

# The real issues in the controversy over the Tasmanian pulp mill

Alex Safari, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Kingsford Smith  
3 November 2007

In one of its final announcements before calling the federal election, the Howard government pushed through approval for Gunns Ltd, a major timber corporation, to build a controversial \$1.7 billion pulp mill near Launceston in northern Tasmania. Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull attempted to put the best possible spin on the decision. He was relying, he declared, on the recommendations of the government's chief scientist, which would impose "the toughest environmental conditions on a pulp mill, anywhere in the world".

The reasons for the announcement were not hard to fathom. Trailing Labor badly, the government calculated that it could sew up seats in Tasmania by aligning itself with the island state's powerful timber lobby, especially Gunns. During the 2004 elections, the company, which was backed by the unions, demonstrated its political clout by orchestrating an effective campaign against former Labor leader Mark Latham, and his limited proposals to preserve old growth forests in Tasmania—in return for Greens' preference votes. Its failure to win a Tasmanian seat was a key element of Labor's defeat.

Determined not to repeat Latham's "mistake", Kevin Rudd had already given the nod to the pulp mill during a national "listening tour" last December, shortly after taking over as Labor leader. But it was left to Labor's environmental spokesman Peter Garrett—former rock star, Australian Conservation Foundation president and prize Labor recruit—to do the dirty work. Within days of Turnbull's endorsement of the mill, Garrett blithely jettisoned his former environmental rhetoric, declaring himself satisfied with the conditions imposed on the project and guaranteeing that a Labor government would maintain it.

The political consequences, however, are not yet clear. The *Australian* has published internal Liberal Party polling showing a boost for the Coalition in all Tasmanian seats except Lyons, where the mill is to be built and local opposition is strong—and where the Greens appear to be gaining support. Turnbull himself may face defeat in his blue ribbon Sydney electorate of Wentworth. The high-profile Liberal Party recruit and investment banker faces a hostile campaign led by businessman turned anti-mill campaigner Geoffrey Cousins and other environmental advocates. For its part, Labor has effectively neutralised the mill as a campaign issue by lending its support.

At the most fundamental level, the sordid history of the Tasmanian pulp mill project provides a graphic demonstration of the irrationality of the profit system, which is incapable of reconciling the industrial needs of modern society with the right of ordinary working people to decent, secure jobs and a clean, safe environment. Both sides of the official debate—for and against the pulp mill—are driven by powerful vested interests, driven, above all, by profit. While Gunns's heavy-handed tactics are notorious, no less calculating are the business layers

represented by Cousins, the Greens and other anti-mill groups pitching for a "greener, cleaner" Australian corporate image.

It would take a small book to document the activities of Gunns, Tasmania's biggest company and largest private land-owner. A Royal Commission in 1991 found that former Gunns chairman Edmund Rouse had attempted to bribe Labor MP Jim Cox to switch sides in 1989 and bring down the ruling Labor-Green coalition. While Rouse was prosecuted, subsequent state governments—Liberal and Labor—have established close working relations with the corporation, enabling it to establish a virtual monopoly in Tasmania's forest industry.

The Forest Industries Association of Tasmania (FIAT), of which Gunns is the largest member, reportedly spent nearly half a million dollars on aggressive pro-logging advertising during the 2004 federal election. Following the election, Gunns donated \$70,000 to the state division of the Liberal Party and the Liberal-linked Free Enterprise Foundation. Then, in December 2004, the company issued a \$6.3 million damages claim against a group of conservationists and organisations, clearly aimed at muzzling opposition. The action turned out to be the prelude to the company's announcement of its plans to build the pulp mill at Launceston.

From the outset, the state Labor government threw its support behind the mill proposal. In a bid to allay public concerns, Premier Paul Lennon insisted that the plans be subjected to independent environmental assessment by the Resource Planning and the Development Commission (RPDC). In the course of the RPDC inquiry, Lennon mounted a multi-million dollar "information" campaign to support the mill's construction. But, as public criticism of the mill's impact mounted, Gunns became increasingly hostile to the issues raised by the RPDC. RPDC head Julian Green and expert panel member Dr Warwick Raverty eventually resigned in early 2007, amid allegations of bias and political interference.

The new RPDC head and former Supreme Court judge Christopher Wright immediately came under pressure from the Tasmanian government to speed up the inquiry in line with the corporation's timetable. Wright told an ABC's "Four Corners" program that, in a meeting with Lennon and Gunns chairman John Gay, he had been informed that the process was to be finalised by the end of July, and that a ministerial directive would be issued to "water down" the RPDC's inquiry. In March 2007, when Wright resisted, Gunns simply short circuited the process by pulling out of the inquiry. The company then relied on the state government to push through legislation in August giving the go ahead for the mill.

Gunns now claims to be building a mill to "world's best practice" and to have spent millions of dollars addressing every environmental

concern. But its political interference and subversion of the RPDC enquiry underline the fact that its overriding preoccupation was to push through the mill's approval, whatever the environmental cost. Having obtained sanction at the state level, Gunns pressed for the federal government to quickly endorse the project.

