



Losing our home

by Sophie Underwood and Greg Lehman

Our remote island refuge from a world gone mad is threatened today as it was in 1803, but this time it's chequebooks doing the persuading, not guns and gallows

TASMANIA has a tradition of waking up to the threat of profound and irreversible loss when it's almost too late — of only uncovering terrible truths when forced to defend things we love, things that define us. Our global reputation and our identity as an island of natural beauty has created an understanding of Tasmania as a refuge from a world that is going progressively mad.

That madness touched our shores as British ships arrived in 1803 and commenced a greedy exploitation of seals and whales that saw their populations decimated in less than a single lifetime.

The sealing industry had collapsed by 1820, whaling was unviable by 1900. Breeding populations of elephant seal, and many species of whale have not returned to our waters.

Tasmanian Aboriginal (palawa) families initially offered a cautious welcome to European visitors. But the British arrived with another madness. Their violent system of convict labour reduced human lives to a form of slavery. The same military system that controlled this was deployed on the Black Line, a campaign that today would be referred to as ethnic cleansing. A genocide was unleashed to clear the land for wool production. The palawa not killed by armed roving parties were driven from their traditional lands to be held in permanent offshore detention on Flinders Island.

The last convict ship unloaded its cargo in 1840 and exile of Aboriginal people was ended seven years later. But by then it was too late. The Aboriginal population had

been decimated. About 10,000 people from 12 nations or language groups had been reduced to less than a few hundred in a lifetime. Medical demographers are still uncovering the lasting social costs of the convict era for today's non-indigenous population.

Have we learned from our past? Too many Tasmanians seem complacent about their lives. We are regularly assured we are doing well, despite a health and housing system in crisis and a growing gap between rich and poor.

Aboriginal people remain cautious about the prospect of

reconciliation as our unique heritage continues to be sacrificed to recreational vehicles and the politics of division. Social programs that bring public good are cut back, while industries that cause lasting damage are subsidised.

The madness continues. Increasing numbers of commentators are now pointing to tourism as the latest threat to what we hold dear about our home. New Zealand has been grappling with the losses that come with over-tourism for years now, due to its new identity as a "Middle Earth" destination. Tasmania's infrastructure is

already straining with a 9 per cent visitor increase in the past year, and serious questions have been raised about the limits of such growth, including by Tourism Tasmania itself.

However, it's not only visitors who threaten our quality of life. One of the consequences of international exposure is that many who like what they see here now seek to control it.

Foreign ownership of agricultural land in Tasmania, at 24.3 per cent last year, is already the second highest in Australia. Only the Northern Territory is higher at 25.6 per

cent. Next highest is WA at only 16.7 per cent.

More disturbing is that, while close to 80 per cent of foreign-held farm land in Australia is leasehold, in Tasmania 87 per cent of such land has been sold, not leased. These figures, from the Register of Foreign Ownership of Agricultural Land, do not include land held for other purposes. So the real figures will be much worse.

The recent exposure of plans for a mega-development at Cambria Green should serve as an urgent wake-up call to those who do not want to see acceleration of



ownership and control of land and economic resources being taken up by foreign interests. Rest assured there are more covert deals in the pipeline.

The mantra of attracting investment can be a dangerous euphemism for divesting our freedom and independence. And losing more and more of the island we call our home.

The danger is that huge concentrations of wealth will enable proponents such as Cambria Green and the Fragrance Group to significantly change the social and cultural fabric of Tasmania. Our planning schemes struggle to offer

meaningful democratic power to everyday Tasmanians, and there is a palpable lack of transparency in the way such business is done.

This year, the deputy chair and non-executive directors of Tasmania's Moon Lake Investments, Australia's largest dairy farm at Woolnorth, resigned en masse. The collapse of local governance was as a result of refusal by the foreign owner to adequately fund farm operations. Moonlake was set up to export dairy products to China.

Democracy coming under threat from foreign interests should be of great concern.

Tasmanians have not yet properly reconciled with Tasmanian Aboriginal people for the damage done when British colonial interests overran palawa nations.

Ironically, Tasmanians now have an opportunity to appreciate, to a small extent, what it is like to witness the burgeoning power of foreign interests as they poise to take what they want.

This island is destined to be the latest acquisition in a new colonialism — a quest for global ownership and destructive exploitation.

Our refuge from global madness is threatened today

as it was in 1803. Except this time, instead of guns and slaves against a defiant palawa defence, it is fat chequebooks that will do the work and an acquiescent Tasmanian leadership that will allow it to happen.

But this time we have a choice. Insisting on transparency from those we elect — who are now brokering these deals — is our only defence.

We must demand a true accounting of what we stand to lose before it is too late. While we delay in reconciling our past, its errors will be repeated.

A public meeting will be held on Tuesday, August 21, at 1.10pm at Hobart Town Hall on the future of the East Coast.

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