

People **not** like us?





Introduction

“Give me a child for his first seven years and I’ll give you the man.” Jesuit Maxim

We all know that someone’s background, education and personal circumstance has a profound impact on the decisions they make throughout their life. Consciously or unconsciously each of us draws upon our past experiences to form judgements about the best way ahead for ourselves or for those around us. Our frame of reference is reinforced by the people we chose to associate with as they more often than not have similar backgrounds or levels of education and outlook.

This largely works to all our mutual benefit, however, there are circumstances where clearly it does not.

For example, according to Dun and Bradstreet’s small business ten rule guide to hiring new staff, rule number six states:

“Don’t hire someone who is just like you. We have all heard that we buy from people we like. Well, that happens in recruitment too. Too often we make the mistake of hiring someone who is just like us or someone that we like on a personal level. However that’s often not the best approach as businesses usually need a diverse range of people to get the job done efficiently and effectively.” ¹

In the same way we often overlook our desire to associate with people just like ourselves we can also at times overlook how our backgrounds, education and personal circumstances will drive our decision making.

In politics just like in business, this blind spot can lead to some very troublesome consequences. For columnist and author Michael Thompson, the dominance of one class of people namely the university educated, “self appointed progressives” in the Labor Party has come at the expense of the working class

He calls this new class the chattering class and believes his party has been “trashed” as a consequence.

“The chattering class is drawn from among the tertiary-educated middle class whose members have gone to university since the 1960’s, where they imbibed the social causes of feminism, multiculturalism, environmentalism and the like, which their counter-culture lecturers had imported from America.” ²





Thompson goes on to argue, as others have before him that the views of this new dominant class in the Labor Party has successfully undermined the very real and legitimate concerns of blue collar workers saying:

“Labor’s claim to working-class loyalty has been forfeited.”

Decisions affecting the timber industry in Victoria

Over the past 30 years, decision makers have significantly reduced timber harvesting in Victoria. Job losses, mill closures and economic hardship have followed these decisions impacting directly on timber communities.

The fact that these decisions have been made in Melbourne, by university educated Ministers and Premiers advised by a white collar bureaucracy has not been lost on those affected by these decisions. However, to date, this suspected correlation between these decisions and the limited backgrounds of the decision-makers has not been highlighted.

In July 2010, CPI Strategic was commissioned by Timber Communities Australia to outline the backgrounds of the key Ministers and Premiers who implemented the major reductions in timber harvesting during 1986-87 and 2002 to see whether the suspicions of those living in timber affected communities are justified.

History of Reductions in Timber Harvesting

Late 1980s

During this period the Cain government announced the Timber Industry Strategy, Flora and Fauna Guarantee Bill, the establishment of the Land Conservation Council and the establishment of the Alpine National Park and a range of other National Parks in East Gippsland. These decisions caused significant reduction in the number of mills and workers employed in the industry.

According to ABS statistics, the number of timber mills in Victoria dropped from approximately 150 to approximately 100 between 1986 and 1990. There appears to be no publicly available figures for the number of blue collar timber jobs that were lost in this period.

Using the mills to jobs lost ratio in the later Our Forests, Our Future package of 2002, we estimate that approximately 1500 blue collar timber jobs were lost in this period. ³

³ ABS (Manufacturing Industry, Victoria, Cat No. 8221.2; and Manufacturing Industry, Victoria, Cat. No. 8207.2)





Our Forests, Our Future 2002

In February 2002, the Bracks Government announced a 31 per cent reduction in the available hardwood that could be harvested from State Forests. This was followed by an announcement to ban timber harvesting in the Otways at the November 2002 state election bringing the total reduction of harvesting to 40 per cent.

These decisions resulted in 30 mills closing and more than 900 blue collar timber jobs being lost. ⁴

It was Gippsland that bore the brunt of these mill closures with 15 out of the 30 mills located in Central and East Gippsland.

A further 13 mills have closed bringing the total number of mill closures to 43. ⁵
These mill closures had a significant impact on many small rural communities, again particularly in Gippsland.

For example, in 2006 the Department of Sustainability and Environment commissioned MBAC Consulting Group to study the socio-economic impact on the timber communities within the East Gippsland Forest Management Area (FMA).

This study revealed the following:

“The timber industry directly employs around 491 people, of whom about 435 or 89% live within or travel into the FMA to derive their living. The industry directly and indirectly supports around 1228 fulltime jobs. This employment represents around 50% of all fulltime jobs in the region.” ⁶

This last statement about timber jobs making up 50% of ALL full-time jobs in the region highlights how critical the timber industry is to the survival of these smaller rural communities.

Backgrounds of the decision makers

In 1986-87, the government decision-makers was Premier John Cain and Minister for the Environment Joan Kirner and in 2002 they were Premier Steve Bracks and Minister for the Environment Sherryl Garbutt.

