

TITLE: Silence on peace deal is telling

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Economists aren't known for their accurate predictions, but my record is not too bad. Not because I have a crystal ball, but because I stick to two simple rules. The first is don't make wild guesses about what "the market" is going to do based on projecting from trend, because, as those who were big on planking well know, no trend lasts forever.

My second rule is to try to predict the inevitable. As night follows day, mining busts follow booms and, usually, people do what they are contractually obliged to do. This leads me to my most recent forecast.

Two weeks ago on this page I explained the consequences of the Australian Conservation Foundation, The Wilderness Society and Environment Tasmania support for the so-called "forest peace deal" in Tasmania. The deal obliges them to cease all protests that might impede the ability of native forest loggers to sell their woodchips, take active steps to help silence other environment groups that are still opposed to native forest logging and, most bizarrely, fly to Japan to help the woodchippers persuade Japanese paper mills that native forest woodchips are "sustainable" and worth buying.

Writing on these pages in response, Lyndon Schneiders of the Wilderness Society took up Prime Minister Julia Gillard's call to fulfil his part of the deal to "do everything they can to use their abilities to silence those who haven't gone with the mainstream consensus".

In an attempt to deliver for his new logging constituents, Schneiders accused me of having piled "up a soap box so high that perhaps the lack of oxygen has affected [my] mental faculties". With no hint of irony he also called me disingenuous and intellectually lazy without once in his 800-word piece rebutting the central claim of my recent column.

The environment groups listed above have surrendered in the fight to protect Tasmania's native forests, which is, of course, their right. The fundamental problem is not that their terms of surrender require them to help sell woodchips; it is that they supported the passage of an act of the Tasmanian Parliament that imposes unprecedented sanctions on those who are still willing to protest or speak out to protect Tasmania's native forests.

The Tasmanian Forests Agreement Bill creates an extraordinary provision which threatens those who would protest to provide greater protections to Tasmania's forests with the loss of that which they love most. If "substantial active protest" or "substantial market disruption" is deemed to have occurred then trees that are currently protected in reserves will be opened to logging.

Of course, Schneiders isn't the only leader of an environment group trying to silence his critics and distract the public from the flaws in the "peace deal" they negotiated. Australian Conservation Foundation chief executive Don Henry wrote to his Canberra members, and lapsed members like yours truly, to provide some "good news" about the deal. And, like Schneiders, Henry did not even try to rebut my claim that, as a result of the legislation he supported, if protests were held protected forests could be logged.

Consistent with his undertakings to the loggers Henry also wrote a defence of his deal, in which he concedes that the legislation "has its weaknesses" and states that "dissenting voices and protests are not silenced, but there is a high premium on peace for all sides of the debate". Henry seems to think that it's OK to punish people for speaking freely.

The leaders of the environment groups that negotiated the so-called peace deal have been quick to live up to the commitments they made to the loggers to defend it. But, just as in a Sherlock Holmes mystery, the most interesting clues to what is really going on are the dogs that didn't bark.

It's not the loggers explaining why Commonwealth money is needed to maintain native forest logging to supply Japanese paper mills with woodchips.

And it's not the loggers who are defending the need to create unprecedented laws to punish protesters with the destruction of what they seek to protect.

It's the green groups mentioned above.

But perhaps the biggest dog that is yet to bark is the environment groups' silence in the face of the claims made by Forest Industry Association head Terry Edwards, who told a parliamentary committee that the environment groups had committed to help drive smaller organisations broke.

Indeed Edwards put it more dramatically, stating that "the negotiating [environment groups] have given us their commitment, which we have accepted, that they will do everything in their power, and they believe they have some strong persuasive capacity with these groups, both in terms of persuasion itself, but also in terms of persuading those groups I referred to before as the rich philanthropists, to no longer fund these organisations. If they do not fund the organisations, they eventually wither and die."

Neither Schneiders nor Henry has publicly distanced himself from Edwards' version of the promises they made.

In the coming weeks, Forestry Tasmania will begin to log the old trees on Bruny Island that the endangered swift parrots nest in. There are only 1000 breeding pairs of the swift parrot remaining and they can only nest in the hollows of old trees. But, while the so-called peace deal means that Schneiders will be silent, it does not mean that the chainsaws will be.

Disagreement and dissent go hand-in-hand with democracy. It's understandable that some of the big environment groups might run out of steam. They are adamant that they have done the best they could and there is no evidence to suggest they were capable of more. But what is incomprehensible is why any environment groups would agree to silence and bankrupt groups that have the mettle to fight on.

It's hard to predict where the actions of some of the best known environment groups in Australia will take them, or take our democracy. Who knows whether it will be unions, human rights groups or welfare campaigners that will next be faced with legislation that promises to do less of what they want if they have the audacity to ask for more.

But what is easy to predict is that while dissent can be stifled, it can never be silenced. As Neville Chamberlain showed on the eve of World War II and George Bush Jnr showed on the deck of the USS Abraham Lincoln, declaring the peace is a lot easier than delivering it. Lasting peace requires consent, not coercion.

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