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Turning Point in Van Diemen's Land: Bob Brown, Bob Hawke and the Franklin River Dam Crisis of 1983

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Turning Point in Van Diemen's Land
Bob Brown, Bob Hawke and the Franklin River Dam Crisis of 1983

There is often a historical event that can be pointed to as the beginning of a new era and the origin of future destinies for the major players and entities involved. The 1983 Franklin River dam crisis in southwest Tasmania is such an event. Bob Brown and Bob Hawke were two individuals whose respective political careers took dramatic turns toward acquiring and representing fame and power in Australian politics for the rest of the 20th century and beyond. The Franklin River itself became an enduring and dynamic symbol of change affecting Australia's constitutional interpretation and practice, as well as inspiring environmentalists nationwide who sought ecological policies that protected the most treasured, and revered gifts of nature, from man's endless lust towards private and public development and exploitation.

Together, Brown, Hawke, and the Franklin River altered the constitutional, environmental, political and social landscapes, the self-perceptions that Australians had of themselves, and the land they inhabited. For all three subjects, the dam crisis represented and triggered a turning point in their respective existences. Amanda Lohrey wrote, quite aptly, “The Franklin River blockade of 1982-1983 is one of the defining moments in Australian political history.”

Franklin River Dam Crisis: A Turning Point in Australian Environmental History
The environmental showdown, in 1983, over the proposed damming of the Franklin River was not an accident. It was a collision of historical forces that were divinely destined to occur on this often ignored island located off the southeastern coast of the Australian...
mainland. The roots of this environmental, political, and social confrontation were deeply embedded in the flooding of Lake Pedder in 1972. Kevin Kiernan, a professor in the Environmental Studies Program at the University of Tasmania (UTAS), wrote about the pain associated with this event that altered his existence in Tasmania, "(Lake) Pedder was the cradle of my adult life . . . My own soul seems haunted by an unwanted legacy of cynicism and distrust."2

This stunning alpine lake was considered, in 1972, by most ecological observers as an aquatic jewel of unspoken beauty. Many individuals, like Professors Keirnan and his fellow university colleague, Richard (Dick) Jones, the founder of the Environmental Studies Program at UTAS, admitted afterwards their respective recoveries from the painful ordeal of attempting to prevent Lake Pedder's drowning was, indeed, profound. Professor Jones believed the political environment in Tasmania to be corrupt and amoral. In an interview with Roger Green, Jones stated that the Franklin River campaign and the (Lake) Pedder campaign were "just one continuum of experience and activity."3 Pete Hay, a professor within, and former Director of, the Environmental Studies program at UTAS, commented, about his former colleague (Jones died tragically in 1986 after falling from the roof of his home), that Professor Jones was an intense and serious-minded individual who did not care much for small talk.4

Dr. Jones held an especially intense disdain for the Tasmanian and Australian political systems that he believed to be broken and unresponsive to the wishes of the people at-large. He believed this dysfunctional political reality became evermore evident and undeniable to the common citizen who witnessed both of the environmental campaigns mentioned above. Jones was unspiring in his seething critique of the state and federal government, respectively:

I believe there is a fundamental breakdown in the operation of politics in Australian society and that Lake Pedder detected that in the early stages. The responsibility of politicians and the public has continued to break down—public decision-making and involvement in politics has only gone for worse—and that's a continuum.5

The Lake Pedder dam crisis became an enormous amount of environmentalists and moral reform towards the Hydro-Electric Commission (HEC) and the state government. Therefore, the Franklin River dam crisis became a moral equivalent of Gallipoli, that gave Australians a new sense of worth and courage as a fighting force comparable to the (Turkey) Ottoman s contribution to the British Empire. It was true that this environmental struggle became its "green" combatants, a fight that had to be won. The operation permeated the campaign with even imprisonment, if required, for an unflinching commitment to the destruction of an unwanted dam upon the Franklin region of Tasmania.

The man who emerged and nominated resolve to confront the Franklin Dam was a doctor, from (northeast) Tasmania named Bob Brown. After the Franklin River in 1976, "the best of the (Northeast) Tasmanian people" to Dr. Brown, he became an environmentalist.6 Soon after, Robert Moore, a reporting Company (ABC), called "physical obstruction" its "disarray."7 The operation of the (Franklin) dam was forgotten.