Many unanswered questions remain. The chief scientist's report to the Howard government, completed in the month of September, was narrowly confined to issues of federal jurisdiction: the mill's possible impact on threatened species, migratory species and the marine environment. Even within these limited guidelines, several scientists raised concerns about the environmental impact of dioxins contained in the mill's effluent. Dr Warwick Raverty, Dr Stuart Godfrey, a retired CSIRO oceanographer, and Professor Andrew Wadsley, from Curtin University, urged the chief scientist to reduce the proposed limits for dioxins by 85 percent.

Issues not covered by the report included air pollution, the large water supply needed by the pulp mill and the huge quantities of wood feedstock required for the mill's operation. Given the widespread hostility to the company's devastation of old growth native forests in the past, both Gunns and the Labor government have been at pains to assure the public that the mill will be fed by woodchips from plantations and regrowth forests. However, calculations published in August by forest scientist Chris Beadle cast doubt on the ability of plantations and regrowth forests to meet the mill's demand for woodchips, raising the prospect that old growth forests might indeed be exploited.

Residents living near the pulp mill site, along with many ordinary people in Tasmania and throughout Australia, are legitimately concerned about the long-term environmental dangers posed by the project. At the same time, opposition has come from sections of the corporate elite. Geoffrey Cousins, for example, is the former chief executive of advertising agency George Patterson Australia and Optus Vision, and has served on a string of other corporate boards. He was also an adviser to Prime Minister Howard and was appointed by the government to the Telstra board.

Cousins has said that he was suddenly converted to the cause in April, after reading a lengthy and passionate essay entitled "Out of Control: the tragedy of Tasmania's forests" by Australian novelist Richard Flanagan. The businessman has had 50,000 copies printed for letterboxing throughout Environment Minister Turnbull's Sydney electorate. A number of high-profile celebrities has joined the campaign, including actors Cate Blanchett, Bryan Brown, and Rachel Ward, former tennis champion John Newcombe, playwright David Williamson and singer Mark Lizotte.

The political campaign being waged by the Greens and other environmental groups is being supported by the small "I" liberal organisation "Get Up", which was launched in 2005 to create "a progressive movement... to advance social justice, economic fairness and environmental sustainability". Its board of directors includes conservationists, social workers, corporate directors such as Don Mercer, chairman of Orica Ltd and Newcrest Mining, and union officials, including current Labor candidate Bill Shorten. Another organisation, Investors for the Future of Tasmania, joined with the Tasmanian Wilderness Society to mount a legal challenge to the pulp mill in July.

The concerns of this social layer were voiced in an editorial last month in Murdoch's *Australian*, opposing the siting of a pulp mill near Launceston. "Few would accuse the *Australian* of being overly sentimental on environmental matters but on this issue we have

expressed a lot of sympathy for those who oppose the project. We recognise that the Tamar Valley has many businesses that rely on the area's natural beauty and clean environment. For this reason, we supported relocation of the plant to a less sensitive site," it stated.

"Ultimately, we believe Tasmania must look past its historical dependence on cutting down trees as the best option for economic prosperity. As travel to Tasmania becomes cheaper and easier and improvements to digital communications free people to work from wherever they choose, Tasmania's economic future may well lie in promoting its natural beauty."

In other words, the destructive activities of Gunns are not just threatening the health and livelihoods of local residents, winery owners, fishermen, farmers and the numerous businesses reliant on tourism in the Tamar Valley, but they undermine the "clean, green" image of Tasmania and Australia as a whole—now a very valuable commodity. New and potentially lucrative markets in the sale of carbon credits and carbon offsets, "environmentally friendly" products, and the push for "ethical investment" are springing up around the world, and a significant section of corporate Australia is determined not to miss out.

Get Up's new-found interest in "social justice" and "environmental sustainability" does not translate into campaigns against the destruction of jobs and conditions, or of health and safety standards, over the past three decades. Cousins, Mercer and many of their supporters have sat on corporate boards that have made huge profits through the slashing of the jobs, wages and conditions of the working class.

At the same time, the anti-pulp mill alliance is serving as a safety valve for the discontent and anger felt by millions of ordinary people towards the blatantly profit-driven motivations behind the project. As the lack of any discernable difference between Labor and Liberal becomes increasingly evident, the Greens and Get Up are seeking to maintain the pretence that corporations and governments can be pressured to be socially responsible. This is aimed at obscuring the real source of pollution and environmental degradation—the capitalist profit system itself.

The Socialist Equality Party insists that the safe and environmentally sustainable manufacture of paper products can only be organised on the basis of a rational, scientifically-based plan, drawn up utilising the skills and experience of scientists and other experts in the field from around the world. This will only be achieved through the development of an independent political movement of the working class itself, fighting for the socialist reorganisation of society as whole, to meet the needs of the majority—for safe, well paid jobs in a clean, sustainable environment—not the profits of the wealthy few.

Authorised by N. Beams, 100B Sydenham Rd, Marrickville, NSW  
Visit the Socialist Equality Party Election Web Site



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**