

Mercury

Talking Point: Major Projects Bill returns us to dodgy past

Major Projects law consigns our future to a handpicked panel, says Rosalie Woodruff

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**SAVED: The Gordon-below-Franklin Dam was proposed for the Gordon River.
Picture: DAVID CAIRD**

THE palawa people have treasured lutruwita/Tasmania for time beyond our imagining. The Black War against invasion was the first chapter in an ongoing story of people who continue to doggedly fight off attempts to privatise and exploit this land.

We have a history of governments rolling out the red carpet for corporate free-for-alls. Whether it's cronyism, dodgy monopolies, siphoning public money to corporates, mates' rates, secret deals, purpose-designed loopholes, or fast-track laws — we've had it all in Tasmania. Too many times people have been elected to represent the state's best interests, only to spend time in public office aiding greed and profiteering. The fight against exploitation has involved countless instances of communities pushing back — against people abusing power to make money for themselves or their backers.

On the back of struggles, both won and lost, today we enjoy the inheritance of this resistance for the common good. How bleak would our wondrous island be if actions of some governments had not been checked by the people?

The wild Franklin River would be dammed, and pulp mills would have chewed through our remaining ancient carbon-dense forests. Ribbon developments would dominate headlands, coasts and fertile regions. Built heritage would be scant and privileged elite hideaways would destroy wilderness values.

Living in a democracy means equal right to voice our opinion, to have eyes on decisions, and to vote people out of power if they don't act in our interests. This is fundamental to the peaceful and just fabric of our society.



Greens MP Rosalie Woodruff. Picture: LUKE BOWDEN

You may be aware of the Liberal Government's attempt to undermine a pillar of our democracy with their extreme — thankfully, still unrealised — anti-protest laws.

There is more in the pipeline. Major Projects legislation is spun as essential for simplifying planning approvals. Don't be fooled — this is about far more than dry, technical changes to bureaucratic processes. At its heart, it seeks to remove government accountability, along with the say of communities, from decisions for select developments.

The Bill represents the government's attempt to silence dissent on divisive proposals. A panel of assessors would be hand-picked to oversee decisions, people unaccountable to Tasmanians.

Their final decision could not be challenged.

Large and controversial developments by definition have more impact on the natural world and our future.

If anything, government should be expanding the democratic processes instead of removing them.

Coronavirus, with all its tragedy and terror, presents an unexpected opportunity. We have been forced to pause and assess what we value. Decisions now will set our state's course for generations.

The State Government has starting pitching the legislation as crucial for the road to recovery. It seems to have chosen the murky well-worn path of past governments, wanting to remove "green and red tape" so short-horizon big developers can come and squeeze out a quick buck.

We need to focus on projects that make our island a healthier and fairer place. In a rapidly heating world, we need carbon-neutral jobs.

Many choices for the state's rebuild would create jobs: affordable housing; investing in health, education and arts; carbon storage and transport electrification; incentives to establish an industry in resource reuse and advanced manufacturing; skills for more young Tasmanians — the list goes on. Our recovery from COVID-19 should build on the unity of these past months.

We need our democracy to help us negotiate differences, and avoid abuses of power. The Major Projects legislation is designed to shut people out of important decisions about our future. It will contribute nothing of value to a post-pandemic Tasmania.

Franklin MP Dr Rosalie Woodruff is Greens planning spokesperson.