

There Must be a Better Way

An open letter to the Tasmanian MLCs.

The Tasmanian Legislative Council has a unique opportunity to demonstrate effective and important leadership which goes beyond the usual parameters of partisanship and vested interests, and instead considers the matter of the forestry agreement within a broader, holistic and integrated perspective.

We ask the Legislative Council to go beyond the widely-articulated rationale which states they should either reject the current forestry agreement proposal outright or to support it with amendments. We ask them to consider the whole proposal within the scope of their role as effective political leaders, which should be about constructively shaping the collective and individual thinking around this issue for the long term benefit of Tasmania.

At the moment there are a large number of people in Tasmania who do not support this agreement for all sorts of reasons, and/or do not support the process, but are willing to endorse it because they consider that the Tasmanian polity can deliver nothing better. Many people have concluded that this is the “only agreement possible”, and that if it is not supported by the Legislative Council that Tasmania will return to the trenches of all the bitter divisions of the past.

The Legislative Council is now under very heavy lobbyist pressure from politicians and former politicians, ENGOs, Ta Ann and Artec and other industry interests, to support the agreement. One Tasmanian academic has suggested to MLCs that they “hold their noses” and vote for it.

We would like to suggest that there is another option open to the Council other than “holding their noses” in voting in support, or rejecting it outright, and that is to take a more long-term statesmanlike posture. There is every reason for the Legislative Council to maintain a responsible arm’s length from the heavy lobbyist pressure which now confronts them from a range of political, industry and ENGO vested interests.

We ask the Legislative Council to think beyond the highly-publicised either-or paradigm which is being promulgated. There is a third option, and that is to acknowledge that the whole process to this point has been too narrowly focused, too exclusionary and too secret, and therefore has omitted from consideration vital issues which have to be addressed and must be addressed if any degree of success is to be achieved.

The third option is to acknowledge that there is still the opportunity to do this in a better way.

The Legislative Council does have the opportunity to broaden the parameters of this agreement, by saying “no” this must be done in a more fully informed and integrated way, by saying “no, we can and must do better.” They do have the opportunity to say that this

process has been too unrepresentative to work, too many stakeholders have been ignored, and too many valuable perspectives haven't been considered. They do have the opportunity to ensure that a properly-based sustainable industry can be developed, where sustainability means more than just a "smaller paddock", but also means reform of forestry practices according to FSC International guidelines, and also means ensuring that sawlogs for the future are not being harvested now for short-term profits in peeler billets and "residues".

At no stage during the process which began in May 2010 has there been any attempt to examine successful examples of well-integrated, triple-bottom line forestry models operating elsewhere, for example in Slovenia and Switzerland, although Tasmania has a number of highly qualified people with expertise and experience in such forestry environments.

The best way forward for the Tasmanian industry is a real focus on high-value adding which benefits Tasmanians, not on a continuation of resource-stripping for the benefit of a few through the promotion of monopoly control. That model has failed and will continue to fail in the future. It is really incumbent on the Legislative Council to look beyond the foreign corporate lobbyists to places in the world where practices such as selective harvesting ensure careful maintenance of land and water resources for the future, as well as a timber resource for the future as well. It is clear that the current agreement does not cater adequately for a viable sawlog industry in the future, for it allows the harvesting of the resource while it is still immature for the short-term benefit of a single company.

The Legislative Council does have the opportunity to take a position of strong leadership on this issue by saying that more needs to be done before they will vote for it. They have the opportunity to say to themselves that there must be a better way, and that there is a better way, rather than just agreeing with all those who – for their own reasons – say this is as good as it can be. They have an opportunity to say it must be much better than that.

The Tasmanian community deserves better than never-ending failing business as usual in the forestry sector, where corporate welfare is the main game. It is well past time for some real courage to be shown by Tasmanian politicians, and for them to reject business as usual in the form of corporatisation and destructive management practices.

The Legislative Council does have the opportunity to demonstrate they have the capacity to offer more to Tasmanians than the now widespread belief that "anything, no matter how bad, is better than nothing".

We are a small group of non-partisan individuals with a belief that the current agreement fails many fundamental tests, that it was based on a totally flawed and unrepresentative process, that it fails to address many key issues which can only be addressed within an integrated plan – not a siloed plan – and that it fails Tasmania's future. It is unacceptable

on those grounds, and we urge the Legislative Council not to pass it, but to also have the courage to insist that we can do something much better than this.

Frank Strie, Peter Henning, Alison Bleaney, Peter Brenner, Claire Gilmour, Bob McMahon, Julian Wolfhagen