

## The Franklin River conservation issue

One of the most recent episodes in the diverse history of the Macquarie Harbour region unfolded during the summer of 1982-3, when the village of Strahan became the focus of the largest conservation battle ever fought in Australia: the battle to save the Franklin River. The issue dominated Tasmanian politics throughout the late 70s and early 80s and caused great rifts between those who supported the construction of the dam and those who sought the preservation of the wilderness values of the region.

### The issue

In 1979 the Hydro-Electric Commission (HEC) released a proposal to construct a 180 megawatt power scheme which would result in the inundation of 37 km of the middle reaches of the Gordon River and 33 km of the Franklin River valley. The scheme would add to the huge power output already provided by the State's 23 hydro-electric power stations and generate a significant number of jobs for the west coast — an area with one of the highest unemployment rates in Tasmania. There

was some concern, however, among economists and academics that an increase in power output would not necessarily strengthen the economy, nor decrease levels of unemployment.

Regardless of economic rationales, the focus of the conservationists was the protection of the Franklin River, one of Australia's last truly wild rivers, and the integrity of one of the world's last great temperate wilderness areas.

### The 'greenies'

A co-ordinated campaign by the Tasmanian Wilderness Society (TWS) and other conservation groups mobilised support from a wide cross section of the community during a long campaign to bring the plight of the Franklin River to the notice of all Tasmanians and indeed, much of the world. A series of public meetings and street marches, culminating in the largest street march seen in Tasmania, brought the issue to the forefront of Tasmanian politics.

Those who supported the dam responded with a cam-

paign of their own. With the support of pro-dam politicians, they argued passionately for the economic benefits that the construction of the dam would bring.

### The politicians

In order to stem the growing wave of concern over the construction of the dam, the Labor Government of Premier Doug Lowe sought a compromise, passing legislation that paved the way for the construction of a dam on the Gordon-above-Olga, an alternative that did little to appease either pro or anti dam groups.

In 1981 a referendum was held in an attempt to resolve the issue, giving the Tasmanian people the opportunity to express their support for the construction of either the Gordon-below-Franklin or the Gordon-above-Olga scheme. The option of no dams, however, was withdrawn. This resulted in a staggering 44% of the electorate casting an informal vote by writing, 'No Dams' across their ballot ticket.

In 1982, the Government nominated the

Cradle Mountain — Lake St Clair National Park, Franklin — Lower Gordon Wild Rivers National Park and the Southwest National Park for World Heritage listing. The listing was accepted at the December UNESCO meeting on World Heritage. The Western Tasmanian Wilderness National Parks World Heritage Area had satisfied all the criteria for listing as a natural property and three of the six cultural criteria. In doing so, the listing had satisfied more criteria than any other World Heritage Area on Earth. Yet the World Heritage Committee expressed that it was 'seriously concerned at the likely effect of dam construction in the area on those natural and cultural characteristics which make the property of outstanding universal value'.

Prior to the listing, however, a State election was held at which the Labor Government was defeated. The new Liberal Premier, Robin Gray, was a staunch proponent of the dam who considered the Franklin River, 'nothing but a brown ditch, leech-ridden and unattractive to the majority of people'. On the 16 June 1982 the newly-elected Gray Government revoked parts of the Wild Rivers National Park, paving the way for the development of the Gordon-below-Franklin power scheme.

### **The Franklin River blockade**

The campaign to save the Franklin River, now clearly lost on political grounds,

shifted emphasis, with the organisation of what was to be one of the largest acts of mass civil disobedience seen in Australia. The Franklin River Blockade, organised by the TWS under the leadership of Bob Brown, commenced on the 14 December 1982, the day the Western Tasmanian Wilderness National Parks World Heritage Area was listed.

A total of 2613 people registered at the TWS headquarters in Strahan to participate in the campaign of non-violent civil disobedience. Protesters chained themselves to gates at the HEC compound in Strahan and formed blockades in rubber duckies at Warners Landing. As boat load after boat load were arrested, new waves of protesters came to take their place. The campaign continued throughout the summer of 1982-3 and resulted in the arrest of 1272 persons. Bob Brown was imprisoned for three weeks, and many people, including internationally renowned botanist, David Bellamy, were remanded in custody.

### **Federal intervention**

During the height of the campaign, the Tasmanian Government rejected \$500 million offered by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser to construct an alternative power scheme outside the boundaries of the World Heritage Area. Further offers by the newly-elected Labor Government under Bob Hawke were similarly turned down. Then, on 31 March

1983, the Hawke Government, which had recently been elected into office on an anti-dam platform, passed regulations forbidding HEC works within the World Heritage Area. Despite this, the HEC continued with the construction of works while the Tasmanian Government's challenge to the validity of the legislation was heard in the High Court. It was the decision of the High Court on the 1 July 1983 which, after a four to three majority ruling, prevented the damming of the Franklin River.

The Federal Government subsequently provided the Tasmanian Government with \$276 million in compensation, the bulk of which was used to subsidise the cost of the King and Anthony HEC power schemes. Grants were also provided to assist in the management of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.

The listing of the Tasmanian Wilderness as a World Heritage Area was an essential component in the landmark decision to halt the construction of the dam, but listing also gave recognition to the natural and cultural values which make the area of outstanding universal significance.

### **Further reading**

Pink, K. (1984). *Through Hells Gates*. Published by the Advocate Newspaper, Burnie.