



Tasmania's Hydro-Electric Commission and the Franklin Dam (B)

The December 1981 referendum on the Tasmanian Hydro Electric Commission's (HEC) proposal to build a dam on the Franklin river in pristine wilderness in the state's south-west sparked a heated public debate which opened up deep divides in the community. The inconclusive result of the vote did little to quieten the controversy surrounding the issue. Within six months the Labor Government had lost power in a landslide and the new Liberal Government, headed by Robin Gray, gave permission for the construction of the dam to commence. As the HEC started work on the dam, environmentalists took their campaign national, urging the Commonwealth government to intervene. A protest blockade of the construction site was attempted and many hundreds of environmentalists were arrested, attracting intense media coverage. The Bob Hawke-led Australian Labor Party (ALP) opposition campaigned heavily on a commitment to stop the Franklin dam going ahead during the Federal election of 1983. Hawke's victory and subsequent intervention to halt the dam led to a High Court challenge by the Tasmanian Government. The challenge failed and the dam was never built.

Referendum results in

The result of the referendum on the Franklin Dam was released before Christmas 1981 but the split result meant there was no resolution to the controversy. 47 percent were in favour of the "Gordon-below-Franklin" dam, 8 percent were in favour of the smaller "Gordon-above-Olga" dam and 45 percent voted informally, rejecting both options. Harry Holgate had replaced his Labor party colleague Doug Lowe as

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Premier in a leadership challenge only weeks before. He strongly supported the HEC's "Gordon-below-Franklin" dam and decided that the referendum outcome was sufficient endorsement to proceed with this option. On 29 January Holgate announced that the ALP would back the construction of the Franklin Dam and began actively spruiking the strengths of the project.

Outside of Tasmania, Holgate faced strong opposition to his new policy. Influential members of the Federal Labor Party were critical of the decision, believing that an anti-dam policy would attract many new votes to Labor which was then in opposition. The incumbent Liberal-National party coalition Government led by Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser also announced that it had nominated the south-west of Tasmania, including the Franklin River, for listing on the world heritage register.

Within Tasmania Holgate was also on very shaky ground. Ex-Premier Doug Lowe and a pro-conservation MP Mary Willey had declared themselves Independents, which meant the Government did not have the votes to defeat a "no confidence" motion in parliament and could therefore be forced to the polls early. The Liberal Opposition, led by Robin Gray, believed the controversy over the Franklin had made the Government vulnerable, and expected to win an election.

When Parliament resumed sitting after the summer break on 26 March, the Opposition moved a "no confidence" motion against the Government citing its mishandling of the Franklin Dam issue. Holgate didn't have the numbers to defeat it and was forced to call an election for May 15. There would be a seven-week campaign. Both Holgate and Gray were supporters of the Franklin Dam. Bob Brown and several other conservationists chose to run for seats in the hope that they would hold the balance of power and could block the project.

Election of Liberal Government

Robin Gray and the Liberal Party won the election of 1982 in a landslide. The new government's first act in parliament was to pass the legislation approving the "Gordon-below-Franklin" hydro scheme. Two and half years since the HEC had first proposed the project, it was now law. HEC Commissioner Russell Ashton announced that construction work on the massive project would commence in July.

With their campaign against the dam in Tasmania now soundly defeated, the conservationists chose to switch their attention to the Federal arena. They hoped to persuade the Federal Government to intervene to stop construction of the dam.

In June Prime Minister Fraser met with conservationist leader Bob Brown and made it clear he would not intervene in the issue. A legal challenge was launched in the High Court by the Wilderness Society, claiming breaches of the Australian Heritage Act, but this was dismissed.

The Federal Opposition was the final avenue to pursue for the conservationists. An election was expected in 1983 and the conservationists began lobbying the federal ALP members to include a ban on hydro-electric schemes on the Franklin in its party platform. The proposal came to a vote at the ALP National Conference in July and, in the face of strong opposition from the Tasmanian ALP representatives, it won

support. The future of the Franklin Dam would now be a major campaign issue at the next election.

Blockade and arrests

With the Federal ALP now on their side, conservationists embarked on a strategy they hoped would draw national attention to the works under way on the Gordon-below-Franklin dam. The HEC was ahead of schedule on construction of the road from Warner's Landing to the dam site. In December teams of conservationists began occupying key sites along the lower Gordon to obstruct the work. Journalists from print and electronic media were brought in by boat to witness the start of the blockade. Police were called in, and arrested 53 people on 14 December. The story was front-page news across the nation. With another 48 conservationists, Bob Brown was arrested on 16 December and jailed for three weeks. Over 1300 arrests occurred at the blockade in December and January.

In Paris the world heritage committee accepted the Australian nomination of the Tasmanian South-West. It was officially listed on the world heritage register alongside 30 other natural areas from across the globe including the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone National Park and the Serengeti National Park in Tanzania.

The Franklin dominates a Federal election campaign

Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser called an election on 3 February 1983. ALP leader Bob Hawke ran hard on his policy to save the Franklin river and got considerable support from the conservation movement which campaigned heavily in marginal seats. Bob Brown's arrest at the blockade had elevated him to national celebrity status and he was constantly interviewed by journalists during the election.

Hawke declared victory on election night on 5 March and in the first sentences of his acceptance speech he confirmed he would stop the construction of the Franklin Dam. In the following days the leader of the National party and former Deputy Prime Minister Doug Anthony said: "There is no doubt that the dam was the issue that lost the government the election."

High Court showdown

On 31 March Prime Minister Hawke passed regulations under the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act to prevent further construction of the Franklin dam. A day later Tasmanian Premier Gray announced that he planned to ignore the regulations, construction would continue and a legal challenge against the Hawke Government's actions would be launched in the High Court.

On 1 July the High Court ruled against the Tasmanian government and upheld the Commonwealth's authority to halt the construction of the Franklin dam.

In the negotiations which followed the High Court decision, Tasmania secured compensation grants from the Commonwealth for the construction of two smaller dams, known as the King and Anthony River schemes, totalling in excess of \$500 million.

In the fallout from the Franklin dam controversy, the Tasmanian Government undertook a major review of the HEC. Premier Robin Gray eventually made changes to the status of the organisation, bringing it firmly under Ministerial control for the first time in its history.