

History of the Franklin River

Campaign 1976-83

The genesis of the Franklin Campaign was the campaign to save Lake Pedder (1966-1973), a campaign which was lost with the inundation of Lake Pedder in 1973. This dispute was largely over wilderness preservation versus hydro industrialisation. The main proponent of the dam was the HEC, Tasmania's electricity, planning and dam building authority, which had enormous political power and a budget larger than the state government.



The HEC was opposed by a number of conservation groups, and after the Lake Pedder debate, the Tasmanian Wilderness Society was formed in 1976, at a meeting at the home of Bob Brown in Liffey, Northern Tasmania.

Early in 1976, Bob and a friend, Paul Smith, rafted the Franklin River in rubber rafts - the first time it had ever been done using this particular method. This alerted Bob to the importance and beauty of this area.

In subsequent years, Bob dropped his practice as a GP and became the full time voluntary director of the Wilderness Society as plans to dam the Franklin River firmed up. As a result of a campaign involving celebrities, colour publications, slide shows, public meetings, and guide-books, pressure mounted on the state government to protect the Franklin River. In June 1980, the Labor government of Doug Lowe decided to place the Franklin River into a Wild Rivers National Park. This compromise proposal involved building another dam, on the Gordon River, upstream from the junction of the Franklin. This was the Gordon above Olga Scheme.

This scheme would still have had a massively destructive effect on the South West wilderness and would have flooded features like the Gordon Splits. This proposal was opposed by conservationists as well as established interests, for example unions, business and the HEC, who still wanted to flood the Franklin. As a result, Tasmania's Legislative Council amended the government's dam legislation by inserting the words 'Gordon below Franklin' in place of 'Gordon above Olga'. This led to a deadlock between the houses of parliament and precipitated a constitutional crisis.



Meanwhile, in early 1981, Aboriginal caves were discovered on the lower Franklin. They contained the remains of campfires, stone tools and animal bones which dated back to 24,000 - 8,000 years BP (before present). This added to the suite of values in the area threatened by flooding. Other values included rare and endangered species, ancient rain forests, and Huon Pine. Similar caves were subsequently discovered which would have been flooded by the Gordon above Olga scheme.

In late 1981, the state government attempted to resolve the constitutional deadlock by holding a referendum. The Tasmanian Wilderness Society ran a strong NO DAMS campaign, but the government refused to include this option on the ballot paper, which gave voters a choice simply between one scheme or the other. The Tasmanian Wilderness Society responded by urging voters to cast an informal vote by writing NO DAMS on their ballot paper. The result of the referendum was that the government's Gordon above Olga scheme received 9% of the vote, with the majority of voters split between the NO DAMS and the dam on the Franklin. The informal vote was 45%, 33% of informal voters had written NO DAMS, while 46% had voted for the Franklin option.

Meanwhile the crisis had resulted in the pro-dam Labor politician Harry Holgate ousting Doug Lowe as premier. Mr Lowe and another Member of the House of Assembly, Mary Willey, resigned from the ALP and took seats on the cross benches as independents. The government lost its majority in the House of Assembly. Australian Democrat MHA Norm Sanders moved a motion of no confidence in March 1982, and an election was called for May 15.

Despite a vigorous campaign by the Tasmanian Wilderness Society in favour of NO DAMS candidate Dr Bob Brown, the strongly pro-dam Liberal Party of Robin Gray won 19 of the 35 seats and proceeded to dam the Franklin. Legislation to dam the Franklin passed parliament in 1982 and the bulldozers started rolling.



Meanwhile, the NO DAMS campaign had developed a momentum on the mainland. In August and September 1982, Dr Bob Brown went on a national tour, showing films of the Franklin and raising awareness and support. The aim of the conservation movement was to get federal intervention by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser to stop the dam. The constitutional mechanism for achieving this was the federal government's power over foreign affairs and the fact that the South West had been nominated for World Heritage by the federal government in 1981. Malcolm Fraser refused to intervene, saying it was a state issue. Many scientists, constitutional experts and newspaper editors disagreed and called on Mr Fraser to stop the dam. There were major rallies in Melbourne and Sydney.

Meanwhile plans for peaceful direct action were advanced in November 1982. Dr Bob Brown, in front of a 14,000 strong rally in Melbourne announced that the Franklin Blockade would commence on December 14, 1982, the same day that the Australian Democrats' World Heritage Protection Bill was passed in the Senate. On December 14, fifty three people were arrested. The blockade continued until March 1983, during which time 1,400 people were arrested and many jailed. These included celebrities like Professor David Bellamy, some members of federal and state parliament, Claudio Alcorso, a millionaire entrepreneur from Hobart, and Dr Bob Brown himself. Dr Brown spent nearly three weeks in gaol, during which time Dr Norm Sanders, the Democrat MHA resigned his seat in protest at the dam and the treatment of protesters.

On a count back, his seat went to Bob Brown. Bob went from Prison to Parliament in less than 24 hours.



Meanwhile, back in July/August 1982, the Federal ALP had adopted a policy of saving the Franklin. This policy was strongly

supported by MHR Bob Hawke, but much less so by the then leader of the opposition, Bill Hayden. In early February 1983, Prime Minister Fraser called a federal election, and on the same day, Bob Hawke replaced Bill Hayden as leader of the ALP. The ALP ran strongly in the subsequent election campaign, on a policy of saving the Franklin. The Tasmanian Wilderness Society swung into action, as by then it had about 70 branches Australia wide, many in marginal electorates. The Society ran a strong 'vote for the Franklin' Campaign, involving full colour ads in the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age, and letterboxing hundreds of thousands of leaflets urging a vote for the ALP in the House of Representatives and the Democrats in the Senate. Labor's Bob Hawke easily won the election. Subsequent analysis showed that the TWS campaign had delivered crucial votes in marginal electorates to Labor. After accepting victory, PM Elect Hawke announced that the dam would not proceed.

Premier Gray, however, defied the federal government and continued to work on the dam. At that stage the road being built had not yet reached the dam site, so damage to the South West was still limited. In March and April, the Federal Government brought in both regulations and legislation to stop the dam. These were challenged in the High Court by a recalcitrant Premier Gray. He was joined by Queensland Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen, while the Federal Government was supported by the states of Victoria and NSW. The High Court heard the case in 1983 and announced its decision on July 1. It found by a majority of four votes to three that the Commonwealth Government had the power to stop the dam. Premier Gray accepted the decision, halted the dam works and the Franklin was saved.

Later that year a \$270 million 'compensation' package for Tasmania was agreed between PM Hawke and Premier Gray. The case was a landmark in Australian environmental and constitutional history. It established the Commonwealth Government's power to protect the national environment on issues of international importance. The same power was subsequently used to protect the Daintree rainforests and Tasmania's Lemnathyme and parts of the southern forests.

In 1984, the Tasmanian Wilderness Society became The Wilderness Society and took on national wilderness conservation issues, including Kakadu and the Daintree rainforests. Bob Brown resigned as director in 1984, and went on to form the Tasmanian Greens in the Tasmanian State Parliament. Later he formed the Australian Greens.