

Disregard for concerns is inexcusable

PETER BOYER



It is worrying that the state government seems indifferent to many Tasmanians' concerns over several high profile land-use cases, writes **Peter Boyer**

ANY First Nations person will tell you that land defines nations and shapes the lives of all who walk on it. That is true for everyone and we get upset when people change our land in ways we don't like.

China's growing interest in offshore lands, reflected in its investment in Australian property from the port of Darwin and posh residences to mines and big farming estates, is now the talk of the country. Not much of it is complimentary, which probably says more about us and our inner fears than it does about China.

Tasmania has been on the Chinese radar for many years, taking in the Hodgman government's lavish welcome to President Xi Jinping when he visited in 2014.

Back then there was much talk of investment in agriculture, forestry, aquaculture and education. Much was also said – and it remains true – about the benefits to be won from a mingling of cultures.

But Xi's welcome party might have been more restrained had the government been able to foresee things that can happen when the attention of rich investors from a big, crowded country is drawn to a far-off, uncrowded, relatively unspoilt island. Things such as Cambria Green.

Cambria was the name given to a generous tract of land overlooking Great Oyster Bay and Freycinet Peninsula, allocated by Governor William Sorell to George Meredith, who had arrived from England in 1821. The real

owners of the land for millennia fought to keep it, but in the end were beaten by manpower and muskets.

Meredith's sheep farm, which he named Cambria, stretched from hills behind Swansea all the way to a magnificent beach at the head of Great Oyster Bay. A beachside subdivision, Dolphin Sands, was developed and sold off last century.

In 2012 the remaining 3185ha of Cambria came up for sale. In 2014 its new owners, a consortium of mostly Chinese business interests, applied to Glamorgan Spring Bay Council to have the land rezoned to allow a \$100m development including a 120-room luxury hotel, more than 300 tourist units, two golf courses, and aged-care accommodation and services.

Release of the Cambria Green proposal in April 2018 resulted in public backlash against both council and proponents, fuelled by the proposal's scale and the secrecy of the council process. In the face of hundreds of hostile submissions, the mayor Michael Kent stoutly defended his support for it until his death from ill health in December 2018.

Former premier Peter Gutwein and his planning minister, Roger Jaensch, did not respond to written requests to rule out fast-tracking Cambria Green by declaring it a major project. After multiple challenges, revisions, passage of new planning laws and a Supreme Court hearing, a "final" series of Tasmanian Planning Commission hearings is due to start next week.



Sophie Underwood, centre, of Freycinet Action Network with Jennie Churchill and Anne Held of the East Coast Alliance, photographed near their homes at Dolphin Sands, which is adjacent to the proposed Cambria Green site, who have been campaigning against the East Coast development for several years. Picture: Peter Mathew

Cambria Green is far from the only land use issue on this island. Two other chronic bones of contention were discussed in these pages last week: the right to protest forest clearing and the environmental impact of salmon farming.

As Rachel Hay pointed out,

the Tasmanian government is proposing a solution to a non-existent problem by persisting with a fourth attempt (after previously being blocked by parliament and the courts) to clamp down on protest action against business activity.

In new legislation, the government proposes

draconian penalties that put forest protest in the category of arson or aggravated assault, amounting to tens of thousands of dollars and months in jail – out of all proportion to any offence committed.

This amounts to a direct assault on the right of a person

seeking to protect natural values against logging and other forest clearing. Those values include not just an array of biological concerns, but also the long-term retention of carbon stores in natural forest which – despite industry claims to the contrary – cannot be matched by

harvesting and regeneration cycles.

A day after Hay's article came an excoriating expert critique of a very worrying failure by Tasmania's environmental authorities to prevent dangerous pollution of our waterways by effluent from land-based, flow-through

salmon hatcheries in the Derwent basin.

The article by Christine Coughanowr, an aquatic biologist with decades of experience monitoring water quality in the Derwent estuary, warned that without a rapid transition to closed-loop systems, the existing regimen

would result in algal blooms that are impossible to eradicate.

All three of these land-use cases – Cambria Green, protest laws and salmon industry pollution – reflect a deep connection of people with their homelands. The Tasmanian government seems

indifferent, even hostile to their concerns. In a democracy, its attitude is unconscionable and unforgivable.

A former Mercury reporter and public servant, Peter Boyer specialises in the science and politics of climate.