

TITLE: Goodies and baddies lost in Tasmanian logjam, PM Tony Abbott will find

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Tony Abbott recently described the people who take the chainsaws to Tasmania's native forests as "the ultimate conservationists".

Seriously. In his speech to the 2014 Forestworks Dinner, the Prime Minister claimed that because the loggers' future income depends on the availability of trees, they - and not the derided greenies - are the true custodians of our wilderness.

By that logic, the men who fire explosive-tipped harpoons into whales in the Southern Ocean would fit the Abbott definition of "real conservationists". Indeed, any self-respecting rhino poacher in Africa must surely see themselves as a far-sighted conservationist.

But the illogic of the Prime Minister's speech didn't stop there. Having defined the native forest loggers as the real conservationists, Mr Abbott went on to explain that his government's determination to remove 74,000 hectares of Tasmanian forest from the World Heritage Listing was based on the fact the areas were no longer "pristine" because, wait for it, some of them have been previously logged.

It seems that whoever wrote the first part of the speech didn't bother to talk to whoever wrote the second part, and in turn that the Prime Minister didn't read it before he gave it. Surely a Rhodes Scholar would have picked up a howler like that?

Or perhaps not. Maybe in the modern political world the debate moves so fast that facts and consistency are not as important as headlines and campaign bunting.

But even if the modern political speech is nothing more than a sound-grab looking for a photo opportunity, Mr Abbott's recent effort deserves closer scrutiny. It may well be the silliest speech given by a prime minister in recent years, but it certainly tells us a lot about his world view and the kind of decisions he is likely to make.

As with his approach to foreign policy, this speech assures us the Prime Minister sees economic debates in terms of "goodies" and "baddies" as well.

When it comes to Tasmania's forests, the "goodies" in this speech were obviously the "ultimate conservationists" - also known as the loggers. And the "baddies" in the story were the environmentalists who want to "lock up the forests".

The baddies, we are told, want to "ban men and women from enjoying" the environment, while of the goodies, Mr Abbott says, "you intelligently make the most of the good things that God has given us". By that he presumably means knocking down trees with bulldozers and dropping napalm from helicopters on what's left behind.

Having introduced the heroes and villains of his story, the Prime Minister's speech turns to the "great quest". Along with our heroes the loggers, Mr Abbott simply wants to create jobs and prosperity for the people of Tasmania. But to succeed in this mission, he must first vanquish the villains who have been holding Tasmania's jobs captive in their World Heritage-listed forests. "We want the timber industry to be a vital part of Australia's economic future," he told the loggers.

But this is where the fairytale and economic reality begin to diverge. While there is no doubt Mr Abbott and the loggers want the logging industry to grow, the problem is the overseas customers don't. The world is buying less timber as more high-rise housing is built from concrete and steel, and when the world does buy timber it prefers softwood such as pine rather than the hardwoods found in Tasmania's magnificent forests, and when the world's consumers do want hardwood they prefer it to come from plantations rather than native forests.

The car industry is leaving Australia because the world doesn't want to buy the kind of cars we like to make and because overseas consumers can get the cars they do like from cheaper places than Australia.

While Mr Abbott has said no government ever subsidised their way to prosperity, and Treasurer Joe Hockey has said he wants to end the age of entitlement, the Coalition government seems determined to prop up the Tasmanian native forest loggers while waving a cheerful farewell to the car industry.

Over the past 25 years, the loggers have received more than \$750 million to ease the pain associated with the fact the world doesn't want to buy their product any more.

When digital cameras replaced film cameras, the photo development labs didn't get a cent. But despite the fact the loggers' falling fortunes have been softened by an enormous mattress made of taxpayer cash, the Coalition is now painting the loggers as the victims.

While the brave loggers battling against the evil greenies may well make for the kind of simple story political strategists love these days, such stories do nothing to help the 19,000 unemployed people in Tasmania. Given that native forest logging employs only about 1 per cent of Tasmanians, it should come as no surprise the vast majority of Tasmania's jobless have never, and will never, work in the native forest logging industry.

While in the vacuum of modern political debate being "anti-environmentalist" means you must be "pro-jobs", the reality of the Tasmanian state economy is that 99 per cent of the population are not employed in native forest logging. Even if the Prime Minister's strategically selected sound bites combined with another truckload of taxpayer cash managed to double the size of the native forest logging industry, it would still be a tiny employer.

Indeed, even at twice its current size, native forest logging would still be dwarfed by the tourism industry, and Tasmania's unemployment rate would still be the highest in the country. Tasmania used to be the hub of whaling on the east coast of Australia. Men with saws once cut enormous trees and sold Australia the wood we once wanted. But, as with whale oil, the Australian public doesn't want to buy native forest hardwood any more. If they want hardwood, it's cheaper and better for the environment to get it from plantations. And when the world's paper mills want woodchips, they prefer the cheaper plantation product too.

There is nothing to stop the Prime Minister telling himself, or the public, fairytales about goodies and baddies and the quest to find jobs in magical forests. But there is no chance such stories will solve Tasmania's problems. Mr Abbott promised to create a million new jobs before the last election, and so far he is lagging badly. Speeches such as last week's might gee up the troops and shift the blame, but they do nothing to solve the underlying problems.

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