



The Hon. Tony Burke MP

T R A N S C R I P T

Interview on ABC 774 with Jon Faine,

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JON FAINE: The Federal Government yesterday announced that they would approve a more than two-billion dollar proposal for a pulp mill in Tasmania. Gunns Ltd have finally got approval, but whether or not they get financing is another thing. This has been, perhaps, the longest running environmental dispute in Australia.

Tony Burke is the Minister for the Environment, who issued the approval yesterday. Mr Burke, good morning.

TONY BURKE: Good morning.

JON FAINE: Why?

TONY BURKE: It passed the tests of environment law, and that's my job as Environment Minister, to reference the application against the Act. We had a very unusual situation this time where we had the company actually asking me to impose tougher conditions than what my department was actually ultimately recommending to me.

JON FAINE: Window dressing, you could say, on their track record.

TONY BURKE: Well, I've got to say, I can understand why a whole lot of people in the community given the history of these issues had a view that it might be one thing that Gunns are saying they'll only use plantation timber, but how do we know? Well, now there's no doubt. It's a condition of the approval that your native forests in Tasmania, not one of those trees goes through this pulp mill.

JON FAINE: Until they don't have plantation timber and then they'll turn around and say, can we have a variation; there's hundreds of jobs at risk, billions of dollars of export, the economy of this part of Tasmania; and then they'll get a variation on their permit.

TONY BURKE: You're nearly right on that, Jon. Had I not rejected my departmental advice on one issue, what you've just described could happen.

I've added a condition 49, which is a change from the standard variation clause, and it says yes, you can come back for a variation, but only if it involves an equivalent or better environmental outcome.

JON FAINE: Oh, they'll find a way of doing it. There's always an expert who'll swear that something or other is happening that's good for the environment, Minister.

TONY BURKE: I think you'd have a hard time saying that it was better for the environment to knock down old growth than plantation.

JON FAINE: What about the emissions? There's massive outflows through the Tamar River. Even though you're reducing the amount of chlorine, it's still hardly good to have all that effluent going out into what, until now, have been pristine waters.

TONY BURKE: I think your reflection on those as pristine waters certainly doesn't match the science that was shown to me.

JON FAINE: Well, have you been to have a look?

TONY BURKE: I beg your pardon?

JON FAINE: Have you been to have a look?

TONY BURKE: Have I been to the Bass Strait? Yes, I have been to the Bass Strait.

JON FAINE: No, the river outflow.

TONY BURKE: Well, the outflows go into the pipe - it's quite a long pipe - it goes out into the Bass Strait, where the outflows occur. But the science that has come back on what was originally recommended to me said that under those rules the danger and environmental damage would be - and it was described by my officials as close to negligible. Where we've ended up with is an ever better standard than that...

JON FAINE: A reduction of chlorine, but it's still billions, mega litres a day of chlorine infected effluent coming out. Yes, it's not onshore, it's offshore; but it's still chemical - pipe spilling chemical effluent right out into the water of Bass Strait.

TONY BURKE: That's why the question has to be asked: are the concentrations enough? Is the full load of what goes out enough to cause environmental damage? And the answers that I had, under the original proposal, was that what was being recommended to me last week, that it was regarded as negligible. Under the change that happened over the last week, at the request of the company to demand what's called elemental chlorine free light technology, it's an even better outcome again.

JON FAINE: This has been, as I said in the introduction, the longest running environmental battle still underway in Australia. The Greens, the local activists and others have said this is not the end of it as far as they're concerned. So why are you confident that what you've approved is actually ever going to be built?

TONY BURKE: Well the principal objection that I've been hearing over the last twenty-four hours from community groups, the outstanding issue that they believe is not resolved, is the issue of community engagement or social licence.

That's not one of the issues that forms part of an environmental approval, and if that's the most important final hurdle, that's something that the company's going to have to directly engage in with the community.

JON FAINE: The company now have to go off and try and get financing. That's been one of their major hurdles. Just because you've approved it doesn't mean it will get financed. What do you do if the people who want to finance it say they can't finance it in its current form, and then they ask, and the company comes back to you to ask, for further variations or compromise on some of the environmental restrictions?

TONY BURKE: Then they'd better find variations that get an even better environmental outcome, because if it's a step backwards I've already ruled it out.

JON FAINE: Do you think it will get financed?

TONY BURKE: As environment minister I don't know about that, nor is that my job. My job is to make sure that these matters of national and environmental significance are properly protected. I take that job seriously, but I don't carry a brief trying to get individual projects financed. That's nothing to do with my job at all.

JON FAINE: No, but you carry a brief, as a Labor Party politician, to try and protect votes through jobs in Tasmania. Or have you forgotten about Mark Latham's perilous journey and the way that environmental votes and jobs there cost the Labor Party so dearly in that election campaign?

TONY BURKE: When it comes to an environmental approval, if I'm doing that, I consider issues other than the ones I'm meant to consider under the Act, I'd be acting illegally. I don't go there. I take these responsibilities on environmental approvals really seriously. We've ended up with an outcome better than what would have been demanded by the Act.

JON FAINE: Are you asking me, seriously asking me, to believe that you're making a decision where politics plays no part?

TONY BURKE: Yes.

JON FAINE: I don't. And I don't think anyone listening to you does either, Minister. The political fallout and the implications of these decisions are keenly measured by you, and we all know that.

TONY BURKE: Jon, you can't argue that I'm acting illegally.

JON FAINE: No.

TONY BURKE: You can make that - because what you've just described is for me to take into account issues which it would be unlawful for me to take into account.

I'm telling you, and I'm telling your listeners, I'm the environment minister, I operate under the law. We have ended up with a better outcome than what the law demanded.

Whether it ends up getting finance, how it plays in the community; all of that's still to flow. My responsibility is matters of national environmental significance, and I take that seriously.

JON FAINE: Geoffrey Cousins, the businessman who's an environmental campaigner, with investments, it might be said, in ecotourism in Tasmania, says that Gunns need not just a government licence, but a social licence, and because of community resistance they'll never get that.

TONY BURKE: He's described what I think has been the principal objection that people have been making over the last twenty-four hours. There have been some objections to the approval that I've given, but most of the objections have been whether or not there's been sufficient community engagement. That's not my responsibility, but there's no doubt that's a responsibility for the company, and we'll now see how that plays out.

JON FAINE: I'm grateful to you for your time this morning. I'm sure it's not the last time you'll be asked questions about it.

TONY BURKE: I'd agree with that.

JON FAINE: Eh?

TONY BURKE: I agree with you on that.

JON FAINE: Yes. And just finally, since I have you, the Prime Minister, is she being undermined by Kevin Rudd calling for no-fly zones in Libya?

TONY BURKE: No. The Prime Minister's made clear that there's a suite of measures. That's one of the ones to be talking to the UN about.

JON FAINE: But Kevin Rudd's not consulting her. They're not singing from the same song sheet.

TONY BURKE: I think now you're talking about an unsourced article. I've seen what the Prime Minister's said publicly, and agree with every word of it.

JON FAINE: I'm grateful to you for your time on both issues, and thank you. Tony Burke, Minister for the Environment in the Gillard Government.

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