

TITLE: Tasmanian forest deal: The silence of the logging lambs

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Last week, under the guise of a forestry “peace deal”, the Gillard government committed \$350 million of new industry assistance and other handouts in exchange for the Tasmanian government passing legislation that imposes an unprecedented restriction on free speech.

According to the norms of modern political debate, Tony Abbott’s opposition should have raged against wasteful spending while the graphic artists at the Murdoch press photoshopped ministerial faces onto Stalin’s body.

But there is nothing normal about the politics of subsidising native-forest logging in Tasmania. The Right were as silent about the impact of a third of a billion dollars’ worth of industry assistance on public debt as they were on a state Labor government trying to stifle free speech.

Officially, the Tasmanian Forest Agreement package includes money to “restructure” the forestry industry, compensate displaced forest workers, pay out forest contracts, subsidise regional development projects and help establish and manage new reserves. Although the details of the funding arrangements are vague at present, somewhere in the order of \$66 million to \$100 million is earmarked for forestry subsidies.

There is nothing new about Australian taxpayers subsidising native-forest logging, but there is something unique about the so-called “peace deal”. That is, it wasn’t just the loggers begging the Commonwealth for corporate welfare; this time they were joined in their quest for cash by a handful of environment groups. And that is where the story swings from the unexpected to the inexplicable.

Part of the deal between the loss-making loggers and the three relevant environment groups (Australian Conservation Foundation, the Wilderness Society and Environment Tasmania) included a so-called durability clause. The deal not only delivers a swag of taxpayers’ dollars

to the loggers but the environment movement has to promise to stop protesting about native forest logging. Specifically, the ACF, the Wilderness Society and Environment Tasmania have not only promised to abandon further logging protests, they have also promised to help silence other environmentalists.

Prime Minister Julia Gillard specifically emphasised this element of the big environment groups' terms of surrender, stating that, "The obligation is on the signatories that first came together, the parties who started this process, to do everything they can to use their abilities to silence those who haven't gone with the mainstream consensus."

"Silence". Rather than encourage the green groups that were part of this \$350 million deal to prop up a failing industry to debate those who think they are mad, the Prime Minister called on the critics to be "silenced", and she meant it. The durability clause spells out the consequences for failing to stifle criticism: if either house of the Tasmanian Parliament deems that "substantial active protest" has occurred then forest reserves will be open to logging.

The creation of this legislative poison pill is equivalent to telling a union that if it strikes for better conditions then the minimum wage will be cut, or telling human rights groups that if they protest for improved treatment of asylum seekers the annual intake of refugees will be cut.

While it is unclear if it is constitutional for a state government to attempt to silence political protest, it is quite clear why the environment groups involved want to silence protest. They know their deal doesn't bear scrutiny.

You would expect that the ACF, the Wilderness Society and Environment Tasmania received a substantial benefit for helping their old foes get \$350 million in handouts and agreeing to silence themselves and the rest of the movement.

In fact, they got virtually nothing.

The loss-making loggers have simply promised, in exchange for another round of subsidies, not to log in some areas, around half of which they were never planning to log in. But given that they could not afford to keep logging without the subsidies, the big environment groups' main achievement is the perpetuation of native-forest logging. No wonder they think silencing dissent is important.

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