

A personal view by George Harris

An additional personal view by George Harris submitted to the Senate Inquiry into the proposal for a Minor Boundary modification to the TWWHA, tabled on Monday, March 31, 2014

I am materially interested in this matter in that I am a self-employed furniture designer and manufacturer of thirty years standing, and my business depends on the good reputation and reliable supply of Tasmania's unique Special Timbers, and due to my commitment to this industry and the social and cultural values surrounding it, I am involved in a number of organisations connected with promoting, representing and supporting it. These associations are disclosed at the end of this submission.

I believe the 2013 WHA extension is illegitimate. I believe it should never have happened. I believe winding back only 74,000 hectares as the federal government is proposing is not going far enough.

I believe the entire 170,000 hectares should be annulled by the World Heritage Committee, and the state party, Australia, be asked to undertake a proper process of investigation and evaluation to determine if any areas should be added to the WHA as it previously existed, and if any areas are found sufficiently worthy, that the state party undertake proper consultation of those affected, and that any such proposal should seek and attain a full and proper passage of any proposed extension through the parliament of Tasmania.

To me, the World Heritage Area extension of 2013, and the process that delivered it was the most sordid, corrupt, and disgusting spectacle I have ever witnessed, and I never want to see anything like it ever again, ever, especially in the theatre of public policy development and delivery.

I believe it was born out of political opportunism arising from an unusual set of circumstances, and capitalised upon by green fundamentalists who saw the scope to achieve a misguided goal not otherwise possible. Those circumstances were the combination of both the House of Assembly in Tasmania and the House of Representatives passing into minority government within months of each other, with both relying on Greens members to continue, combined with the Greens holding the balance of power in the Senate. This was not lost on some people, who correctly decided this was a situation that would not last, and that it could be exploited.

I believe the WHA extension of 2013 was totally unjustified and poorly assessed, and will cause significant damage to an iconic aspect of our cultural and heritage landscape, namely the Special Timbers manufacturing sector, for which the opportunity to defend was denied. I believe there will be significant damage to Australia's international reputation when this consequence of poor process becomes more fully understood and further embarrassment when the necessary efforts to repair the situation are made.

So many people feel surprised that the WHA extension is being challenged. So many people feel that the concept of World Heritage is so "up there" that it is beyond reproach and any opportunity to extend it must be good. It cannot be wrong. Surely. Wrong!

If more people were to understand that no expert international panel assessed it, and that it was entirely generated and assessed within Australia by people who were all of a certain partisan conviction from one side of the issue, there would be an outrage. If they were to realize it was being supported by federal and state governments more interested in survival and which were prepared to do the exact opposite to their own forest industry policies on which they were most recently elected there would be outrage. If they were to then understand that it did not go through the full assessment process by the World Heritage Centre, but was snuck through the back

door as a 'Minor Boundary Adjustment' at the World Heritage Committee meeting in Phnom Penh in June, 2013, and largely unchecked, and where the Australian drivers of the process were all green activists and consultants who deceived by omission, there would be outrage.

The 2013 extension was against Tasmania's interests, and a lot of what is wrong with it is owed to the signatories negotiation process, and the abrogation of responsibility by government in allowing and encouraging it to occur in the manner that it did. Participation in the process was limited. Those who should have been able to engage in it were prevented, or promised presentations on their behalf and misrepresented, in an exercise that was the most undemocratic I have ever seen.

The timeline that started with the so-called round table on forestry after the 2010 state election progressed through the poorly worded and self-contradictory Statement of Principles, which negotiated to a stand-still before morphing into the Heads of Agreement, and gate-crashing the 2011 ALP state conference to bring a result that some of the original participants could not only not agree with, but could barely recognise. This became the IGA or Inter-governmental Agreement, which brought the invited and well rewarded participation of some academics known more for their affiliations than their independence in the task group known as the Independent Verification Group. This provided some information but little consensus and the negotiations staggered past many more missed deadlines and diminished expectations.

Those driving the process knew there needed to be an agreement signed and translated into legislation well before the next round of state and federal elections, and that new arrangements needed to be bedded down and seen to be working, or at least to have faded as a current issue, and for any funding assistance to be flowing, and so on. There also needed to be the perception that any changes were sufficiently locked in that they would be difficult to impossible to change.

However, things have not gone quite to how some were expecting.

All three parliamentary chambers have undergone a major change of political colour, the federal House of Representatives, the Tasmanian House of Assembly, and the balance of power in the Australian Senate. The conditions necessary for WHA extension by improper and undemocratic means have ceased to exist, and moves are underway to undo the damage.

Those affected have no option but to take the issue into the international arena to achieve redress, and hopefully nothing similar will ever occur again.

Yours sincerely,

George Harris