Tasmania’s Labor-Green Accord, forged in optimism, has ended in bitterness. And it’s mirrored elsewhere by a collapse of trust between the environmental and labour movements. Clare Curran looks at the competing interpretations of failure.

On 1 October Tasmania’s brave new experiment in green and mainstream politics was rendered meaningless. The Labor-Green Accord, hailed by many throughout the world as a ‘unique alliance’, crumbled into dust in an impasse over the future of the state’s national estate forests.

The breakdown occurred after conservationists refused to support the forest industry strategy proposed by the Labor government - the product of a year’s negotiations.

Once again the battle lines are being drawn in the Tasmanian wilderness and neither side appears prepared to budge an inch towards a compromise. Tasmania is now left with a hung parliament. Instead of a Labor-Green alliance with a majority of one, Labor now governs with 13 seats, the Liberal Party holds 17 and the Green Independents five.

The situation is precarious for Labor, despite the government’s prevailing ‘no worries’ attitude. It would take just one Green or Labor member to cross the floor and vote with the Liberals in a no confidence motion to bring down the Field government.

But despite that prospect, neither Field and the Liberals nor industry and union sources believe the Greens will take that step. Recent polls show support for both the Greens and Labor has slipped. It is in no-one’s interest to go to an early election.

That the Accord was a farce now seems generally accepted by the major players in this tug-of-war over the small state’s natural resources. Serious questions have now surfaced over how the Labor government could have allowed this internationally-acclaimed, 15-month agreement to be deliberately set aside to meet industry and political interests. Right now the only winner appears to be industry - with the strong likelihood of a new major pulp and paper mill development of Wesley Vale proportions in the next few years.

Alan Evans, head of the Premier’s Office, is widely considered to be a major force behind the government’s decision to push for an outcome on the forest strategy and to have Labor seen to move away from the Green position. It is this distancing tactic that is most significant, particularly in light of similar strategies used by the federal government in the recent decisions over the East Gippsland and South East forests. The decisions indicate that, fearing an economic backlash for appearing “too green”,

Labor governments everywhere are putting distance between themselves and conservation interests.

Evans argues the Tasmanian situation is not nearly as bad as it’s been painted. He says there has been a shift in positions all round. And he claims the environment movement will be much more prepared to accept the forest industry strategy once it is in place and seen to be working. He says it was a calculated decision by the government to walk away from the Accord because hard decisions had to be made. That the government has left itself open to an early election if the Greens choose to withdraw support does not seem to worry him. “We are prepared to accept that risk.”

There is private disquiet among Labor supporters that the decision to break the Accord was too hasty. But sources say it was inevitable that the Accord wouldn’t last, that Labor and the Greens were locked into a death stance - with Field wanting to be seen to be running the show and the Greens wanting to distance themselves from Labor’s economic platform. Predictably, conservationists consider Labor’s actions in the last month as “politically stupid”, motivated purely by the desire to satisfy industry interests.

But it is inevitable that significant industry pressure would be exerted on the Tasmanian government. In an economic climate dangerously affected by the excessive spending of the previous Liberal government, there is an obvious need for export-producing industry. It seems the conditions have now been set in place for such a development to occur. Whether it produces the much-hoped-for outcomes for job generation and export dollars is another matter. But will it be worth the trouble?

Renewed hostilities between the polarised forces of green and industry interests threaten to undermine the gains of the last 15 months. Will green and economic interests ever be compatible? For now, it seems not. A few things seem certain. While the political success of the five Independents in parliament may be short lived, the movement is not going to pack up and move on. And Tasmanian industry as a whole is backing the forestry industry; it seems to have dropped all pretence of seeking solutions. “We’ve reached the limit of compromise,” said Mark Addis, chief executive of the Forest Industries Association of Tasmania.

Addis refers to a new pulp and paper mill as a certainty, not a possibility. The only question remaining is when. He thinks the mill will be established within three to five years, given the need to develop new guidelines for the processing. Further evidence of industry interest in the outcome of the forest industry strategy talks was the silent presence of North Broken Hill at the negotiating table for three solid
weeks. Alec Marr, campaign co-ordinator for the Wilderness Society, claims North Broken Hill has been frantically lobbying the government for yet another mill. And Evans has indicated there is a strong likelihood of a world-scale bleached Kraft mill in Tasmania in the near future.

Alec Marr is a member of the Combined Environment Groups (CEG) which represented conservation interests at the forest industry strategy negotiations. He argues that those talks were never meant to produce consensus between conservation, industry and political interests. At first CEG believed a consensus might be possible, but when the 1 September deadline passed and no one seemed bothered, the conservationists suspected another agenda was operating. “They acted weirdly. We couldn’t figure out what the hell they were doing.”

According to Beacon the unions want to get rid of the export woodchip industry and are looking to a new processing plant that would create more jobs. He points out that Tasmania doesn’t have many options for industrial development. He accepts that a new mill won’t create many jobs in the long-term and could mean fewer as the processing industry sets about consolidating its 40-odd smaller plants into larger ones. Without the strategy - and the increased woodchip quota - the possibilities for job creation in the forest industry were pretty limited, he says. “It’s better than nothing.”

