

# New planning puts wilderness edge in danger

Greg Barns says reforms swing the pendulum too far toward developers  
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TASMANIA'S key selling point is its natural beauty.

Reserves, national parks and the World Heritage Area are a competitive advantage in a global economy. So one wonders why the Hodgman Government is placing that advantage in jeopardy by vesting in bureaucrats' power to approve tourism, retail and recreational developments in these sensitive places.

Before your ire rises at the thought of another "developer versus greens" battle, consider this proposition. The area of bureaucratic control and power in planning and land use decision-making has been riddled with corruption, both fiscal and political, around this nation for years. It is inevitable when bureaucrats are vested with discretion to approve commercial investment in sensitive areas, pressure from those who profit from such development will be intense.

The State Government has made much of its desire for greater economic return from Tasmania's wilderness. That is not inherently bad, but we need to ensure development processes are robust so we do not allow development to make such a footprint the competitive edge we have is weakened.

The planning reforms of Peter Gutwein, who doubles as Planning Minister and Treasurer, are laudable in their object of reducing complex planning regimes that make lawyers, planners and a few others wealthy at the expense of creativity and spontaneity. But in the area of development in national parks and reserves the reforms are dangerous.

Under the draft State Planning Provisions, if bureaucrats in the Parks and Wildlife Service sign off on a tourism, recreation or retail use by terming it a "permitted activity" in a national park, reserve or World Heritage Area, that is all a developer or proponent requires to commence. The guidelines are opaque and internal.

The capacity of third parties such as park users or experts to object to, or have meaningful discussion about, approval are severely limited.

Tasmania's liberal standing regime allows anyone to object. This is far too broad, but this new scheme is the other extreme.

It is inherently dangerous to allow bureaucrats to play god. First, bureaucrats become captured by rent-seeking developers and political

pressure. Unfortunately, the state service in Tasmania is no different from bureaucracies around Australia. The days of saying a firm "no" to ministers and governments have been replaced by a willingness to behave politically. If public servants stand up to ministers they are likely to be sidelined by ambitious agency bosses doing the minister's bidding.

Cameron Murray and Paul Fritjers, of the University of Queensland economics faculty, examine the impact where government agencies capture power to alter land use. In the *May Journal of Urban Economics*, they observe that where decisions are exclusively in the bureaucratic process, there is "political rent-seeking as a process of entrenchment of insiders who are well-informed and well-connected to the bureaucratic procedures, using the system to their mutual advantage at the expense of outsiders".

They describe a revolving door between developers and politicians "where benefiting property owners and the key political or bureaucratic decision-makers are the same people, exchanging positions over time".

It is not suggested the Parks and Wildlife Service is anything other than a typically under-resourced but dedicated agency. The point is the evidence suggests poor practices, inefficiency and corruption have a habit of emerging where decision-making is internalised.

The sorts of developments and uses of wilderness areas that the bureaucracy will be able to sign off on include major footprints in sensitive environmental areas. If the best economic and social outcomes are to be achieved, it is critical there is a robust and independent process.

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