martin, who rightly identified the Ralphs Bay issue as a matter of ethics and said so. And who along with the member for Pembroke, Ms Ritchie, and the member for Rumney, Ms Thorp, bucked the Premier and the party line to work with the overwhelming majority of upper House members to prevent the very worst excesses of that odious abuse of legislative power, the Ralphs Bay Conservation Area so-called clarification bill 2006.

I remind members that the clarification bill was in fact an attempt by the Lennon Government at the developer's clear behest to shrink the Ralph's Bay conservation area to a tenth of its size. Well, working with the Environmental Defenders Office and our team of lawyers, Save Ralphs Bay's Jane McDonald worked day and night to prove that the bill went against standard surveying practice; it was a legal lie.

Mr Speaker, only four members of this House voted against the bill. Only the Greens in this place identified the sham that it was. In the course of its investigations I trust that the Resource Planning and Development Commission will see sense, knock off the Walker Corporation project of State significance, because it is unsustainable and undesirable by every measure, and ultimately restore and increase the conservation area as it has been empowered to do.

I understand what it is like to have my home threatened, my community tilted into stress and upheaval and our lives effectively put on hold. I empathise deeply with the people of the Tamar Valley who do not want the Gunns pulp mill. What was spun at great public expense as the world's greenest pulp mill has been exposed as a potential contaminant to the air we breathe today, a guzzler of the northern community's water, a plunderer of our old forests, killing wildlife and poisoning Bass Strait. More log trucks on our roads, more carbon into the atmosphere and habitat vanishing for such iconic species as the Tasmanian devil, the giant freshwater crayfish and the awe-inspiring Tasmanian wedge-tailed eagle.

This nightmare was foisted upon Tasmania by Paul Lennon and John Gay, their efforts made easier by every member in both Houses who last year voted for the fast-track Pulp Mill Assessment Act 2007. It is time to listen. Tasmanians are adamant they do not want this pulp mill. In poll after poll we have spoken in our thousands, more than once, on the streets and on the coast and via every Tasmanian media outlet as well as nationally and internationally, from across Australia and online through GetUp!, whose support has been critical to the campaign. A strong alliance has formed. Its membership includes Tasmanians Against the Pulp Mill, the Wilderness Society, GetUp!, Lawyers for Forests, students, and of course the Greens and others, standing with the local community, with motivated souls from all over Australia, to defend Tasmania's future. We are saying to Gunns and its backers that this island belongs to us.

I have contemplated thanking Mr Lennon, and maybe Sir Joh's departed soul, for giving me the fire and fury to challenge the myopia of greed that threatens our communities and our planet, but that would be going too far. In truth, the good fire, the passion came from my parents, Shane and Colleen, who are here today. Mum and Dad, thank you for your love, the lessons you gave us about fairness and respect; Dad, for your brilliant mind and the power of your stories, your sense of social responsibility and your bleeding heart. Mum, for all of the above and for your unyielding strength and kindness. How hard you worked to raise us and what sacrifices you willingly made. My mother and father did not fail to teach me the meaning of responsibility, and responsibility runs deep.

As parliamentarians and as decent citizens we have a responsibility to those Tasmanians who are disempowered by circumstance; by the frailties of body or mind; by poverty and all its attendant stresses and social harm; by disability, intellectual or physical; or by the sad fact that they never learned how to read. What prospects are open to a young Tasmanian leaving school with some of the poorest literacy standards in the nation? I commend the Government for making literacy a priority. As leading economists point out, lifting literacy and public education standards generally is the foundation of addressing social inequality. As Tasmanians we must also do more for children being abused and neglected right now in their own home, if they have one, or for the children who end up on the streets and grow up too soon. We can do more for our elderly citizens, too many lonely and poor, strangers to their fragmented communities; for the grandparents struggling to find a means to pay for their grandchildren's upbringing. Surely as a society we have more to give to these Tasmanians. There are many good people working their guts out, plenty not paid or underpaid, doing all they can to make life brighter for disadvantaged Tasmanians across all the social support services.

