

The Mercury

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Locals ill at ease with resort plan



Cambria Green sprawls over more than 3000ha near Swansea. Inset, Anne Held.

Tasmanians' nerves have been on edge over a proposed Chinese-backed resort near Swansea. But, as Charles Wooley says, locals might be able to relax a little.

It is only human to find change hard to take and rarely for the better.

We are creatures of habit. We find deep comfort in the routine and the familiar. So, when decisions enforcing major change are suddenly imposed upon us, it should be no surprise that we resist them.

To encourage us to accept the benefits of change we need reliable information, persuasive argument, a clarity of process and purpose and a sense of involvement.

And most of all we need inspired and trusted leadership.

In Tasmania we have too little of all the above and not much faith that our leaders really know what they are doing.

Cambria Green is a case in point.

Back in August 2018 there was standing room only in the Hobart Town Hall to protest a shock \$100m Chinese-backed proposal to build a resort on a 3185ha parcel of land at Swansea on the east coast.

It was a huge project that would force dramatic change on the small seaside town.

The proposal included a 120-room, four-storey luxury hotel, two golf courses, 70 villas and 240 units, a further 80-unit health retreat, a palliative care centre and (hold the paranoia) a crematorium.

An airport was also planned, with the possibility up to 20 flights per day.

Little wonder back in 2018 the Hobart Town Hall was full.

Tasmanian Liberal senator Jonathon Duniam emerged as the political champion of what was effectively a CCP-backed proposal.

I remember a time when the Libs were unreasonably and inflexibly anti-communist. But a lithe Senator Duniam praised the Chinese project for its economic benefit and the “enhanced accessibility and accommodation options for tourists”, and for the jobs it would bring – though those have never been specified.

My own experience in other Pacific islands where the CCP has territorial ambitions is that the Chinese bring in their own qualified people and the locals mostly get work as unskilled labourers.

Senator Duniam’s Pacific experiences must have been quite different from mine. He denounced the opponents of the Chinese-backed project as “the anti-everything brigade”.

That was three years ago. Since then, Jonathon has had a change of name if not a complete change of heart. “Jonno” Duniam has privately told the good burghers of Swansea he regrets the use of his “rash comment”.

As he should. In the increasingly toxic relationship between the CCP and Australia, I doubt any member of the Morrison government will ever again dare praise the creation of a sizeable Chinese community on Tasmania’s east coast, let alone insult good people and potential voters.

The Artifakt Café in Swansea’s main street serves a famously good breakfast and excellent coffee. Nancy, the proprietor is also known for serving up a generous helping of common sense.

“At first I thought the opposition to Cambria Green looked a lot like a conspiracy theory. But looking at the world and the way things are going now I’m not so sure,” she told me. “We certainly don’t need it and I don’t think it will happen.”

Nor do I. Surveying the Cambria Green site this week I saw no sign of development. Instead of bulldozers and aircraft the place was full of frog-song. Two wedge-tailed eagles circled overhead. The grass was long and the gates were unlocked with not a soul in sight.

From what I can glean, no one knows what's happening. The whole project is bogged down in government bureaucracy and financial uncertainty.

Even were it a good idea Cambria Green would be troubled. But it's not a good idea and the inscrutable proponents have signalled a change of intent. But no one, least of all the locals, knows what that might be.

Tourism developer Simon Carrant, who does know a thing or two about negotiating the hurdles of planning, was always sceptical about the project.

"Without getting into the cold-war geopolitics of it. I just don't think the project was ever fair-dinkum. The master plan was only ever an indication of what might be built. Not what would be built," Simon told me this week. "It was at heart an old-fashioned land grab to make an easy quid. They got more than 3000 hectares for five million dollars. That's next to nothing. By my reading of the 'specific area plan', they could split the land into hundreds of lots and flog them off back in China, make a lot of money and build a decentralised town with the population of Devonport."

The political implications are another matter. Simon suggests that if given residency, the Chinese settlers would soon control the local council. "They would have the votes to completely run the place," he said.

Conversely you might think the Glamorgan Spring Bay Council could benefit from having a few shrewd Chinese councillors on board. This was, after all, the hayseed local government outfit that voted to create the Cambria Green mess in the first place.

Back in 2018, when the council voted to support the controversial development, did councillors understand the geopolitical implications? Could they even spell the word?

Did they read newspapers or watch television news?

To be fair to the local council, they are not alone in their naivete.

In 2015 a cowboy outfit called the Northern Territory government sold the Port of Darwin to a Chinese company.

We still haven't quite figured out how that happened.

But as the federal government moves to tighten regulations regarding foreign investment, ownership and residency (mainly directed towards you know who), that is unlikely to happen again.

As for Cambria Green, with the intensifying cold war between Australia and the CCP, with a property collapse and a looming financial crisis in China, and with disrupted international travel, perhaps the lovely town of Swansea might relax a little.

At Col's Bar, a discreet unofficial watering hole on spectacular Dolphin Sands near Swansea, I was entertained in good local company with east coast pinot noir and Col's

excellent homemade pizza. It was easy to pick quite a few of the dissenters there for Liberal voters (or they formerly were).

To call them “antievrything” is to offend people whose only sin is to passionately love the place where they live.

“We moved here because it was the most magnificent and beautiful place. Then overnight our world changed. Our population would be dwarfed and the place we loved destroyed. It was frightening,” said Anne Held, a management consultant from WA. She is president of the East Coast Alliance, a local group formed to oppose the Chinese venture. “The mantra in Tasmania is ‘jobs, jobs, jobs’ for the economy. There is no real consideration for the community to get a say. The decisions are based on the dollar. Not what the locals want. The process is run, not for the people who live here but by and for people who don’t live here,” Anne Held said.

The mood in Swansea this week was much as I had found the mood in Stanley last week where the locals felt they had no say over a wind farm to be built 4km from their heritage town. Same as the residents of Killora on Bruny Island, confronted by a noisy and polluting salmon farm in their peaceful bay. Or the same as those residents of Hobart’s southern outlet, who might lose their houses and who feel government has treated them in a peremptory and insensitive manner.

If I missed you in that list, send me a letter.

Unless you live in the wellheeled suburbs among our political rulers, in Sandy Bay and Battery Point (remember how the foreshore walkway didn’t get the nod), no one is safe. The sudden appearance of a surveyor’s tripod in most Tasmanian streets is always sure to cast fear into the hearts of all the residents.

I suggested to the gathering at Col’s Bar that while the Tasmanian government doesn’t change the world does.

Given our deteriorated relationship with China, they were probably now much safer from becoming a Chinese colony. At least in the short term.

But, of course, in Tasmania you never know what is just around the corner.

A wind farm, perhaps? Or a fish farm?

The only thing of which you can be certain is that you will not be consulted.

I asked our leading tourism guru, Simon Carrant, had he known about the bargain price availability of those three thousand well-watered hectares with a grand manor house and sweeping views across Dolphin Sands to the Hazards at Coles Bay, would he have bought them?

“Too right, I would. For five million dollars, the price of only a moderately posh suburban house in Sydney, I could have been the lord of the manor,” he said.

“But my benevolent rule would be more in tune with Tasmania.”