⁴ Appendix F, page 45 'Our Forests, Our Future' Industry Transition Taskforce October 2003

⁵ VAFI data supplied to VAFI July 2010 entitled 'Catchment Impact'

⁶ Page 7, 'A Socioeconomic impact of the timber industry on communities within East Gippsland FMA', MBAC Consulting Group, Victoria, August 2006

This section details the backgrounds of the key decision-makers of the above four.

Joan Kirner, the Minister for the Conservation, Forests and Lands from 1985-1988, was born in Melbourne. She was educated at Alberferdie Primary School, Penleigh Presbyterian Girls School and University High School and graduated from the University of Melbourne with a Bachelor of Arts and a Diploma of Education. She became a teacher. ⁷

John Cain Junior, who was Premier between 1982 and 1990, was born in Melbourne. He was educated at Bell Primary School, Northcote High School and Scotch College. He graduated from the University of Melbourne in law (LLB). He became a solicitor. ⁸

Sherryl Garbutt was Minister for the Environment from 1999 to 2002. She was born in Melbourne and went to Oak Park High School. She graduated from the University of Melbourne with a Bachelor of Arts and a Diploma of Education. In addition, she obtained a Bachelor of Education from Latrobe University.

⁹

Steve Bracks was Premier from 1999 to 2007. He was born in Ballarat and educated at St Patrick's College. He graduated from the University of Ballarat with a Diploma of Business Studies (Accounting) and a Graduate Diploma of Education and became a commerce teacher. ¹⁰

In examining backgrounds four things become apparent.

- All four decision-makers were university educated.
- Three out of the four attended private secondary schools. Only Sherryl Garbutt did not. John Cain Junior and Joan Kirner attended both public and private schools.
- Three were trained teachers (Kirner, Garbutt, Bracks) and John Cain was a lawyer.
- Three out of the four grew up in Melbourne.

In our view, the fact that three of the four decision-makers were teachers and one was a lawyer, put those affected by their decisions at a disadvantage. This is because, understanding the hardship faced by blue collar workers is a challenge for all of us, but particularly so for those whose life experiences and outlook are so vastly different.

Contrast this with Jeff Kennett who took no major decisions reduce the number of blue collar timber jobs. Interestingly, Jeff Kennett is the first Victorian Premier since Sir Henry Bolte who DID NOT graduate from University. (He attended the Australian National University for one year only.)

Environment movement's pre-election campaign

In the lead up to the November 2010 state poll, the Wilderness Society and other environmental groups have been running an effective campaign to persuade the state government to impose a total ban on timber harvesting in Melbourne's water catchment areas. In response, it appears that the Victorian Government is considering the demands of the environmental movement to implement a ban.

This is despite material from the Department of Sustainability and Environment which confirms that no 'old growth' forest is currently being harvested in Melbourne's water catchments and that this harvesting has no impact on the quality or amount of Melbourne's water supply.

The effect on jobs however, will be significant. According to VAFI, a ban on timber harvesting in Melbourne's water catchment areas will threaten the viability of 7 mills and 462 mill jobs. This DOES NOT include the number of blue collar timber harvesting contractor jobs that would also be threatened by such a ban. In addition, a further 6 mills and 1562 mill jobs could be affected by such a decision. ¹¹

The Department of Sustainability and Environment agrees that hundreds of regional jobs could be lost if such a ban were implemented. Material from the Department states:

“A ban on timber harvesting now could result in the loss of 200 direct jobs and many more indirect jobs losses. These impacts would be felt mostly through Heyfield, Traralgon, Morwell, Dandenong and smaller towns throughout the Central Highlands and Gippsland.” ¹²

It is unclear what position the current Victorian government will take on timber harvesting in Melbourne's water catchment areas.

The current Premier, John Brumby, like his predecessor, is a private school and university educated school teacher. The current Minister for the Environment and Climate Change is Gavin Jennings is a public school and university educated social worker.

However, John Brumby also has a farm in Harcourt and Gavin Jennings attended Beaufort High School, a rural high school in Central Victoria. In addition, Joe Helper, the Minister for Agriculture who shares the responsibility for the timber industry with Gavin Jennings, is a motor mechanic by occupation and the only blue collar worker in the current Victorian cabinet.

CONCLUSION

In our view, the education and occupational training that government decision-makers receive may have been a factor in to significantly reduce the amount of native timber to be harvested in 1986-87 and 2002.

Therefore, the fact that all four decision-makers were university educated with three teachers and one a lawyer does suggest that their education and background might have had a significant impact on their willingness to reduce the number of blue collar timber jobs.

The challenge for blue-collar timber workers is to make white collar decision-makers understand this inbuilt cultural prejudice that they may have when making decisions affecting their jobs and their lives.

