

Foreign Ownership and Influence: Let's talk about it



Cassy O'Connor MP | Greens' Leader

Shaping our island's future.

The Greens have been listening to people who are concerned about the growing level of foreign ownership and influence in Tasmania.

Elevating this concern is the increased influence of companies with strong links to foreign governments and overseas based developers on the major parties, often in the form of political donations and other largesse.

Like all donations that come from vested interests to political parties, this has a corrupting influence on our democracy.

We recognise this is a conversation Tasmanians are keen to have.

FOREIGN INVESTMENT IN RESIDENTIAL PROPERTY

Foreign Investment Review Board (FIRB) rules place a range of restrictions on foreign investment in residential property. The FIRB annual report indicates low level of residential investment proposals in Tasmania.

There are, however, a range of exemptions from the requirement to notify and seek approval, including for new or near new dwellings purchased from certain developers, as well as for student accommodation.

Anecdotal evidence strongly suggests some international students are buying one or more residential properties to rent out for student accommodation. There is no requirement to report these real estate transactions under FIRB rules.

FOREIGN OWNERSHIP OF LAND

Available statistics tell us almost a quarter of our island's agricultural land has a level of foreign ownership, the highest of any State in the country.

This is concerning, given food and water security and the need for local food solutions will be critical this century. At the moment, the picture is incomplete. Tasmania has no historical data to compare past trends and no breakdown of interests by nationality.

In April 2016, a local consortium was outbid or 'overlooked' in the sale of Woolnorth in the State's North West to Moon Lake Investments. It is worth noting the VDL Company has not been under local ownership since it was established in 1825.

In August 2017, the Liberals sold 29 000ha of public plantation land to a company based in the Cayman Islands, without consultation and at substantially less than it cost taxpayers to establish the plantations.

Meanwhile, at Kangaroo Bay on Hobart's eastern shore, public foreshore land has been sold to Chinese based Shandong Chambroad Petrochemicals causing anger among residents denied a fair voice in the approval process.

The Office of the Coordinator General, established by the Liberals to facilitate private projects, actively promotes Tasmania as an investment opportunity for foreign companies.

When the Greens lodge Right to Information (RTI) requests with the OCG about negotiations over developments proposed for public Crown Land, detail is denied on the basis of 'commercial in confidence'.

We understand the value of foreign companies investing in our State. We also recognise the difference between such companies and those closely tied to or wholly-owned subsidiaries of foreign governments.

FOREIGN INFLUENCE

In 2015, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) warned all major political parties of the risks in accepting donations from the Yuhu Group of companies given its strong links to the Chinese Communist government.

In May 2016, the Tasmanian branch of the Liberals accepted \$30 000 from two Yuhu Group companies. Neither the Premier nor the party's Secretary have yet explained why ASIO's advice was ignored.

In this term of government, the Liberals have also signed MOUs they refused to make public with companies wholly owned by the Chinese government, including the Bank of China.

Such secrecy over agreements being signed on behalf of the people of Tasmania does little to instill public faith.

The Liberals' changes to the planning system have encouraged a Singapore based developer to propose two skyscrapers for Hobart and one in Launceston.

The Fragrance Group has demonstrated significant influence with the current government. It was able to negotiate the move of a bus stop at the bus interchange, located outside its new Hobart hotel development, around to busy Macquarie Street, only increasing traffic congestion.

To date, the state Liberal Party has not responded to questions about whether it has accepted donations from the Fragrance group or any other foreign donors in the lead up to this election.

A CONSIDERED APPROACH

The Greens recognise this debate must be undertaken rationally and respectfully. We want the Tasmanian community to be provided with more information about the level of foreign ownership and influence in Tasmania and whether or not the public interest is served by current policy settings.

We will move to establish a Joint Select Inquiry into the Nature and Extent of Foreign Ownership and Influence in Tasmania, with the following terms of reference.

TERMS OF REFERENCE.

- a) Examine the extent of foreign ownership of land and property, including but not limited to residential property and agricultural land;
- b) Seek expert evidence and public input to assess the impacts of foreign ownership on communities, food security, housing affordability and availability, strategic assets and sovereignty;
- c) Consider the experience of other jurisdictions, including New Zealand, and any legislative responses to foreign ownership of land and/or property that may be required in order to protect Tasmanian interests;
- d) Specifically examine whether more restrictive laws may be required where foreign individuals or businesses have strong ties to a foreign government;
- e) Analyse the level of foreign influence on political parties, planning decisions and governance in Tasmania;
- f) Any other matters incidental thereto.



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▲ WANT MORE INFO?

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