Thus, the birth of an environmental leader to confront the Franklin River upon one of the last wilderness areas of Australia, inexplicably, exerts a new partnership in understanding. The raf of Bob Brown to become a formidable leader of the Franklin River.8 The Australian history emerges as all the parties involved
The Lake Pedder debacle left behind in its wake an enormous amount of bad blood amongst hard-core environmentalists and strong supporters of environmental reform towards the powerful Hydro-Electric Commission (HEC) and the indifferent Tasmanian state government. Therefore, in 1982-1983, the Franklin River dam crisis became the environmental version and moral equivalent of Gallipoli, the famed WWI battle that gave Australians an inspired sense of their own worth and courage as a nation. Australia suffered thousands of casualties upon this isolated peninsula within the (Turkey) Ottoman Empire to defend the integrity of the British Empire. It is not an exaggeration to say that this environmental “battle” in Tasmania amongst its “green” combatants, like Gallipoli, was perceived as a fight that had to be won at all costs. A sense of desperation permeated the air. All efforts, strategies, and even imprisonment, if necessary, had to demonstrate an unflinching commitment toward stopping the construction of an unwanted and unnecessary hydro-power dam upon the Franklin River system in the southwest region of Tasmania.

The man who emerged as representing an unquestioned resolve to confront and deny the development of the Franklin Dam was a quiet and unassuming country doctor, from (north-central Tasmania) Launceston, named Bob Brown. After rafting down the Franklin River in 1976, “the best two weeks of my life,” according to Dr. Brown, he became an avid and uncompromising environmentalist. Soon afterwards, he wrote a letter to Robert Moore, a reporter for the Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC), stating that he would resort to “physical obstruction” if necessary to prevent construction of the (Franklin) dam.

Thus, the birth of Australia’s most significant environmental leader took place during a rafting trip upon one of the last wild river systems in the world. Nature, inexplicably, exercises an undefined aura, power, and spirituality over humanity and its institutions of understanding. The rafting adventure convinced Bob Brown to become a foot soldier in the struggle to save the Franklin River. The beginning of a new chapter in Australian history emerged, but went unrecognized by all the parties involved at the moment of conception.

Therefore, educating the public and presenting a strong and visible protest were necessary, according to Brown, to stop the Franklin River dam project. He also knew that an aggressive blockade represented a threat to his well-being. Indeed, during the Franklin protest, Brown was beaten severely by youths with a wheel-brace, sent death threats and vilified by many of the local citizens during his activities in the southwest region of Tasmania. He was not deterred, nor intimidated, in his commitment to save the Franklin River from destruction.

In 1983, the potential flooding of one of the last wild rivers in the world propelled an all-out effort to prevent the repeat of Lake Pedder. The stakes were incredibly high, and the atmosphere within Tasmania was dangerously tense and threatening. The situation was a powder keg waiting to blow. Both sides, the HEC on one side, and the ardent environmentalists with significant support within Tasmania, has also written that the seeds of rebellion, in relation to the Franklin River dam crisis in 1982-1983, were planted during the Lake Pedder affair in 1972. The destruction of this unquestioned beauty of nature only inflamed and motivated...
those committed to preventing a repeat of this tragedy from happening again in the future. Professor Crowley stated, "If the (Lake) Pedder dam had torn the heart out of the southwest, a Franklin-Gordon dam would bisect its remnants into utter insignificance." 10

However, the origins of the political and social tsunami that was to strike Tasmania and Australia in 1982-83, which eventually became an international event, began with a major report released, in 1967, by the Tasmanian-based Hydro-Electric Commission (HEC) titled, "Report on the Gordon River Power Development Stage One." 11 The report indicated the HEC's interest in facilitating the power existing within the region which consisted of the Lower Gordon and the Franklin River system. Initial drilling proceeded, in 1970, to find a location where a sound and functional dam could be built. In 1976, a summary report was released, and this document re-confirmed the HEC's interest in the region and spoke of two potential sites for dams; both had the Lower Gordon and the Franklin River involved in different configurations of development.12

In 1979, a second major report was produced by the HEC that endorsed a plan to build the "Gordon below Franklin" dam. In 1980, the Tasmanian Parliament voted this proposal down, but later approved another option, "the Gordon above Olga" scheme. In 1981, the Franklin, Lower Gordon, and Olga Rivers were declared to be part of the Wild Rivers National Park in southwest Tasmania. However, this designation was irrelevant to the veterans of the Lake Pedder debacle. They knew this "national" status did not fully protect the territory identified.13 Lake Pedder's flooding was the proof of this hard-earned wisdom. Though, the Tasmanian Parliament, for the first time, voted down an HEC proposal, not everyone was optimistic about the future of the southwestern region of Tasmania. Bob Brown, then Director of the Tasmanian Wilderness Society, believed that conservationists' efforts to prevent the building of the Olga Dam scheme might be doomed.14

From 1981 to 1983, a number of political decisions, events, and maneuverings took place within Tasmania. The Tasmanian situation spilled over into the national political scene as well. In 1981, Tasmania held only its third plebiscite in history over the issue concerning the Franklin dam proposals. Though the Gordon-below-
Franklin dam proposal received 47 percent of the vote, thousands of Tasmanians wrote "No Dams" on their ballots. The Labor Party's dominant position in the state was coming to an end. The Labor government was badly fragmented; its leader, Doug Lowe, was deposed, declared that he was an Independent and left the party in late-1981. Lowe was actually forced to resign over the plebiscite issue, due to his early support of a "No Dams" option to be included on the ballot. He was forced to renege on this voting option, and a secret vote within the Labor caucus, 12-9, ended Lowe's days of leadership.

