

# The dangers of a pulp mill celebrity status

[Food & Environment](#) | [Alan Moran](#)  
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It seems a distant memory but new projects once excited emotions of support. People tended to recognise them as bringing greater wealth, better jobs and spin-off benefits across the community.

Gunns' Tasmanian pulp mill epitomises a regrettable change. Here is a project that introduces a state-of-the-art facility that adds value to basic raw material production; goals that politicians of most stripes have ever advocated.

Weighing in at \$2 billion, the investment will give Tasmania a pulping factory that meets the most stringent environmental requirements in the world.

It will employ thousands of people in a state that has been the laggard within Australia.

In years gone by the mere prospect of such investment would have thrilled governments and community alike.

Not now, it seems.

Predictably, Bob Brown and the Greens oppose the development. But the Greens are not alone. They have, on this issue, also gained support from a wider bunch of flaky anti-development elitists.

These are led by Geoffrey Cousins, a businessman that Canberra insisted be placed on the board of Telstra. The Telstra board, showing far superior judgement to Prime Minister John Howard, resisted his appointment.

Maybe they had previewed the novel he has written, *The Butcherbird*, which portrays all businessmen as either rogues or mugs.

Cousins has assembled a coterie of film and sports stars to campaign against the proposal. These include Bryan Brown, Rachel Ward, Rebecca Gibney, Johnny Diesel and John Newcombe.

People who have devoted their careers to sporting or acting pursuits rarely make the transition into genuine political figures. Among actors Ronald Reagan broke through. The jury is still out on Arnie. Among sportsmen, Justin Madden may consider himself such a rarity.

For the most part such public figures tend to focus on using politics to bulldoze through some favoured cause: saving seals, whales, forests, and so on.

Seldom do their "causes" involve people and never do they involve ordinary working people. The training, working and social lives of the sports and celebrity elites hardly ever arm them to analyse the real conflicts entailed in promoting their favoured cause.

And they are largely divorced from those generating the wealth that supports their own service industries.

This certainly applies to the stars that Cousins has recruited to his cause, none of whom wants to have their views subjected to public scrutiny.

But their celebrity status has the effect of paralysing government decisions. In the case of the pulp

mill they are threatening to galvanise the "doctors' wives" to toss Environment Minister Malcolm Turnbull out of his leafy Sydney electorate. Turnbull is sufficiently intimidated to have delayed the approval processes by adding yet another layer of review.

These appeals from naive celebrities to the "concerned" rich people in areas thousands of miles away would consign Tasmanians to a lower standard of living. Their political pull means that instead of governments putting out the welcome mat to new investment, we see delaying measures and an array of unnecessary reviews impeding it.

A surfeit of "democracy" in allowing everyone a say in what each of us does is a recipe for stagnation. Most people with little direct interest in a matter will not bother to think through the consequences on others and, in parading their own vanities, many may not even care about any adverse ramifications. Others will willingly recruit political muscle to obtain even minor benefits at others' expense.

There has to be a better way. This should de-politicise business decisions or at least confine the politics to those closely affected.

The Prime Minister may have hit upon a guide to a solution in suggesting that people in an affected region might be allowed a veto over whether a nuclear power station should be built. The Swiss handle nuclear waste disposal by calling for communities to offer locations for the waste and prices at which they would agree to its (safe) storage. This allows communities to benefit by payments that defray their rates and there is eager bidding for the storage facilities.

The trick is to define a community meaningfully. It has to be large enough that the effects of the development be mainly confined within it. But it must be small enough to avoid the dilution of benefits and maintenance of the selfish moral posturing that Cousins is seeking to tap in his campaign.

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