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O p i n i o n

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Opinion Piece: Tear up Tasmania's Sham Forest Deal

The current debate over who should be doing what, if anything, in 430,000ha of possible High Conservation Value Tasmanian forest actually highlights a much more serious issue with the Tasmanian forests agreements— it's a sham deal and it should be torn up.

As much as it might pain me to say so, Bob Brown is correct when he says the intergovernmental agreement (IGA) for Tasmania's forests states the 430,000ha claimed by environment groups (ENGOS) as HCV will be immediately put into interim reserves while it is assessed to determine whether in fact the HCV exists and if will be protected in the longer term.

The IGA goes on to say that if it is not possible to meet contracted supply from outside those areas then companies will be compensated financially from the adjustment package rather than receive logs.

In effect, the State and Commonwealth governments are in breach of their own IGA.

This demonstrates yet again the Federal Governments incapacity to implement any policy without stuffing it up.

What Senator Brown will no doubt dispute with me, is that the very presence of this eleventh hour clause in the agreement confirms what a sham the process has been right from the start.

The Federal Coalition, however, will not be dissuaded from this view.

The clause was inserted after industry representatives read what they thought was the final draft of the IGA. It was inserted at the urging of the Greens and ENGO's, and it was based on an assessment drafted by former Wilderness Society National Director, Professor Jonathon West .

All of the available data at the time contradicted West's assessment, and this has subsequently been confirmed more than once by the Independent Schedulers Reports that has subsequently been conducted within the IGA process.

So as not to expose its incompetence in relying on West's poor report, the Federal Government continues to refuse to release the Independent Schedulers Reports.

It is, frankly, ridiculous to suggest that compensation instead of supply is an option. No business can operate with such uncertainty. Supply must be maintained.

Certainty for business has never been a consideration for the Greens but I do question why the two Labor governments would agree to insert the clause at such a critical time in the negotiations.

This display of incompetence further reinforces why the Coalition has been opposed to this IGA deal from the outset.

It was once heralded as a “peace deal” but it has never been a genuine negotiation.

For the ENGOs it has never been about reaching common ground and finding compromise. It has always been about locking up our valuable, renewable timber resources.

The ENGO agenda has been greatly assisted by the pair of inept Labor Governments that are more concerned about keeping sweet with their Greens minority partners than securing a long-term viable future for Tasmania’s forest industry.

In fact, the ENGOs are now using the IGA as a weapon against industry in local and global markets.

If there was any doubt about the lock up objective, just look at the makeup of the IGA assessment panel - four of six members are either directly involved or have close links to the Wilderness Society. What chance a fair outcome for industry amidst that bias?

The really perverse irony is that the catalyst for this whole process - the decision by Gunns Ltd to exit native forests as part of its strategy to progress the pulp mill project – actually provided the opportunity for a better outcome for all sides of the argument.

Instead the sham process will leave the Tasmanian forest industry even less sustainable and under more pressure.

Gunns Ltd’s exit from native forests provided an opportunity to reduce the intensity of harvest across the State, giving better environmental, forestry and economic outcomes but the Greens, Labor and the environment groups could not accept that.

The Greens, Labor and the environment groups are instead intent of squeezing what is left of the industry into an ever smaller area. This will most likely result in higher harvest intensity, bringing us more pain in a few years time and certainly no peace.

- **Senator Richard Colbeck**
Coalition Forestry Spokesman