In March 1982, Tasmanians witnessed for the first time ever the emergence of a Liberal (conservative) government majority, led by Robin Gray, who promised to move forward on the dams issue despite tensions within his own party. Throughout the rest of the year, it appeared that Gray, the HEC, and the state government had gained the upper hand in this titanic struggle of wills. Nevertheless, Bob Brown, the Director of the Tasmanian Wilderness Society during this period, the UTG (United Tasmania Group—as the Greens were known then), and other committed supporters of conservation continued their struggle in Tasmania against the HEC and state government's plans for the Franklin River. By the end of February 1983, there had been over 1,400 individuals arrested at the Franklin blockade, of which, approximately 600 went to jail. Time was running out.

In early 1983, Australian Labor Party (ALP) leader Bill Hayden spoke out in favor of stopping the construction of the Franklin River dam scheme while boating on the Gordon River with Bob Brown. Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser even offered Tasmania $500 million to alter their focus toward creating a thermal power plant in their state. Premier Gray ignored Hayden's comments and rejected Fraser's financial offer outright. Gray, quite correctly, pointed out the constitutional rights of states to control the development of their natural resources as they wished. Also, work on the Franklin dam had already proceeded during 1982. However, fate had not finished its efforts with Tasmania, Australia, and its citizens. Peter Thompson, an Australian political journalist and Franklin River activist, in retrospect, commented that the Greens always received some type of divine intervention when they needed it most.26

In a surprise move, Prime Minister Fraser called for national elections in February 1983. The Franklin River crisis was to be transformed from a Tasmanian issue into a quasi-national referendum concerning the nation's environmental future. A growing environmental tsunami was about to strike the Australian body politic. Unbeknownst to all, Tasmanian politics, Australian history, and the interpretation of the Australian Constitution were standing at the cusp of radical change and transformation.

In early February 1983, Fraser was simply not going to intervene and stop the construction of any dam on the Franklin River. However, in a sudden and unexpected turn of events, Labor had decided to shake up the party's leadership just before Fraser's call for new elections. Hayden, though considered a good man within the party ranks, was perceived by Labor's leaders to find their natural resources as they wished. Also, work on the Franklin dam proposal received 47 percent of the vote, thousands of Tasmanians wrote "No Dams" on their ballots.15 The Labor Party's dominant position in the state was coming to an end. The Labor government was badly fragmented; its leader, Doug Lowe, was deposed, declared that he was an Independent and left the party in late-1981. Lowe was actually forced to resign over the plebiscite issue, due to his early support of a "No Dams" option to be included on the ballot. He was forced to renege on this voting option, and a secret vote within the Labor caucus, 12-9, ended Lowe's days of leadership.16

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was not wildly popular within the ALP. Labor, out of power since Gough Whitlam’s controversial (unconstitutional?) dismissal as Prime Minister in 1975, was desperate to win back the prime ministership. Taking on an environmental crisis in Tasmania appeared to be a waste of party resources and time. Nevertheless, Hawke had publicly committed the ALP to the cause of stopping the Franklin River dam from being constructed.21

Bob Hawke: Dams, Environmentalists and the Pursuit of Power

Robert (Bob) James Lee Hawke is a man who has cultivated, developed, and capitalized upon opportunities throughout his life. His extraordinarily successful political career, and his subsequent career as a businessman and consultant to numerous countries in East Asia during his post-prime ministership, represents irrefutable evidence of his driving ambition and human relations skills. To some, though, Hawke appeared to be just another ambitious politician on the make. Tasmanian writer, environmental activist, and fellow Rhodes Scholar, Richard Flanagan considered Hawke an empty vassal despite his pedigree of excellence.22 Flanagan, like many in Tasmania, was not expecting any miracles from the new Labor leader.

Nevertheless, in 1983, Hawke exhibited a substantive intellectual capacity and unexpected political courage during the volatile national election campaign. Although his critics, at times, chose to ignore these qualities, it was these traits that endeared him to the common ‘bloke’ in Australian society. Hawke truly believed that he could influence any voter in Australia, if given half a chance. Hawke always felt, and his four winning electoral campaigns strongly support this contention, that he had a deep connection with the Australian people. It was a relationship that he treasured. Though it was impossible to get every vote, Hawke saw himself as the leader of the whole country.23 It was this “special relationship” that made it difficult for friends and politically dangerous for opponents to criticize him too harshly, on issues he felt strongly about, during his reign as prime minister (1983-1991).

