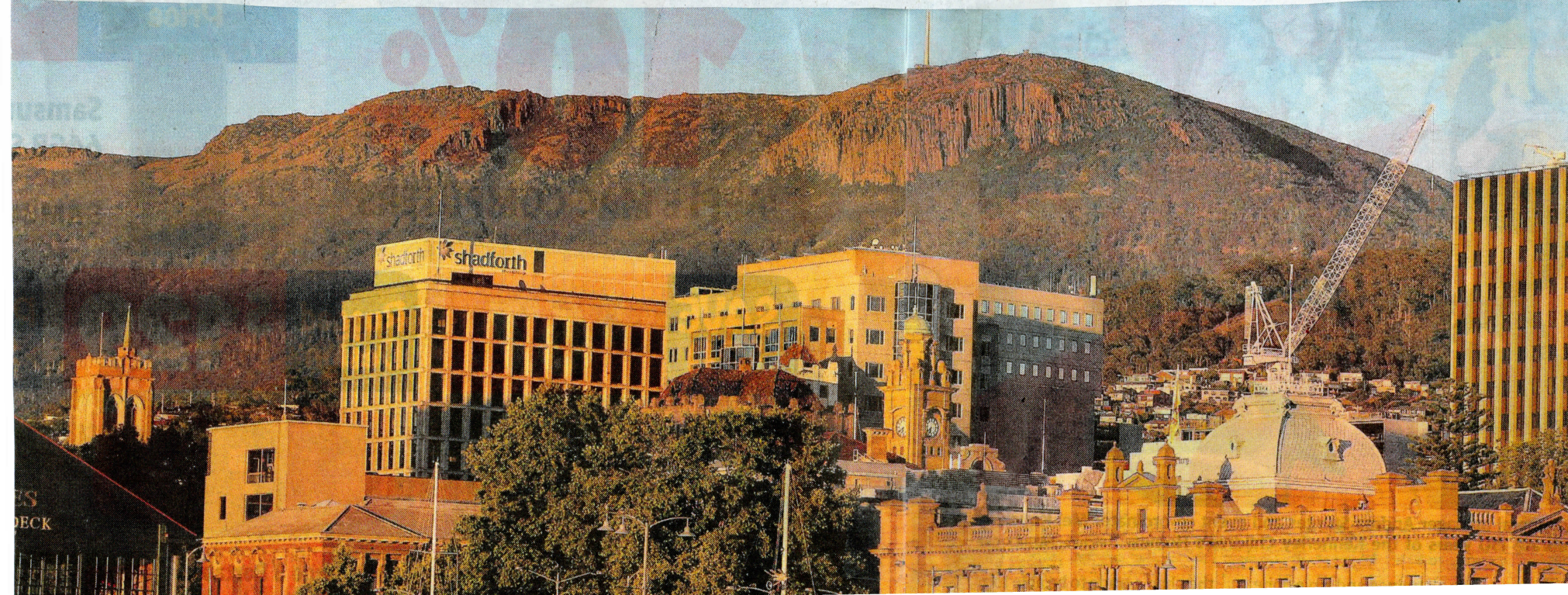




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Paupers in Tassie's vanishing paradise



Politicians who write off concerns raised by Tasmanians about their way of life tread a dangerous path

WHEN he celebrated his crushing 2002 election victory, Labor premier Jim Bacon boldly proclaimed that it meant that "Tasmania can be the treasure island of the 21st century and Tasmanians can avoid the spectre of being paupers in paradise."

Nearly 20 years later, unfortunately, history has not lived up to Bacon's bold claims.

Despite the economic resurgence of the last few years, the cold, hard statistics show that, relative to the rest of Australia, Tasmanians are still paupers. Wage growth, while better than mainland Australia, continues to be below the rate of inflation, in fact our average wage remains more than 10 per cent below then national average;

sure education results have improved but still around 50 per cent of Tasmanians are functionally illiterate; and our health services continue to lag.

You might think that with the current unprecedented period of economic growth Bacon's bold claim is finally on the way to being realised.

Our growth rate per capita is the fastest in the nation, our tourism industry is continuing to grow strongly, exports are skyrocketing, house prices have not just caught up to the mainland but are outpacing them, and our population growth rate is the strongest in nearly a decade.

It might not quite be the "golden age" Treasurer Peter Gutwein suggested in his budget speech; but by any historical measure the Tasmanian economy is as strong as it's ever been.

Yet, through the act of trying to lift ourselves out of the "pauper" class and finally casting off the Mendicant State tag, many Tasmanians feel that we are destroying the very paradise we live in.

No longer just paupers in paradise as Jim Bacon feared; now, paupers in a disappearing paradise.

A paradise with a laid-back lifestyle where the most famous person to come from Tasmania was David Boon, who apart from his cricket epitomised what it meant to be Tasmanian with his legendary downing of 52

beers on the Sydney-London flight.

A paradise where you could go to your shack at the beach or up in the highlands, put the tinnie out at the weekend and easily catch yourself a feed of good-sized flatties. And a paradise where nature was on your doorstep, you had it all to yourself, and depending on your disposition it could be either bushwalked or logged.

Once confined to Green voters and NIMBYs, a growing group of mainstream Tasmanians are concerned that this Tasmanian Way of Life is being eroded, and they are seeing little in return.

This is a phenomenon that first began to emerge in 2012 with the supertrawler Margiris, and strengthened in 2016 when the Tasmanian economy really started to roll with the Oakhampton Bay salmon farm proposal – both of which mobilised an unlikely coalition

of environmentalists, recreational fishers, yachties and shack owners.

More recently we've seen concern over the Cambria Green project, a renewed push to stop the Mt Wellington cable car, and opposition to the idea of tall buildings not just in

Hobart, but also in Launceston.

Like it or not, more and more Tasmanians are concerned about our strong population growth and its impact on traffic congestion and service delivery; the threat of "over-tourism"; foreign investment; the impact



GROWING PAINS: Tasmanians love their way of life including shack life and fishing but are worried about projects like the Cambria Green proposal on the East Coast.

of free trade and globalisation on the ability to source our own quality products here; and the fact that the very face of our state is changing with increased numbers of international migrants and students.

For politicians focused on creating more jobs and better

services, it's tempting to dismiss people with concerns about these issues as anti-development, extreme, unrepresentative, or even as racists. And in some cases, they are.

But one of the main rules of politics is, when voters speak, listen. This doesn't mean that

you blithely act on their demands, but dismissing voter concerns out of hand is likely to have the effect of driving them to the extremes on the Left and Right, where they feel they are being heard.

This is what brought us Trump in the US, nearly Cor-

byn in the UK, and locally, has manifested itself in strong votes for people like Craig Garland in the Braddon by-election and One Nation in the 2016 federal election before that.

Economic growth and protecting our way of life is not incompatible – but it requires

nuanced policy that addresses community concerns while retaining a clear open for business attitude.

The Hodgman Government's Sustainable Industry Growth Plan with its "no grow" zones on Tasmania's East Coast was an example of

such nuanced policy.

Supporting sensible soft-cap height limits in Hobart (although closer to the 75m recommended by Leigh Woolley than the extreme 45m favoured by some on the council) is an idea worth considering in this context.

And while I'm not advocating for it here, recent developments in Western Australia that have increased the rock lobster quota, subject to a minimum amount being avail-

able locally, is another example of such nuanced policy.

I've written before about the importance of protecting the Tasmanian Way of Life as an increasingly salient issue to voters that can no longer be ignored.

The challenge for government is not just to translate our current period of economic growth into real benefits for everyday Tasmanians, but also to develop and implement policies that protect our island paradise and unique way of life.