Since being elected a Tasmanian Greens MP, I have immersed myself as wholly as humanly possible, just as my predecessor, Peg Putt, did with great commitment in the life of Denison. I have been working hard to get on top of my policy brief. There is of course so much more to learn. In politics, as in life, the learning never stops. I have been out to Chigwell Community House and Mission Australia's Chigwell House, Anglicare, National Disability Services, TasCOSS, Bowen Road Primary School, Lower Sandy Bay Infant School and Claremont College. I have been privileged to meet the most fantastic people. I visited the Brain Injury Association, the Council on the Ageing, and more recently listened to John Ward with his wrenching stories of grandparents raising grandchildren on the proverbial pittance. I have listened also to the stories of migrants who come here from places such as the Sudan and Sierra Leone seeking a life without persecution. I have met so many inspiring people and my work has only just begun.

I have been hearing a consistent, pressing theme. Across the health and human services and in public education the system is under enormous strain. The Greens believe that if more money is needed to protect vulnerable Tasmanians, priorities must be changed in order to provide it. The money, the resources, the right people paid appropriately, a strategy that works - these must be found. The same goes for our public schools and in public housing. I gladly acknowledge that some of the policy resetting in the last State Budget is heading in the right direction, but the question of priorities remains relevant. It is gone now, but the \$35 million spent on Elwick racecourse would have taken considerable strain off Tasmanians waiting for public housing and those who sleep on the streets at night, so too would the tens of millions in public subsidies handed over to Gunns in the form of roads and dirt cheap timber, to name just two.

If a government priority causes harm, if a law or policy perpetuates social or environmental injustice, if it is wrong, if it is not working then the Parliament has a duty to fix it. If there is compelling cause for Parliament to say sorry, to play a vital healing role towards righting the wrongs of the past, then we must do so. I believe government must recognise that ultimately responsibility for the health and welfare of Tasmanians rests with it. Parliament has a crucial role to play in keeping it to account. Governments might successfully outsource service provision to non-government organisations who may well do a better job, but a democratically elected government cannot be allowed to outsource responsibility for the exercise of its policy.

Policies implemented by previous Tasmanian governments ensured the miserable incarceration of mentally ill, physically and intellectually disabled children in Willow Court, also known as the Royal Derwent, until the New Norfolk institution's closure in 2000. What happened to these people? They

were de-institutionalised back into a poorly prepared community. We should know, but we do not, really. As with former wards of the State harmed in care, it is our responsibility to find out. There are Tasmanians alive today who are still traumatised by their experience as young people in that unhealthy environment, hidden away, subjected to deprivations, abuse, neglect, even shock treatment. We must acknowledge that this trauma extends to the parents of these broken children who are now broken adults. They were told by the State that the best place for their handicapped kids was Willow Court. They were told that the care these children received at Willow Court would be better than what could be provided at home. How wrong that advice was.

I fear that the victims of this profound duty-of-care failure would be voiceless but for the dedicated work of Margaret Reynolds and National Disability Services Tasmania. In a recent submission to government, Margaret Reynolds called for a parliamentary apology to the victims of Willow Court and for the establishment of a joint select committee inquiry to determine their current status and unmet needs. The joint select committee investigation would also be asked to use the recognition of this terrible period of institutionalisation to develop policies which protect the human rights of all Tasmanians living with disabilities.

As a parliament, and on behalf of the people of Tasmania, we can work together to right a terrible wrong. We can apologise to the children and teenagers who were systematically abused and neglected, their human rights grossly breached, at Willow Court. We can and should also apologise in the Parliament to the families of those Tasmanians who have suffered a painful, lingering guilt as a result of an appalling dispassionate government policy. They have a right to acknowledgment, to be heard and to be compensated.

I believe these are necessary steps towards a more just, socially inclusive Tasmania. I look forward to working with members to achieve these outcomes. I also very much look forward to serving the people of Denison with great care and respect.

In closing, I have saved one of the very best people in my life to last, my husband, Steven Lees. Father, and landscape painter extraordinaire, it is Steven who tends the home fires so we are cosy at night, who cooks meals full of love, who tries to clean the tide of chaos juggling a gaggle of children and an activist wife. My husband makes it possible, and he continues to create, now a little slower than he would like, the most evocative paintings, for it is Steven's joy and wonderment in the Tasmanian landscape that opened my own eyes wider to its beauty.

Mr Speaker, Tasmania's is a sacred beauty, and I will defend it with all my heart and courage as the member for Denison.

Members - Hear, hear.

Applause from the Gallery.