In 1983, Hawke chose to make the Franklin River dam crisis a point of principle in his campaign to be prime minister. Many in Australia asked why, in respect, the backdrop to a common-sense appeal that leaders must sense direction, even if it’s forthrightly, that “the terms of seeing the Franklin crisis in Tasmania an of a revelation.”24 Instead, the crisis in Tasmania and building of a dam up right thing to do, and well. Hawke told Tasmanian campaigners that tourism required investment in the state’s hydropower and hydro-electricity of quality.

It is important to remember that Hawke was attempting to get into power after the Great Depression. Since 1949, the Liberal Party (led primarily by Menzies), had dominated the political scene in the early 1970s. The Wring moment, from 1972, The scars from Whitlam’s defeat were quite evident amongst Australian voters in 1983.

As a consequence of the increasing discontent of Australian voters over the state of the economy, wasn’t quite up to the task. And the crippling perception return rate for ALP candidates in 1983. Hawke’s candidacy, in Hawke’s candidacy, in as a fresh start for the ALP and the Australian people. A commodity from his years within the Australian Labor Council of Trade Unionists. Therefore, it did not take observers that Hawke was as the “breakthrough” man.

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spect, the backdrop to Hawke’s candidacy represented

a common-sense approach to politics. Hawke believed

leaders must sense when it is time to go in a new

direction, even if it’s unconventional. Hawke stated

forthrightly, that “there was no road to Damascus” in

terms of seeing the Franklin River Dam crisis in terms

of a revelation. Instead, Hawke saw the environmental

crisis in Tasmania and his support in preventing the

building of a dam upon this wild river system as the

right thing to do, and good economics for the state as

well. Hawke told Tasmanians during the 1983 campaign

that tourism represented greater profitability and

investment in the state’s future than the production of

hydro-electricity of questionable future value.

It is important to remember, once again, that Hawke

was attempting to get the Australian Labor Party back

into power after the Gough Whitlam debacle of 1975.

Since 1949, the Liberal Party (along with the National

Party), led primarily by the patriarchal Robert Menzies,

had dominated the political landscape in Australia until

the early 1970s. The Whitlam government, Labor’s brief

shining moment, from 1972 to 1975, ended in tatters.
The scars from Whitlam’s abrupt dismissal were still

quite evident amongst many Labor voters in the early

1980s.

As a consequence of Whitlam’s demise, the majority

of Australian voters continued to believe that Labor

wasn’t quite up to the task of national leadership. This

crippling perception represented an enormous obstacle

for ALP candidates seeking the prime ministership.

Hawke’s candidacy, in 1983, in many respects, was seen

as a fresh start for the ALP amongst common workers

and the Australian people at large. He was a well-known

commodity from his years of high-profile involvement

within the Australian labor movement and politics. At

one point, Hawke was the national president of both

the Australian Labor Party (ALP), and the Australian

Council of Trade Unions (ACTU).

Therefore, it did not surprise Australian political

observers that Hawke was seen by the ALP powerbro-

kers as the “breakthrough” candidate against Fraser.

In an interview, in 1998, Hawke explained how

he exercised this strength with those who challenged
his ascendency to the party’s leadership in 1982-1983. Hawke knew, in terms of being able to win the prime ministership, he was the only game in town. The party’s powerbrokers, in 1983, had lost faith in Hayden’s electoral capabilities. Therefore, it was acknowledged and accepted within the ALP leadership that Hawke was the only candidate with a significant national presence and support to run against the incumbent Fraser and win.

However, his critics were not without merit. Hawke had not been a member of the House of Representatives until 1980, winning a safe seat representing Wills, located in Melbourne’s industrial northern suburbs. There were several ALP House members who were disgruntled about the fact that Hawke had not paid his dues within the often volatile and bloody trenches of Australian politics. Nevertheless, he quickly positioned himself to succeed the popular but vulnerable Labor leader, Bill Hayden. Hawke’s decision to stand for parliament was due to a burning internal need to seek the parliamentary leadership of the ALP. Thus, in 1983, Hawke’s ascendance to the party’s leadership position, though stormy at times, was not a question of if, but only of when.

The ALP’s caucus voters were determined, if not desperate, to present to Australian voters a perceived “winner.” The defeat of the incumbent Malcolm Fraser at the polls was the primary focus of everyone in the ALP. On 3 February 1983, Hayden resigned his leadership position in the ALP. Having staved off a Hawke challenge in July 1982, the votes within the party caucus, eight months later, were simply not there. It was a heart-wrenching and difficult moment for Hayden, who had risen to the top of the ALP leadership after beginning his working life as a policeman. Hawke, indeed, was the new leader of the ALP, but potential internal damage to the party had been prevented due to the gracious and supportive behavior displayed by Hayden toward Hawke during the post-defeat period.