For Beacon, at the heart of the issue is the refusal by the conservation movement to place importance on preserving people’s jobs and livelihoods. He says he would dearly like the interests of the union and conservation movements to draw closer. “But it won’t happen until they recognise we have a responsibility to our members. Putting conservation interests above that responsibility is a price we’re not prepared to pay.”

Investigating alternative job creation possibilities for the forest industries does not appear to have been a priority, despite the injection of $8 million by the federal government last year to find solutions that would protect both employment and the national estate. More than a year later, with a strategy formulated (without endorsement by conservationists), only $2 million has been spent. Some of it appears to have been well invested in researching alternative industry options.

The most realistic - developing the veneer timber industry and plantation forests - could produce results, but not in the short-term. Overall, say the conservationists, a unique opportunity to investigate real alternatives - such as unbleached pulp processing - has been squandered. And there doesn’t appear to have been an attempt to look for alternative job strategies outside the forest industry. The remainder of the money will be used for implementing the new strategy, developing more plantations and compensation packages for job losses.

Doesn’t that concern the federal government? Bob Burton, from the Wilderness Society in Tasmania, maintains that the attitude of the federal government since handing over the money has been one of “bored indifference”: “they just hope the problem will go away”.

The extent of the state government’s indifference to seeking a solution of its impasse with the Greens was shown by the recently released Simons report - a consultancy commissioned by the government to investigate overseas trends in the unbleached pulp industry. Marr: “The report doesn’t say there isn’t a market for unbleached pulp. But it doesn’t say there is. It maintains the information is confidential.”

“A unique opportunity to investigate alternative strategies has been squandered”
Green Independent Christine Milne was recently quoted in the Launceston Examiner as saying the Greens were still opposed outright to a pulp mill unless there was no organo-chlorine discharge. She said the Greens were submitting a report on the Simons report into unbleached products markets and it would be highly critical of the consultant’s study.

So will the Greens pull the plug on the Labor government? Right now the general response is ‘no, not yet’. It is not in the Greens’ immediate interests to force an election where they would almost certainly lose two of their five seats. But while Field’s calculated risk depends on the Greens’ desire for political power, there is no doubt that his government is again at loggerheads with an old foe.

Marr says the conservation movement faces another five years’ hard work. While he believes the Accord was not a failure, it inevitably meant the Labor government would compromise on matters of principle. “Rather than a failure for the green movement, it confirms that neither party was capable of dealing with the major issues confronting the human race this century.”

He said the Tasmanian conservationists would turn away from expecting support through a government process towards the community, its traditional base. “We will continue the struggle all over Australia...and hope to speed up the formation of a political structure.” Marr says it’s no secret that many Australians are seeking a political alternative to the existing parties. “We’ve got to be prepared. The Labor Party is not the party that will save the planet.”

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What’s in the forest strategy?

The forest industry strategy proposes setting aside 1.1 million hectares for wood production to meet a sawlog quota of 300,000 cubic metres a year. That is expected to increase the woodchip quota by 400,000 tonnes a year, a move which requires federal government approval.

The strategy also includes the immediate reservation of 4,300 hectares as additions to existing national parks (an increase of less than 0.5%). It creates multiple-use reserves totalling 155,000 hectares and puts 580,000 hectares into a deferred forest area for further evaluation. Eventual protection of these areas is dependent on efficiency improvements in the industry itself.

Most significantly, the strategy proposes the creation of permanent wood production zones which would require the approval of both state and federal parliaments to revoke. Such legislation would in effect turn all Tasmania’s state forests into permanent wood production zones, creating a precedent for other states to follow.

Mark Addis from the Forest Industries Council in Tasmania makes no pretence that this is merely a one-state campaign for industry. “There is a strong push in industry for that sort of legislation to get up elsewhere. The federal government is coming under increasing pressure from the states, industry groups and the union movement to legislate to secure the resources for industry in state forests.”

The Tasmanian government formally adopted the forest industry strategy on 1 October, but will take six months to draw up the legislation to implement it and to finalise precise boundaries for the wood production zones, new reserves, multiple-use reserves and to decide the fate of the 580,000 hectares of deferred forest area.

Rejecting the government’s strategy, the Green Independents said they could not accept a lift in the woodchip export quota above 2.89 million tonnes, until there was agreement over a range of other concerns. They want protection of all national estate forests, large areas of which are in the proposed deferred area, the introduction of nature guarantee legislation to protect flora and fauna on private forest land and the rejection of the proposal to give legislative protection to the permanent wood production zone.

The final cabinet decision offered the Greens some compromises - legislation to protect rare and endangered species in private forests and a complete scientific examination of 220,000 hectares of deferred forest by June next year. These were in turn rejected by the Greens for not going far enough.

Green Independent Bob Brown has said the implementation process only meant funding forest groups to bring in the strategy, and the timetable for scientific investigation of the deferred forest areas was not new. The commitment to protect rare and threatened species was merely an expression, he said, because industry refused to allow use of the term ‘nature guarantee legislation’.