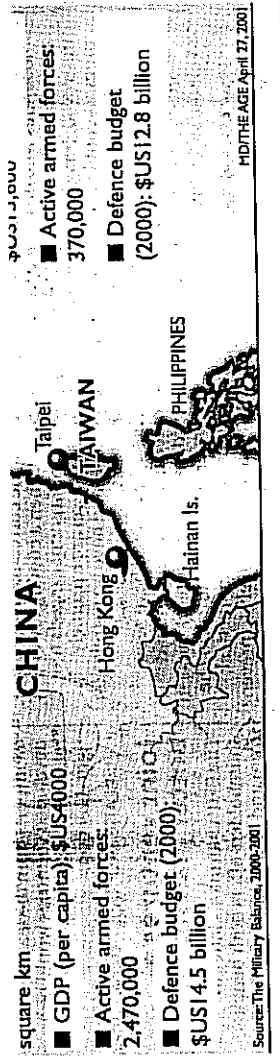


see some very confrontational politics, and we are going to be forced to take a position, in the most extreme case over Taiwan, which could lead to a very big fracture either way. The big strategic issues would obviously pull us in the end to the US side, but not without some very serious downside."

Tony Parkinson is *The Age's* international editor.



in acrimonious negotiations over the fate of the US spy plane that collided with a Chinese jet fighter over the skies of Hainan Island on April 1. The anxious 11-day stand-off over the detention of the American air crew is an episode still reverberating in both capitals.

Adding fuel to the fire was the Bush administration's decision to authorise more advanced weapons sales to Taiwan. On this, the Chinese

Sparks threaten to ignite Victoria's forestry ti

By CLAIRE MILLER
ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

A DOWNPOUR doused a political spatfire over logging deep in the Otways last weekend, just before it threatened to rage out of control. Only for a moment, embattled Environment Minister Sherryl Garbutt was saved by the rain.

But the issues that fuelled the stand-off between logging protesters and the State Government remain red hot. A rising middle-class green consciousness; increasing scrutiny of the environmental credentials of all political players; the Labor party's inherent vulnerability, given its membership, to the jobs-versus-conservation rift; and a pending federal election.

As ALP veteran Lindsay Tanner warned the next generation at a Young Labor gathering this month, the party cannot afford to take the environment vote for granted. Only 30 per cent of voters choose the ALP as the best party to manage the environment, he observed — putting Labor a mere five percentage points above the Coalition. "The message is clear," Tanner told his audience. "In an era when green credentials have assumed critical importance, Labor's lead is not enough to make the environment a major political strength for the party."

"Environmental protest is no longer the exclusive preserve of conservation activists," Tanner said. "Business and communities whose livelihoods are threatened by inappropriate activity are at last beginning to make their voices heard. The Bracks Government would be wise to heed these voices."

The voices reached screaming point after decisions by Sherryl Garbutt provoked confrontations over logging in two contentious areas — the Wombat State Forest and the Otways — these past two months.

In the first case, dozens of residents of the central Victorian township of Trentham entered the forest to stop logging in the hunting territory of a pair of endangered powerful owls. The community, fighting for a 1000-hectare habitat reserve, was especially riled by ministerial claims the existing 500-hectare reserve was adequate. The reserve has only 200 hectares of mature forest — 300 under the legal requirement.

After a week, the logging crew left of its own accord, moving on to another part of the forest where they are getting bigger and better logs without community complaint.

In the second instance, protesters, supported by many Great Ocean Road businesses and residents, disrupted logging for two weeks in the Ciancio block. The block borders endangered rainforest, and a key concern was its vulnerability to a fatal fungal disease which logging helps to spread. The protesters accused Ms Garbutt of hypocrisy — in opposition she had demanded buffers of up to 350 metres between logging and rainforest. But in office, she was satisfied with 40 metres — just like the previous government.

Logging on the coupe breached what the protesters claimed was a peace deal mediated last year, and their anger boiled over when Ms Garbutt argued that the terms of the disputed deal had not been "universally recognised by the other stakeholders". There was no deal, she said. Now all bets were off, and the situation



Sherryl Garbutt

reached crisis point earlier this month when protesters occupied the coupe so effectively that logging was suspended. When they came back, down came the rain.

The confrontations achieved little in the way of asserting Ms Garbutt's authority to manage the forests. But they did succeed in unifying an alliance of public interest groups including small-town business, local government, tourism operators, lawyers and doctors, conservation and recreational clubs. This eclectic movement shares the conviction that the government is determined to support logging at all social, economic, environmental — even political — cost.

Greg Hocking, the Athenaeum Theatre owner-turned-forest-activist, said it was impossible now for the community to deal with the minister in good faith. "Many of us are middle-class and experienced businesspeople who don't appreciate being treated like fools. She has burnt the moderates who were trying to give negotiation a go... She can't be trusted."

How did it come to this? Of all the ministers in the Bracks Government, Ms Garbutt was one of the most experienced and best prepared for her portfolio when Labor unexpectedly won office. She entered parliament in 1992 and was appointed shadow environment spokeswoman four years later, soon scoring

points against her counterpart Marie Tehan and securing the support of community groups alarmed at the Kennett government's approach to forestry.

Ms Garbutt went into the 1999 election promising to reform forest management. She launched a policy pledging an independent audit of how the department set sustainable logging rates. Ms Garbutt was not available for an interview on these issues, but she said in a written response to questions that Labor was committed to involving the community in decision making, meeting the RFA criteria for conservation reserves, and supporting a sustainable timber industry and forests that are protected and managed for a range of forest values. "These were the Bracks Government's election platform, this is being delivered and there are no surprises." But 18 months later, Tim Anderson of the Wombat Forest Society echoes the disappointment of many community and conservation groups, claiming little has changed under Labor despite the promises.

Chris Tipler, a Collins Street corporate adviser and member of the Otway Ranges Environment Network, argues this is not surprising given that the minister is listening to the same people who advised the previous government. Within the department were timber industry "stooges" with a deep commitment to logging and who were used to running the show, he said.

"And I think the government, having signed the regional forest agreements in haste, now feels obliged to meet the licence commitments — but I think it is a fundamental misreading of the politics, if they paid out the mills and invested in

tourism, people in the region would embrace the change."

Ms Garbutt rejects the criticism, saying she is committed to fostering a culture of change within the department in line with the Bracks Government's commitment to being open and transparent. But she remains hamstrung by the fraught nature of the relationship of Labor to green issues, with the party's support base divided between environmentalists and those who see jobs lost for every tree saved. Sources within the Victorian ALP say Ms Garbutt is compromised by her membership of the Labor Unity faction, which enjoys the financial support of the Construction, Forestry Mining and Energy Union and the timber industry. "It is all about winning the said one source. It is all about winning the land back for the woodchip industry and they are using the little mills as their front."

Mutterings from the Victorian ALP's rank and file now urge an end to clear-felling in the Otways. In a presentation to branches, the strengthening non-factional ALP Otway Ranges Interest Group is arguing that the Otways \$20 million timber industry is undermining jobs for the future in the region's burgeoning \$1 billion tourism industry. "The minister needs to be reminded that the ALP holds the state seat of Geelong by only 14 votes, and that Labor wants to win the seat of Corangamite (in the Otways) at the next federal election," the group says in its literature.

ALP sources said federal Labor could intervene to break the factional deadlock at state level. "If federal Labor feel that what the people want is to pay out the timber industry, then they will do it."

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