The federal elections were not going to be a cake-walk for Bob Hawke and the ALP. Malcolm Fraser was a tough and resourceful opponent. He knew how to obtain power (just ask Gough Whitlam), and how to use it. Yet, Hawke represented a real and unexpected threat to his re-election. There was also a serious and unexpected political development for Fraser and the Liberal Party: By 1983, the environment had ascended rapidly amongst voters as a national issue, and the Liberal Party was not ready to respond decisively.

The Franklin River dam crisis and Fraser’s refusal to exercise federal power and intercede on behalf of environmentalists, despite domestic and global pressures to do so, represented a real threat to his re-election chances. Hawke had publicly stated that he would use federal power to cease construction of the dam upon his election. Fraser, responding to Hawke’s bold declaration, correctly stated that the Australian constitution prevented his use of federal power to intercede due to the recognition of states’ rights and their lawful control over their indigenous natural resources. Though Fraser was legally correct, the Australian public increasingly interpreted his indifferent response as representing political weakness and a lack of willful leadership.

Hawke, ever the savvy political opportunist and acute observer of Australian politics, proclaimed his disagreement with the Fraser government on this issue. To put a finer point on this issue for public consumption, Hawke was photographed with Tasmanian environmental activist Dr. Bob Brown at a Melbourne rally. Hawke’s then wife, Hazel, in a brilliant move, wore rather large earrings at the rally that had the triangular shaped slogan, “No Dams,” upon them. Though Hawke and Brown were not close personally, they did respect each other. In truth, they needed each other desperately in 1983. Hawke wanted to be prime minister, and Brown needed a powerful ally and an effective construction upon the issue.

In March 1983, beleaguered Fraser, and that his stance on the Franklin River dam crisis was not a question of public opinion, was not a question of whether he was correct or incorrect. Hawke, in retrospect, observed that his stance on the Franklin River’s preservation as an environmental issue was the big symbol of the 1980s was Labor’s environmental issues.

Hawke, in retrospect, transformation in recognition of Franklin River’s preservation in environmental conflicts, as prime minister. He stated to a Damascus-type of “We (Australians) had a moment) as an issue, and as a slogan, “No Dams,” I thought seriously about that end (pro-environment) a common factor with the Franklin River, 1983 (Franklin River); 1990 (Kakadu); they all were issues at stake. Hawke needed to respond decisively.

Philip Toyne and Stephen Kelly also noted in their essay that evaluated in history and legacy, “The Hawk (“successor to a Damascus-type of...”) was the big symbol of the 1980s was Labor’s environmental issues.”

Bob Brown: Birth of a Legacy

Robert (Bob) James Brown was born on 21 July 1948 in a Tasmanian island town. He had spent a number of years in the Australian mainland and New Zealand to pursue the study (Practice) of medicine.
needed a powerful ally to help shut down the dam construction upon the Franklin River.

In March 1983, Hawke was victorious over the beleaguered Fraser, and many political analysts believed that his stance on the Franklin River played a key part in his unseating the incumbent. Ironically, though understandably, it was not the last time Hawke and the ALP used an environmental issue as a major wedge issue to achieve electoral victory. Paul Kelly, a longtime observer and a writer of Australian politics, commented, “It was the big symbolic (environmental) issues which destroyed the Coalition’s credibility (with the Australian voters).” Kelly also noted that the “one (political) story of the 1980s was Labor’s mastery of the Coalition on environmental issues.”

Hawke, in retrospect, did not mythologize his transformation in recognizing the importance of the Franklin River’s preservation, or the other high-profile environmental conflicts that occurred during his tenure as prime minister. He stated simply, “There was no road to a Damascus-type of conversion that I can recall … We (Australians) had to face up to it (the environment) as an issue, and also within the party (ALP) … I thought seriously about it, and I came down on the side of that end (pro-environment).” Kelly points to a common factor within Hawke’s electoral victories: 1983 (Franklin River), 1987 (Queensland rainforests), and 1990 (Kakadu); they all had a significant environmental issue at stake. Hawke chose the “green” position in each case.

Philip Toyne and Simon Balderstone stated, in an essay that evaluated Hawke’s environmental record and legacy, “The Hawke Government can lay claim to achieving more to protect the environment than any national government before or since.” Hawke stated, in 2004, that “leadership represents the key ingredient at certain moments in history. I felt that I was right then, and I still feel that I did the right thing for Tasmania and Australia.”

Bob Brown: Birth of an Environmental Icon

Robert (Bob) James Brown arrived in Tasmania in 1972. He had spent a number of years working on the Australian mainland and overseas, as a doctor (General Practice) of medicine. Upon his arrival, there was no...
initial indication of the eventual course he took in life. Brown's becoming the face of the Australian environmental movement was not a given, nor expected, of the tall, lean, and bespectacled gentleman who originated from Oberon - which is a small town situated at the foothills of the Blue Mountains in New South Wales. In fact, his original intentions, when moving to Tasmania, were to practice medicine and pursue the Tasmanian (thylacine) tiger. Within a few years, Brown acknowledged that the tiger was not to be found, and he also discovered that his medical practice became increasingly irrelevant in his life. Environmentalism emerged as the focus of his life in the late 1970s.

