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The smoking gun that taints our industry - James Cryer's commentary

Tuesday, 16 March 2010

By Print21

At a time when printing is under fire for being an environmental enemy, the industry must work out what to do about Gunns. Regular *Print21* commentator, James Cryer, shares his thoughts.

Our industry's new-found embrace of environmentalism ("accidental environmentalists" in Phil Lawrence's terms) is to be commended. As converters, we may be very proud of our dramatic reduction in pressroom chemicals, our energy-efficient presses, our choice of materials from certified sustainable sources, and our minimal waste footprint.

But the general public are not given the benefit of a plant visit through a modern printing factory (maybe they should?). They tend to see, and hear, about the printing industry through the tainted prism of news reports such as Gunns' proposal to build one of the world's largest pulp-mills on Tasmania's Bell Bay, and the methods they are accused of using to get their way.

It doesn't matter that Gunn's may align themselves more with the "forest products" industry than printing. And it doesn't matter that we can push the problem off the map, literally, as the pulp from Tasmanian woodchips will probably be mostly exported to Japan or China.

The last time I looked, we still make paper by chopping down trees – or at least that's what the public thinks! And if I may selectively quote from an article which appeared in last weekend's *Good Weekend* ["Peter and the Mill" by Amanda Hooton, *Good Weekend*, 13 March, 2010] – this mill, if it goes ahead, will "consume up to four million tonnes of timber and at least 26 billion litres of fresh water a year, and release 64 billion litres of effluent into the ocean every day".

"The mill is the brainchild of Gunns, the biggest company in Tasmania [whose] core business is felling and processing Tasmanian forests. It cuts old-growth forest [at the rate of] about 2,000 hectares a year."

"Logging, in Tasmania (the article quotes Peter Cundall, the celebrity-gardener turned enviro-warrior) "means clear-felling [which means] they crush everything. They take the parts they want ... with old-growth trees, it's probably less than 10% ... Everything else in the forest ... is then heaped together with bulldozers, and they fire-bomb it, from helicopters, and burn it. These fires are lit with a form of jellied petroleum, also known as napalm."

He goes on to say: "But it gets worse ... because they set out to poison the animals [to stop them feeding on the regrowth seedlings]".

But the article contends, not only are these serious environmental objections still unresolved, but that the whole parliamentary approval process has been corrupt.

It says "in March 2007 the impartial body assessing it ... indicated that it [Gunns] was 'critically non-compliant' with planning requirements ... Some days later ... Tasmanian Premier Paul Lennon announced emergency legislation to bypass the [approval authority] and fast-track assessment of the proposal. The Pulp Mill Assessment Act 2007, under which State Parliament approved the mill, is, in the opinion of [a



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Tasmanian] constitutional law expert, 'a mess'. The guidelines were substantially weakened and public hearings were ditched".

In the meantime, Gunns have fallen in a hole, with their net profits having dropped to almost zero in the last half, but are determined to go ahead, none the less. Having bullied their way thus far it may be difficult to drop the idea now.

But what collateral damage is Gunns doing to us? Here we are trying to clean up our act, present a better, cleaner, more socially responsible face to the public at large – that printing is NOT a dirty, irresponsible industry which tramples over fragile old-growth forests – or ignores democratic process.

I can hear young Johnnie being asked to do a project on the printing industry: oh, you mean that mob that chop down beautiful old eucalypts and flog them off to make paper and chipboard furniture?

Or the spin-doctors employed by all the banks to promote electronic shareholder reports instead of printed ones: we rest our case – the printing industry is dirty, wasteful and environmentally irresponsible. Look what Gunns are doing!

We claim to be part of the "forestry stewardship" process, part of the seamless supply-chain from sapling to paper to printed product. Which is all fine. And then along come Gunns, who appear to be the elephant in the room who can bring all our best endeavours unstuck. Perception overrides reality in the public's mind and the Gunns/Bell Bay issue is currently top-of-mind.

As an industry we aspire to speak with one voice. To the extent that Gunns are perceived to be – by association – rightly or wrongly, as part of the broader printing industry, what is our united voice on this one? Gunns claims to be a "leader in sustainable forest and environmental management" – but a rising chorus of dissent vehemently disagrees.

Do we condemn them? Dissociate ourselves in some way? Or just say nothing? This issue would be an excellent test as to whether we really can speak with one voice on an important issue. Our industry's finger is on the trigger: should we fire the gun or not?

The industry can't afford to lose talent such as Joan Grace
[.http://ft.co/DuGDpXtwbC](http://ft.co/DuGDpXtwbC)

Colin Longbottom heads towards the exit Good man Colin, hope your saddlebags are well loaded for the sunset ride.<http://ft.co/d5oamor2X>

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