

## Hanging by a thread: how the river was won

By [Adam Morton](#)

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"This is pretty well pure rainforest," notes Bob Brown as the seaplane sweeps over the junction of the Gordon and Franklin rivers, deep in remote south-west Tasmania.

It is, and it nearly wasn't.

From above, the temperate myrtle-beech and Huon pine of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area create a royal green blanket, intercut by snaking blue-brown waterways. That it still looks like this is in significant part due to a decision made by Australians 30 years ago today.

Picking up on a campaign that took hold in mainland swing seats, then prime minister-elect Bob Hawke's first commitment on election night was: "The dam will not be built."

He blocked the creation of a 100-metre-high rockfill dam wall - the biggest of its type planned in the southern hemisphere - that would have flooded 25 kilometres of the Franklin River and drowned the surrounding forest.

The Tasmanian Liberal government challenged the decision in the High Court, claiming states' right, but lost a split judgment 4-3. By then, Dr Brown - the public face of the bid to save the river - was away, having entered the Tasmanian Parliament and begun a three-decade political career.

Overlooking the site of the Franklin blockade for the first time in five years, the former Greens leader says it strikes him that the groundbreaking campaign would fail if launched today. While he believes the public's concern about the environment is greater than ever, the political value placed on untouched areas far from where most Australians live has evaporated, for now at least.

"The river would be gone," he says. "The power of the resource extraction industries is running politics. Just in December, the Gillard government tried to hand back legislative power to the states, and I predict Tony Abbott will go further if he is elected.

"We are in an extraordinary situation where we don't take pride in our world heritage properties the way other countries do."

Dr Brown first saw the Franklin in 1976 after accepting an invitation to go on a rafting trip with Launceston forester Paul Smith. Famously, it changed his life. After a brief but mildly alarming encounter with a trio of fishermen armed with a large gun ("Deliverance had just come out and we had that very much in mind"), they did not see another human, or barely a sign of human impact, during the 11-day journey.

"It was day after day of waterfalls and side canyons, each of which was a marvel. There were rainforests, fungi, leatherwood blossoms ... platypuses, sea eagles and cormorants. Then we got to the Great Ravine, a spectacular deep gorge 500 metres deep with the big rapids," he says.

It was a transforming experience. "I was just transported by the remoteness and the wilderness of that country ... And then we came down the Franklin, turned right into the Gordon River and suddenly there were jackhammers, explosions out of adits, helicopters, motorboats," he says.

"Suddenly we'd come out of this entranced journey with nature and run into a cacophony down there and I was struck by the seriousness of what was going to happen."

The campaign built slowly, but became a full-time occupation in 1978, when Dr Brown gave up medicine and moved to Hobart. It peaked in summer 1982-83 when the Wilderness Society forged new ground in environmental campaigning in Australia by launching a mass protest, with more than 2000 people arriving at the west coast town of Strahan to block the works.

They had little direct success, but more than 500 were arrested, and the clashes with police and Hydro-Electric Commission workers received national coverage.

Dr Brown, who spent 19 days including Christmas 1982 in Risdon Prison, says luck played a part. Rain delayed construction, and the road being built for the bulldozers collapsed. The arrival of British botanist David Bellamy brought international attention. The Labor premier opposing the project, Doug Lowe, was rolled by his own party, but not before signing a letter successfully requesting World Heritage listing. And on the day the election was called Mr Hawke rolled Bill Hayden as Labor leader, who was less sympathetic.

"So much of the whole thing hung by a thread," Dr Brown says.

Beyond the protection of the river, one of the lasting impacts of the battle over the Franklin was the introduction of strict new penalties designed to stop protesters.

Today, nearly every environmental campaign from the Kimberley to the Tarkine is said to be "as big as the Franklin". Dr Brown says that the opposition to the proposed James Price Point gas hub comes closest. "Last week 20,000 people marched in Fremantle about this, and yet it received no coverage," he says. "Once it is gone you can't get it back. If ever there was parallels to the Franklin it is that."

Asked if winning protection of the Franklin is his greatest achievement, Dr Brown deflects. "I've always been very keen to have it seen that I didn't save the Franklin, it was saved by a community," he says.

After a pause, he adds: "I have very great difficulty rating one against the other, but going back to the Franklin gives me deep inner joy that is special - it is one of a kind."



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