Brown, by his own admission, was a late participant in the movement to prevent the flooding of Lake Pedder in 1972. While thousands had walked to (and into) this beautiful alpine lake, he saw it only once during a plane flight in May 1972. This marvel of nature, in 1955, had been declared a national park. However, it became threatened, in 1965, due to a new political consensus. It was decided that there was a new and immediate need to construct a new hydro-dam. The new hydro-dam, according to its proponents, would provide cheap energy to future industries developed in Tasmania. Environmentalists and nature conservationists alike were devastated by this new decision taken by the Tasmanian state government and the Hydro-Electric Commission. Brown, though a peripheral figure in Tasmanian politics at this time, began a personal journey that changed his life forever. He became an ardent advocate, a "green" warrior, in the preservation of the last vestiges of the Tasmanian wilderness.

After the Lake Pedder debacle in 1972, Brown used his home, located in Liffey, Tasmania (north-central part of the state), as a center for discussions and strategizing for future environmental operations in the state. The medical practice that originally brought him to Tasmania was put on the shelf. His intellectual interests and emotional passions concerning the island's ecology drew him deeper into the environmental movement. Ten years later, Australia witnessed the birth of an environmental icon.

In 1982-1983, the Franklin River dam campaign began the dramatic emergence of Bob Brown into the consciousness of Australians and Australian politics. His climb to prominence involved public acts of defiance — which were often followed by jail time — involving the construction of a new hydro-dam for a river system located in Tasmania. The Franklin crisis sparked a national movement involving some well-known critics, such as professors Richard Joramo and volatile Norm Sanders from California but, in reality, it was just average citizens who exerted common courage. They were flesh and blood and souls into the effective activism. The Tasmanian state government decided with this controversial project that over 2,500 individuals would be in the blockade, including 600 environmental enforcement agencies. This project represented the hard line in Australian history.

Yet it was Brown who, due to intense and massive pursuits of this new, dramatic, and directed towards a new environmental movement in Australian society. Referring to an interview that he conducted during the Franklin River crisis, Brown said that he would lose his imagination, energy, and his appeal amongst his fellow Australians. Brown does something that he believes can make a difference. He does.
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You think he is so sincere you’ve just got to help him. He’s good talent but not entertaining talent.”

Professor Jones, though, ever skeptical about the media’s role in Australian society, nevertheless he also believed that Brown’s role in the Franklin River crisis was very important to the movement. Jones commented, “Peter Thompson being a media-trained person, could see the value of promoting Bob as an image. Bob wouldn’t have done it without Peter. Bob gained in charisma, he certainly met people’s imaginations around the country. He has carried himself in the role magnificently. He is a phenomenon, whether he was made a phenomenon or not.”

Brown’s ability to come across as modest and sincere in interviews and statements was invaluable throughout the Franklin River drama. Brown understood the importance of presenting a proper image of seriousness to the Australian public. The image of tree-huggers and unkempt individuals did not go over well amongst middle-class citizens in Australia. Therefore, Brown, in his dark suit, possessor of a solemn voice and a demeanor that indicated to fellow Australians, and supporters throughout the world, that this was a serious man who meant business. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind that he was determined to stop this monstrosity from destroying one of nature’s last standing testaments of beauty.

Wayne Crawford, a well-known columnist for The Mercury, the largest newspaper in Tasmania, commented during an interview that Brown was seen by many Tasmanians and some outside observers as representing an almost God-like persona during the Franklin campaign. There is the famous photo of him, later on, being manhandled by loggers at Farmhouse Creek in 1987. Bare-chested, arms pulled wide and a look of fear and determination upon his face represented a powerful message to all Australians. Bob Brown was a man willing to die for his cause. Even the most skeptical of Australians knew they were witnessing a different kind of man, activist and citizen. It only added to his public persona, reputation and stature amongst environmentalists and his fellow countrymen.

By the time the Franklin River dam crisis was resolved by the Australian High Court (4-3 vote), on 1 July 1983, Brown found himself a member of the Tasmanian Parliament. He was released from Risdon Prison, located on the 5th of January, 1982, due to his activities involved in the Franklin River crisis. The day after his release, he was the winner of a Tasmanian Senate seat based upon the 1982 state election. The election was due to the resignation of Sanders in December of 1982.

The outspoken Sanders became increasingly disinterested in the Franklin dam crisis and that he became completely alienated within Tasmania. Sanders’ democracy was dysfunctional and his frustration of seeing the Franklin River dam being abused by police convictions on 23 December 1982. (1982 Sanders was later elected to a second term in the Senate in 1984)

Brown later served in a coalition majority government in Tasmania’s history. It was the last government since World War II that the other “Green” independent they were able to achieve during this period: The Primary law reform, Aboriginal law reform, the area of protected wilderness by 1982.

