

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background to the inquiry

1.1 Lake Pedder was flooded in 1972 to create a hydro-electric water storage servicing the Gordon River Power Development scheme. The flooding proposal was a controversial issue. It was strongly opposed by some, divided the Tasmanian community and contributed to the establishment of the national conservation movement. The passionate opposition to the flooding reflected the strong emotional appeal that the original Lake Pedder had for many who had visited its shores or knew of it through photographs. Support for the new dam was, in some quarters, just as passionate because fears had been raised about the threats to the economic security and life styles of Tasmanians, and because the embryonic conservation movement was probably perceived for the first time as posing a real threat to existing power structures.

1.2 Some of those who felt that they had lost a battle in the early 1970s did not give up hope that the lake would be restored and that the decisions taken by the government of the day and the Hydro-Electric Commission (HEC) would be reversed. The deep concern that they felt and the symbolic importance of the drowned lake led eventually, and perhaps inevitably, to the initiation of a concerted campaign for its restoration. The emergence of this campaign also prompted the instigation of a counter campaign initiated by those who felt that the decision to flood Lake Pedder was appropriate or could not now be overturned, except at an unacceptable cost. The proposal to drain and restore Lake Pedder therefore became a very emotional and vigorously contested issue. The question of the future of Lake Pedder once again divided the Tasmanian community.

1.3 The future of Lake Pedder was revived as a serious issue in April 1994 when the Lake Pedder Study Group released a paper, *Why Lake Pedder should be restored*. The Lake Pedder Study Group is a joint Victorian - Tasmanian voluntary body established in 1992. Its paper was based on the findings of six reports that it commissioned on the technical feasibility of restoring the lake. Two years later, and after the IUCN (the World Conservation Union) had passed a resolution calling for the restoration of Lake Pedder, the Lake Pedder Restoration Committee launched the Pedder 2000 campaign with the aim of beginning to drain the current lake. Branches of Pedder 2000 were formed in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Adelaide, Launceston and Burnie, with coordination from Hobart.

1.4 Commonwealth Members of Parliament were asked to support the proposal and to use their powers to ensure that action was taken. After discussions with representatives of the Pedder 2000 campaign, the Environment, Recreation and the Arts Committee decided to hold an inquiry into the issue, and the Minister for Environment, Sport and Territories agreed to this proposal. In consultation with the Minister, the Committee agreed to consider some of the matters that would need to be taken into account in coming to a decision about the merits of the proposal and whether it should be supported. The Committee found that it first needed to consider the feasibility of the proposal and the likelihood that it would attract sufficient support to warrant further serious consideration at the present time.

1.5 The Committee was faced with a considerable challenge in conducting the inquiry. Early in the process of gathering evidence it became apparent that views about restoring Lake Pedder were extremely polarised, and the issue had become the subject of intense and

divisive debate. However the Committee's goal throughout the inquiry was to seek accurate information, careful analysis and reasonable argument as a basis for producing a sound report.

1.6 The proposal does not currently have the status of a matter put to the Commonwealth Government by a formally constituted authority, such as the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Consultative Committee, or by the Tasmanian Government, which would have a major responsibility in implementing the proposal if it were to go ahead. As such the proposal does not yet require the Commonwealth to make a definitive decision. This does not mean that the proposal should be dismissed without serious initial consideration or that the Commonwealth should simply ignore the public representations that have been made to it. The Commonwealth's response would be significant in determining what further assessment might be given to the proposal and the questions it raises. The Commonwealth would also need to carefully consider its position given that the proposal involves the future management of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.

1.7 The Committee's inquiry provided a forum for the case for the restoration of Lake Pedder to be presented in a more formal way than the public campaign sponsored by Pedder 2000. It also provided a forum for the opposition to the proposal. It appears to have become expected that the Committee would choose between the two alternative points of view and make a definitive recommendation about the proposal's future. This became a threshold question for the Committee and is dealt with in the following chapters.

1.8 The Committee was not specifically asked to recommend whether or not Lake Pedder should be restored. The terms of reference for the inquiry required that it consider:

- . the implications of the proposal for the future management of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area;
- . the potential environmental and economic opportunities and costs arising from the proposed drainage and restoration; and
- . the adequacy of the information currently available to assess the proposal and the need for further research.

1.9 The question of whether the restoration proposal should be implemented inevitably arose and the Committee's response to the terms of reference could only be framed against a consideration of the overall merit of the proposal and the likelihood that it might proceed.

1.10 The Committee needed to consider if the proposal had any prospect of success so that it could determine if the information currently available is adequate or if resources should be put into more extensive studies. This was both a legal and a political question, with an answer partly dependent on the balance of legal powers between the Commonwealth and Tasmania, and partly on the balance of public opinion.

1.11 In considering the evidence and reaching its conclusions the Committee closely examined the reasons presented both for and against the proposal. We endeavoured to take a balanced and rational approach to a matter that became highly political and emotional. All of the evidence was carefully considered and the arguments assessed. The costs and benefits were considered, although it was noted that not all of these could be adequately measured in economic or other terms. There were strong aesthetic and even spiritual values that were associated with the proposal to restore the lake and similar concerns were raised by those

wishing to see the lake retained. The Committee considered such values as well as the more easily identified and measured, (but strongly disputed), economic costs and benefits.

