

Full Text

We have more questions than answers, Treasurer

Hobart Mercury, Hobart by Senator Richard Colbeck

11 Jul 2026

General News - Page 47 - 752 words - ID 1216441523 - Photo: No -

Type: News Item - Size: 338.00cm²

Rushy Lagoon's secret sale approval is not the action of a transparent and accountable government, writes Senator Richard Colbeck

The federal government may think the approval of the Rushy Lagoon sale closes the book on this issue. For many Tasmanians, it is only the beginning of a much larger conversation.

After months of delays, repeated extensions, unanswered questions and extraordinary secrecy, Treasurer Jim Chalmers has approved the sale of one of Tasmania's most significant agricultural properties to a foreign investment vehicle managed by UKbased Gresham House.

The approval paves the way for a substantial shift in land use away from agriculture and towards plantation forestry and carbon projects. The decision has been made, but the questions surrounding it remain unanswered.

My concern has never been foreign investment in itself. Foreign capital has played an important role in Tasmania and Australia for decades. The real issue is whether governments should be using taxpayer-backed institutions to distort agricultural land markets and disadvantage local agricultural production.

The involvement of the Clean Energy Finance Corporation sits at the centre of that concern. Throughout this process, it has been repeatedly reported that CEFC support was associated with the proposal, creating a situation where agricultural producers were competing against a buyer backed by a government-owned financing body. Whether that support was concessional or otherwise, the broader question remains: why is a government agency helping drive the transfer of productive agricultural land out of food production and into carbon and forestry projects?

Both the Treasurer and the government's obvious fixation on a subsidised transfer from agriculture to growing trees for carbon credits shows they are not aware of what is happening in the local market. There were other offers on the table to continue farming and improve farm output.

For months the government refused to answer that question. It ignored an Order for the Production of Documents passed by the Senate seeking transparency about CEFC involvement. Ministers repeatedly avoided providing clear answers during Question Time and Senate Estimates. Letters went unanswered. That is not transparency. It is not accountability.

The timing of the decision only adds to those concerns. After nine extensions to the Foreign Investment Review Board process, the approval was finally announced during the winter parliamentary recess, conveniently outside the scrutiny that accompanies a sitting parliament.

If the government is confident this decision is in the national interest, why spend months avoiding questions about it?

Supporters of the deal have argued that Rushy Lagoon is not prime agricultural

land. Even if one accepts that characterisation, it does not automatically follow that it is suitable for plantation forestry as now proposed.

Serious questions remain about the productivity and suitability of large parts of the property for plantation development.

Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been invested in irrigation infrastructure. The property has supported significant beef and dairy operations for decades and has been a cornerstone of economic activity in Tasmania's North-East.

The government has focused on arguing what Rushy Lagoon is not.

It has done little to explain why the proposed future use represents the best outcome for Tasmania, or for Australia.

Nor has there been any meaningful assessment of the broader regional consequences.

What will happen to milk collection networks that rely on volumes from the North-East? What are the implications for livestock transport operators, local contractors and agricultural service businesses? What does this mean for throughput at Tasmanian abattoirs and processors? These are not theoretical concerns. They go directly to the viability of regional industries and jobs.

Local communities have been raising these questions for months. Instead of engagement, they were met with silence.

Equally concerning are reports that representatives of Gresham House attempted to pressure Dorset Mayor Rhys Beattie regarding public commentary on the project. If those reports are accurate, that sort of corporate behaviour is unacceptable.

Communities have every right to ask questions about major land-use changes in their region. Elected representatives have every right to speak on behalf of those communities without intimidation or pressure.

It is clear that members of the government, including the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, who resides in Tasmania, are not across the interest in the property.

The sale may now be approved, but that does not erase the need for transparency. It does not answer the questions about market distortion, food security, regional employment or community consultation. And it does not justify the secrecy that surrounded the process.

Tasmanians deserve better than decisions made behind closed doors. Richard Colbeck is a Liberal Senator for Tasmania

© Nationwide News Pty Limited. No redistribution is permitted. This content can only be copied and communicated with a copyright licence.



Licensed by Copyright Agency. You may only copy or communicate this work with a licence