Today, Brown is a respected Australian Federal Senator. In November 2003, his President George W. Bush, over issues concerning the firestorm throughout America, most of the nation’s political as well, were stunned by Brown's actions and congratulations.

He has represented Tasmania since 1996. He is recognized as a “Green” since 1992. In the October 2001 Greens (received almost 11 in August), Australian Democrats as
The 57-year-old South Australian Parliament. How? When? Brown was released from Risdon Prison, located in the state capital Hobart, on the 5th of January, 1983. He was in prison for 16 days due to his activities involving the Franklin River blockade. The day after his release, Brown was notified that he was the winner of a "count-back" of preference votes based upon the 1982 state elections. His ascendance to the House of Assembly in the Tasmanian Parliament was due to the resignation of Norm Sanders in late December of 1982.

The outspoken Sanders, an American expatriate, became increasingly disgruntled and dismayed during the Franklin River crisis. He grudgingly acknowledged that he became completely disillusioned by the politics within Tasmania. Sanders believed that Tasmanian democracy was dysfunctional, and his growing frustration of seeing the Franklin River protesters being abused by police convinced him to resign his seat on 23 December 1982. (Note: It should be mentioned that Sanders was later elected to the Australian Federal Senate in 1994)

Brown later served in the first and only ALP-"Green" coalition majority government, from 1989 to 1992, in Tasmania's history. It was the most progressive state government since World War II. Though Brown, and the other "Green" independents, was the junior partner, they were able to achieve a number of legislative reforms during this period: The Freedom of Information Act, gay law reform, Aboriginal land rights, and the doubling of the area of protected wilderness.

Today, Brown is a respected and feared voice within the Australian Federal Senate and throughout Australia. In November 2003, his confrontation with U.S. President George W. Bush, inside the national parliament, over issues concerning the war in Iraq caused a political firestorm throughout Australia. Afterwards, though, most of the nation's political observers, and politicians as well, were stunned by the level of support shown for Brown's actions and comments that day.

Brown has represented Tasmania in the federal Senate since 1996. He is recognized as the voice of the Australian Greens Party. The Australian Greens were founded in 1992. In the October 2004 elections, the Australian Greens (received almost 900,000 votes) replaced the Australian Democrats as the 3rd largest political party in Australia. Though the ALP and Liberal Parties remain relatively strong, the Greens are slowly but steadily gaining more support from Australian voters due to their progressive stands on education, immigration, the environment and political reforms.

Bob Brown stated in an interview that he is in it for the long haul. The quiet doctor-activist-politician from the rural region of New South Wales has become one of the most powerful forces in Australian politics as the 21st century unfolds.

Aftermath: A Different Australia

Amanda Lohrey wrote in an essay, “Groundswell,” the Franklin River blockade of 1982-1983 represented a defining moment in Australian politics. She determined that environmental issues had entered the vortex of the nation's politics forever. Former Prime Minister Hawke stated, in 2004, that the environment is now amongst the top three issues considered important to Australian voters, especially with young voters.

The Australian Constitution, and its implementation and interpretation, were altered forever as well. The powers of the Commonwealth were enhanced at the expense of state power. In short, the federal government did indeed have the constitutional authority to stop or prevent an environmental event or project that was recognized as detrimental, with the understanding that the environment in question has been identified for its global uniqueness by a legitimate international agency.

Hawke commented:
We haven't created a new head of power but the High Court has interpreted the Constitution in a very important way which has implications for the future. It doesn't mean that the Government can go off and conclude some international treaty for the sake of then having some power to act within Australia; it has got to be in pursuit of an international convention properly arrived at; but that's been clarified. 60

In 1983, legal scholar and Head of the Department of Law at the University of Tasmania, M. Sornarajah wrote an essay specifically about the Franklin River Dam legal quagmire. She wrote about the domestic and international ramifications, and whether Australia had decided correctly on this complex question of constitutional authority between the state and federal government. She also addressed the issue of whether the government can exercise the proper authority to meet its international obligations. Professor Sornarajah concluded that the majority decision, 4-3, was correct. The justices displayed a new and broader interpretation and understanding of the Australian Constitution in a changing world:

From an international lawyer's viewpoint the majority judgments are superior because they show a better understanding of trends and developments within international law. Australia must give vigorous leadership particularly in the Asian region, in the human rights and environmental fields. Her claim to such leadership should not be hampered by narrow legalism. Instead every effort must be made to allow the Commonwealth scope to provide leadership while not making a dramatic or swift alteration of the federal structure. 61

Hawke's prime ministership ended in 1991, not by the voters, but from a revolt within the ranks of the ALP. Paul Keating, Hawke's Treasurer in the 1980s, wrested the leadership from him in a close and emotional caucus vote. Though Hawke's departure was acrimonious, bitter, and controversial, he is not a forgotten man. A poll was taken by The Australian, one of the nation's most prominent newspapers, in 1997, and they asked Australians to evaluate the performances of the five most recent prime ministers. Hawke won hands down. 62 His legacy is on the Franklin River Dam, his namesake when it celebrated and determined environmentalists struggled in Tasmania, its last remaining wild river.