The restoration proposal

1.12 Based on the evidence contained in the studies commissioned by the Lake Pedder Study Group, Pedder 2000 believed that the lake and related landforms could be restored as a fully functioning physical feature, and that its aesthetic values could also be restored. The landforms were regarded as the most important attribute of the original lake and these were reported to be clearly recoverable. Pedder 2000 accepted that some endemic species had been lost and that the lake could not be completely restored to its pristine condition, but believed that once rehabilitation work was completed the area would be 'a thoroughly worthy part of the World Heritage Area, functioning and evolving once more, wholly in response to natural processes.'¹

1.13 At the time of the launch of the campaign no studies had been undertaken into the degree of intervention that would be needed to restore the vegetation surrounding the lake, nor was any indication given of what would be an acceptable standard of rehabilitation. It was anticipated that such decisions would be dealt with under the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Management Plan, which is subject to community consultation. Pedder 2000 acknowledged at the outset that while an exact restoration to the pre-flooding condition was not possible, the physical possibility of exposing the unique landforms was deemed by them to constitute sufficient grounds for an in-principle discussion to restore the lake.

1.14 While an attempt was made to quantify anticipated benefits and costs, Pedder 2000 believed that Lake Pedder has sufficient intrinsic merit to warrant its restoration regardless of whether it would make money or create jobs. Much of the appeal of the proposal was seen to be in its symbolism, that is, it would be a demonstration that human beings can rectify what Pedder 2000 considered to be environmental mistakes, and can act altruistically to restore a unique treasure for future generations. The aesthetic and spiritual pull of the former lake is still strongly felt by those who visited it, those who fought unsuccessfully to save it as well as others who have seen only photographs.

1.15 In its submission to the inquiry Pedder 2000 examined how the proposal related to the objectives of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Management Plan. This five year plan was prepared by the Tasmanian Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage with Commonwealth assistance and approved by both Tasmanian and Commonwealth Ministers. Pedder 2000 considered that their proposal fitted perfectly with the Plan's overall objective, which is 'to protect, conserve, present and, where necessary, rehabilitate the natural and cultural heritage' and that this accorded with the aims of the World Heritage Convention.

1.16 In their initial evidence to the Committee Pedder 2000 explained that the process of draining the impoundment was a matter that had not been finalised and noted that more work needed to be done.² They believed, however, that the proposal would be essentially fairly simple and could involve little more than opening the outlet valves and letting the

1 Pedder 2000, *Why Lake Pedder should be restored*, April 1994, p 16.

2 Evidence pp 16-17.

impoundment drain, with some management of the rate of draw down to minimise damage to the Lake Pedder dunes. Questions were raised about the technical feasibility of this approach, the implications downstream, and the need to dismantle redundant infrastructure.

1.17 The proponents' preferred options in relation to these and other questions were, in some matters, clarified during the course of the inquiry but others were seen not to be central to the 'in-principle' consideration of the proposal. It was stated for example that Pedder 2000 preferred that the dams be removed but that they did not see this as essential to their proposal and was not included in their estimation of the likely costs.³ Other matters were left to be determined at some future time as information and developments allowed. It is sufficient to note as a starting point for the Committee's inquiry that the Pedder 2000 proposal was not fully detailed in specifying engineering options. All that was required to begin consideration of the proposal was the request for an in-principle decision about whether the proposal should proceed. Other issues and matters of detail could be clarified and considered if options for implementing the proposal are developed and questions identified. The Committee's inquiry was particularly useful in exposing the proposal to scrutiny and raising questions that needed to be answered if the proposal were to proceed.

1.18 Initial evaluation of the issues was possible from the evidence presented to the Committee and some conclusions have been made, but further consideration would depend on a clearer definition of the details of the proposal. It is not necessary for Pedder 2000 to prepare a detailed operational plan. In the long run, if a decision were taken to proceed with the proposal, the relevant state government agencies would have to carry out detailed studies and prepare operational plans. It is these agencies, and not Pedder 2000, who would then have to define all the details of the final proposal. The Committee therefore had to consider the views of the Tasmanian Government and its agencies.

1.19 Pedder 2000 stressed in its submission that many of the benefits would be intangible and hence difficult to quantify and it urged the Committee to take the broadest possible view of costs and benefits. These costs would depend partly on the level of intervention and the future management of the area. Pedder 2000 listed the studies that would be required, some of which are being undertaken by members of the scientific arm of the Lake Pedder Restoration Committee, but believed that there was sufficient information already available for a decision to restore the lake. Among the benefits predicted were an increase in tourism in the area and an opportunity to develop expertise in restoration ecology, both of which would be enhanced by the world wide attention the project could expect to attract.

1.20 Pedder 2000 gave further evidence relating to the proposal at the Committee's public hearings in February and April. It clarified that it was not calling for the removal of the dams that flood Lake Pedder⁴, and that costs associated with the removal of dams and rehabilitation would be decided by the community once the decision to proceed is made. These matters and the arguments against draining the lake are dealt in the following chapters.

3 Evidence p 11.

4 Evidence p 296.

