

Beware what we sacrifice for pulp mill

OPINION

By
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I SUPPORT a pulp mill.

But not at any cost. And if the pulp mill is to be predicated on the shoddy statement of principles I would oppose it.

Tasmania needs a world-class, environmentally beneficial pulp mill. More importantly, Tasmania needs to maintain its sustainable and scientifically world-acknowledged native forest sector.

The future of one should not be sacrificed for the other. We can, and should, have both.

Allow me to explain. The unprincipled secret dealings orchestrated by Gunns, involving big business, big unions and big environmental groups seeking to trade away 570,000 hectares of public land is a matter of grave concern. To exclude the public and its representatives from the initial process shows an impertinence and arrogance which does not engender community support.

Tasmanians rightly want downstream processing for their primary resources. A pulp mill would fulfil that sensible aspiration. But, if it occurs at the expense of our regional communities' family-owned native forest sawmilling sector, then the tradeoff will be hugely detrimental to Tasmania.

The native forest sector, with its family-owned sawmilling, veneering and furniture ventures, provides the lifeblood for many of our regional communities. Without it jobs will disappear, and communities will simply die (think Triabunna, Smithton, Geeveston, Scottsdale).

There is no scientific doubt that native forestry is sustainable and a lot more environmentally friendly than monoculture plantations. Don't get me wrong; there is a place and need for plantations, given the huge lock-ups which have already been implemented in Tasmania.

Economically, the trading of thousands of regional jobs in favour of a few hundred pulp mill jobs simply does not make sense. It seems Gunns has hijacked the debate and bet both its and Tasmania's forestry future on the pulp mill number on the roulette table. If the number comes up Gunns wins and everyone else loses. If it doesn't come up everyone loses, including Gunns.

Will we still be locked

into the statement of principles if, for whatever reason, the pulp mill doesn't get up? Many a time I have asked people associated with the statement of principles "What happens if the mill falls over?"

Everyone acknowledges it's a good question. But frighteningly, no answer is given. It seems clear now given Gunns' new direction that, if the mill fails, Gunns will fail. I sincerely hope that doesn't happen. But if it does, not only will Gunns fail, but so will our high quality, value adding native forest sector — in other words, we lose everything.

For the green groups there are only potential wins. For forest workers the only question is the extent of the loss. That is why the green groups were happy to engage in the Gunns' process.

For Gunns, the only consideration is the pulp mill. Without it they fail. As a result all aspects of the forestry sector are willingly offered up for sacrifice in their bid to get their "social licence".

Social licence, by the way, is the euphemism to describe the complete capitulation to all the demands of the greens groups to remove their opposition to the pulp mill.

The green groups' predictable tactic from the Salamanca negotiations onwards has been to negotiate; leak pending decisions; take away the gains and then walk away. Given Gunns' desperate position, the green groups are salivating, knowing they have the upper hand.

As a result they will try to extract every last concession. Some of them will then walk away, having inflicted maximum damage.

The statement of principles is shoddy. It is not based on science. It is not based on any socio-economic study. What foregone wood values, mineral values or other values which will be lost are contained in the 570,000 hectares, which are to be simply taken from future generations in perpetuity?

For the state and federal Labor-Green governments to now be embracing this "process" as "community consultation" is worse than Labor's attempt to ram through the pulp mill.

● **Senator Abetz is leader of the opposition in the Senate, and former forestry minister in the Howard government.**