Bob Brown, since 1992, has held a place of prominence. The Greens are no longer seen as "environmental wingers" or as a bunch of Tree Huggers. The Greens are now positioned as a relevant and seen in Australian politics a legitimate party. Bob Brown, though, the master of media and international awareness, has maintained the cult of celebrity. Brown is one of the "environmental voices" of Australia's emerging political power. His mentor was the federal parliament for three years. Though he often struggled to be seen as a grassroots activist, he has a rumored departure from the Greens in an international role. His commitment toward the global environment for the Greens in an international role:

The Greens need to be...The future of the Greens is a historic confrontation between the major nations. The world is divided into the Great Powers and the Global South. The Greens is a historic confrontation between the interests of people and people. We (Green Party) believe that the Parliament recognizes the people. Democracy is the major focus.

Recently, Brown has published his book, Memo For A Safer Nation. The Greens' beliefs and philosophy in political and future hope. He writes that when he was a teenager his home and property in the Australian Bush for his last will and testament...
down. His legacy is only now taking shape. However, on the Franklin River dam issue, Hawke soared like his namesake when it counted most for those committed and determined environmentalists who lived and struggled in Tasmania, in 1982-1983, to save one of the last remaining wild rivers on earth.

Bob Brown, since 1983, has also grown in power and stature. The Greens are no longer seen as "tree-huggers" or as a bunch freeloaders on the public dole. The Greens are now positioned to become a major player in Australian politics after the next national elections. Brown, though, the recipient of numerous national and international awards has remained unaffected by the cult of celebrity. Brown remains in politics because the "environmental voice" and progressive solutions to Australia's emerging problems need to be debated in the federal parliament in Canberra, the nation's capital. Though he often struggles with internal thoughts of being a grassroots activist again, Brown's occasionally rumored departure from politics is greatly exaggerated. His commitment towards social justice and a quality global environment for future generations remains unchanged. Brown commented about the future of the Greens in an interview, in 2003, in his Hobart, Tasmania offices:

"The Greens need to act globally, and not just locally. The future of the Greens rests in the developing nations. The world is in a race between the Pentagon (militarism) and people power. Also, there is a historic confrontation between materialism and people. We (Greens) are after an intellectual revolution, not a violent revolution. The Greens are after power, we are not just an alternative. Greens represent a new perspective for Australians in viewing its environment and its future ecological sustainability. That represents a new judicial interpretation of the Commonwealth's constitutional authority concerning environmental issues involving state sovereignty and the right of the federal government to intervene on such matters. Finally, it recognizes the legitimacy of international declarations and organizations within its own federal judiciary, and the willingness to implement and enforce international decisions or laws when necessary."

In July 1983, Australia chose a new path. The new whole, indeed, represented actions, decisions and outcomes, which can be, and should be, interpreted collectively, as a decisive turning point in Australian history.

Endnotes

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6 Margaret Bowman and Michelle Grattan, Reformers: Shaping Australian Society from the 60s to the 80s (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1989); Bob Brown, Chapter 7, 88-89.

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9 Ibid., 85.


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13 Ibid.


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24 Bob Hawke, interview, 4 June 2004, Sydney, Australia.

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35 Ryan and Bramston, The Hawke Government, 171.
36 Ibid., 170.
37 Hawke interview, 4 June 2004. (Note: Hawke emphasis and pride concerning his environmental record is quite evident on the tape from the interview.)
40 Ibid.
43 Brown interview, 19 May 2003.
44 This honor is bestowed upon an Australian each year by the newspaper, The Australian; Australia’s most important national newspaper. The Australian is the equivalent to The New York Times in the United States.
45 Kate Crowley, Saving the Franklin, 41.
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48 Green, Battle for The Franklin, 158 (Norm Sanders interview)
49 Green, Battle for The Franklin: 67 (Dick Jones interview)
50 Wayne Crawford, interview, 6 June 2003, Hobart, Tasmania.
51 The photo mention can be found in Bob Brown’s book, Memo for a Saner World, within the photo section.
52 Brown, Memo, 21-22.
53 Thompson, Bob Brown of the Franklin River, p. 166.
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56 Ibid.
58 Amanda Lohrey, “Groundswell”, 16.
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61 M. Sornarajah, editor, The South West Dam Dispute: The Legal and Political Issues (University of Tasmania Publication, 1983); M. Sornarajah, “International Law and the South West Dam Case”, 34.
63 Brown interview, 19 May 2003.
64 Brown, Memo, 244.