

Why the heat is on logging in Tasmania

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Instead of suggesting his state is being picked on, Premier Lennon should protect the forests, writes Tim Bonyhady.

Why Tasmania's forests? Why is the focus in this federal election on Tasmania when old forests in Victoria and NSW are also being logged and woodchipped? Is Tasmanian Premier Paul Lennon right to complain that his state is being picked on, discriminated against, unfairly the subject of national attention?

The answer lies in the regional forest agreement or RFA process, which the Keating government initiated in the mid-1990s and the Howard Government then implemented.

Both governments maintained that the RFA process would be based on science. A representative, adequate and comprehensive reserve system would be established according to ecological criteria, with the industry being restructured on this basis so it would become sustainable.

This emphasis on science - with the implication of a neutral, objective process - was implausible. The RFAs were always going to be political agreements brokered between Canberra and the states, which all had only limited interest in science.

The goal of the RFAs was to put an end to Australia's longstanding forestry debate by drawing permanent lines between those areas available for logging and those protected in national parks and reserves. Each agreement was to last 20 years.

The aspiration for certainty rapidly came unstuck, however, because the governments diminished and ignored the RFAs' environmental criteria, gave precedence to wood production in large areas of old forest and ignored public opinion.

As a result, the RFAs entrenched forests as a major election issue rather than removing them from the political agenda. Far from achieving certainty, the lines between areas slated for logging and those to be protected have had to be redrawn.

The RFA process began to break down in Western Australia where the extent of old-growth logging authorised by the RFA resulted in community outrage even before the agreement was signed in 1999.

The protests of tens of thousands of West Australians including Mick Malthouse, Liz Davenport and Janet Holmes a'Court failed to stop the Liberal government of Richard Court from proceeding with the agreement.

But just three months later the Court government walked away from its RFA in an attempt to assuage public anger.

Court's retreat did not save him. He promised to stop the logging of old tingle forests, phase out old karri logging over four years and stop old jarrah logging over 20 years. The Labor opposition went much further, promising an immediate end to all old-growth logging and the creation of 30 new national parks.

At the 2001 West Australian election Labor won office largely because of the forest issue, while the Greens won a record five seats and the "Liberals for Forests" won one.

Victoria shifted next, although not as dramatically.

Much as in the West, a big public campaign in favour of the protection of old forests of great environmental value failed to stop the Bracks Government signing the Western Victoria and Gippsland RFAs in 2000.

But as public protests continued, the Bracks Government reversed its stance in 2002 in the lead-up to the last Victorian election. It promised to phase out logging of native forests in the Otways.

NSW followed, with another election as the catalyst. After a campaign led by the state's North East Forests Alliance, Bob Carr announced he, too, would increase protected areas, making his state's reserve system much more comprehensive, adequate and representative.

Carr declared that 65,000 hectares of old forest in northern NSW, promised to the timber industry under the RFA, would become 15 new national parks and reserves.

That leaves Tasmania. It is the state with the crudest RFA, the one most biased in favour of wood production.

It is also the state where the flaws in the RFA process have gone uncorrected, resulting in woodchipping on an unprecedented scale. Many of its most significant old forests including Australia's largest temperate rainforest in the Tarkine and Australia's tallest forest in the Styx, are being logged.

Premier Lennon has no grounds to complain about the focus on Tasmania's forests. There is nothing arbitrary or unfair about their prominence in the current election.

Tasmania's old forests are those worst served by the RFA process and most in need of protection.

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