

Lake Pedder & Franklin River Environmental Issues – Historical Summary

During the 1960s, Tasmania's Hydro Electric Commission (HEC) developed plans to expand its hydro-electric generating system in Tasmania in order to attract additional energy-intensive manufacturing industry investment in Tasmania.

As early as 1962, the South West Committee was formed in response to the HEC emerging plans for the exploitation of SW Tasmania's rivers.

In 1967, the Save Lake Pedder National Park Committee was formed, but was unable to prevent the flooding of Lake Pedder in 1972 in the face of HEC and Tasmanian government resolve, and the Federal government's indifference to environmental matters.

In 1973, the newly elected Whitlam government's Ministerial inquiry into Lake Pedder, though coming too late, recommended a moratorium on the flooding, but the Tasmanian Labor government refused to co-operate.

Lake Pedder stands as a symbol of Australia's struggle between environmentalists and large development projects.

In 1975, the Tasmanian Labor government proposed an expanded park scheme (The South West Management Plan) to develop and protect the south west of the state. Under the State Grants (Nature Conservation) Act (1974) of the Federal parliament, Tasmania received financial assistance in 1976 for a survey (the first of its kind) of South West Tasmanian resources.

The Tasmanian Wilderness Society was formed in 1976 in response to further HEC schemes proposed for the S W Tasmania region. It later played a major role in the Franklin dispute.

Also in 1976, the Tasmanian government established the Cartland Committee (an advisory committee on S W Tasmania) which reported in 1978 with a proposal on the management of S W Tasmania.

In March 1979, the Tasmanian government adopted the basic concepts of the report but rejected its advice that a statutory body manage the area. Instead the South West Tasmanian Committee was established (comprising interests from the HEC, the Forestry Commission and Conservationists) to advise Cabinet.

In October 1979 the HEC, which wielded great political influence, unveiled plans for a three stage, billion dollar, integrated hydro-electric scheme on the Lower Gordon, Franklin and King rivers. The new Premier, Doug Lowe (who replaced Eric Reece in 1977) remained neutral, preferring to consider alternatives.

Finally in April 1980 Cabinet opted for a smaller hydro scheme above the Olga river, rejecting a Legislative Council Select Committee's report that supported the HEC scheme.

In December 1980 a deadlock was reached in the Tasmanian parliament. the Legislative Council preferring the three Stage HEC scheme to dam the Franklin and Lower Gordon Rivers. The deadlock remained through 1981.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Conservation advised in August 1980 that any proposals likely to have impact on South West Tasmania were of national concern, warranting a federal inquiry to fully examine the alternatives.

The Committee also recommended that advice should be sought as to whether the Environment Protection (Impact of Proposals) Act 1974 could be invoked so that an examination of the national implications could be made.

The Federal government in November 1981, at the request of Doug Lowe and the Tasmanian Labor government, officially nominated S W Tasmania for world heritage listing.

Note: An invaluable reference for the background to this period and the unfolding of this issue during Doug Lowe's premiership is Thompson, Peter. Power in Tasmania. Australian Conservation Foundation 1981.

Meanwhile, unable to resolve the deadlock over the hydro schemes, Doug Lowe was defeated in Caucus and resigned as premier in November 1981.

Under the Tasmanian Labor government's new leadership (Harry Holgate as Premier), a state referendum was held in December on the issue of the hydro schemes. The ballot paper offered voters a choice of the Gordon above Olga scheme or the Gordon below Franklin scheme. Voters had no choice but to vote "yes" for one or other dam proposal and there was no "No Dams" option.

The Tasmanian Wilderness Society encouraged voters to write "No Dams" on the referendum paper in protest.

The results were:

- 33% wrote "No Dams" on the ballot paper
- 45% of the votes were disallowed
- 47% voted for the Gordon below Franklin scheme
- 8% voted for the Gordon above Olga scheme.

In May 1982, the newly elected Liberal government of Tasmania led by Robin Gray immediately passed the Gordon River Power Hydro Electric Development Bill. Preparatory work on the Gordon-below-Franklin dam began in July.

In October 1982, the Federal parliament received the Rose Report, which stated that the Federal government had the power to stop the construction of the dam under its obligation to the provisions of the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), to which Australia had become a signatory in 1974.

On 23 November 1982, a Senate Select Committee urged a three-year delay on the construction of the Franklin dam so that a full investigation into Tasmania's power needs could be made.

The federal Labor Party in November announced that the government and the opposition were obliged, because of the nomination for the world heritage listing, to prevent the construction of the dam.

Significantly, the Cabinet of Malcolm Fraser's Federal government announced in December that it would not prevent the Franklin dam being built despite having the power to do so. This polarisation of views further solidified the Tasmanian Wilderness Society's resolve to fight the construction of the dam and was also proved significant in the election of the Hawke Labor government in March 1983.

On 14 December 1982, the South West Tasmania area was added to the World Heritage list. Despite this, construction of the dam continued at full speed. The Tasmanian Wilderness Society, having galvanised environmentalists world wide to 'save the Franklin', began a blockade on the construction of the dam, aided by hundreds of environmentally concerned citizens. Also on 14 December, Labor and Democrat senators joined forces in the Senate and passed the private members World Heritage Properties Protection Bill.

In March 1983, the newly elected Federal Labor government made the World Heritage (Western Tasmania Wilderness) regulations under the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act 1975 for the purpose of immediately preventing further construction of the dam. These regulations were subsequently deemed illegal by the High Court, but afforded the Hawke government time in which to draft legislation to stop the Franklin dam. New legislation was introduced into the House of Representatives as the World Heritage Properties Conservation Bill, which became law on 22 May 1983. This legislation effectively stopped construction of the dam under the federal government's (and Australia's) obligation to UNESCO.

The Tasmanian Liberal government immediately challenged the Act in the High Court and lost.

The Franklin River project was abandoned and the promise of compensation to Tasmania, made in the 1983/84 budget speech, was debated in Federal Parliament until November 1983. Tasmania was granted a number of financial packages – in 1983, \$m27 and in 1984, \$m62.9, with provision for further ongoing assistance.