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Labor elites are lost in the woods

Rick Brown

History suggests timber communities have more to fear from Labor than the Coalition, writes RICK BROWN

LABOR government decisions, past and present, have decimated the Victorian timber industry.

Between 1986 and 1990, the number of timber mills dropped from about 150 to 100 -- probably about 1500 country timber jobs were lost.

These job losses were a consequence of the Cain Government's Timber Industry Strategy, its Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act and its decision to establish the Land Conservation Council and more national parks.

When the Bracks Government came to power it announced a further reduction of 40 per cent of the available hardwood that could be harvested from state forests.

The impact was the loss of another 30 mills and 900 jobs.

Since then 13 more mills have closed.

The closure of the mills has not only destroyed jobs, but also rural communities that depend on the timber industry.

The economic contribution of the timber industry to some communities is huge.

Industry studies have shown that in East Gippsland the timber industry has employed about 500 people directly and supported another 700 within the wider community.

Yet the timber industry is once again under threat.

The Victorian Greens want the Brumby government to ban timber harvesting in Melbourne's water catchments, even though no old-growth forest is being harvested and it does not reduce Melbourne's water supply.

A ban would threaten seven more mills and 454 country jobs. Another six mills and approximately 1500 jobs could also be affected.

Why is it that Labor governments destroy country, blue-collar timber jobs? Timber Communities Australia recently commissioned CPI Strategic to consider whether the occupational and educational backgrounds of the key political decision makers could be a factor.

The report, People Not Like Us, found Premier John Cain and his conservation minister Joan Kirner attended private and non-government secondary schools. John Cain was a lawyer and Joan Kirner a teacher.

Premier Steve Bracks and his environment minister Sherryl Garbutt were both university graduates and teachers.

Of the four, only Ms Garbutt attended government schools.

By contrast, Jeff Kennett was the first premier since Henry Bolte not to have a university degree. He does not list winding back the timber industry as one of his achievements.

Rather, he highlights bringing the Grand Prix to Melbourne -- an achievement largely scorned by inner-metropolitan, university-educated elites but embraced by blue-collar workers in the outer suburbs.

It is reasonable to ask whether the fact that the key Labor ministers are university graduates, generally attended non-government secondary schools and -- except Steve Bracks -- grew up in Melbourne, made it easier for them to make decisions which adversely affected blue-collar workers and their communities because they had little empathy with them.

Now the focus is on John Brumby, a teacher who attended a non-government high school, and his environment minister Gavin Jennings, a social worker who attended a government high school.

Both have rural links which should be a reason for hope.

However, the fact the government recently shut down two timber mills in northern Victoria by creating red gum national parks to appease environmentalists is not a good sign.

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