

— Editorial —

Troubled at Bastion Pt

Emotions involved in planning community works are bound to cause trouble. Trouble came to the visitors' gallery early this month when the shire council debated once again the Bastion Point ocean access project. Troubled describes the divided town of Mallacoota, and trouble will follow the Minister for Environment Gavin Jennings whatever he decides.

Twenty years of argument might be expected to produce a smidgen of consensus or at least an attitude of resignation in the face of official inevitability. But it didn't. As Bastion Point's fate sits on the Minister's desk, there is not the slightest sign of concord. To their credit, Save Bastion Point campaigners are nothing if not committed. They have marshaled arguments that make sense and, at the council meeting in force, were seriously disappointed by the council's decision.

Could they have expected anything else? The council did not meet to canvass the merits of the ocean access plan, which is already approved by the Planning Minister. It debated whether or not to submit the proposed plan to the Environment Minister, for final approval or rejection. This issue has more lives than a cat.

Save Bastion Point spokesman Leo Op den Brouw says they will fight on. But theirs may be a forlorn hope. Mallacoota Ocean Access Committee chairman Ian Lewis claims most local residents favor the access plan and is confident that it will pass the test of safety and economics. Local MP Craig Ingram's support suggests that the project will now proceed.

If it is not premature to say so, the Bastion Point saga shows that commitment plus proper homework plus strong emotion are not enough to hold back the tide of public and official opinion. The logic of the proposed development has a certain inevitability, at a time in our history when two irreconcilable forces will collide, with only one being the winner.

Sustainable development

Bastion Point is symbolic of that collision. Behind all the arguments about safety, amenity, economics and tourist potential lies the contest between different conceptions of an overworked and highly ambiguous concept – sustainable development. Last weekend's Federal Election showed that Australians are deeply divided about the conservation of natural resources on one hand and the history-long practice of transforming – for pleasure, convenience and profit, what nature provides so lavishly.

The extreme form of the division appears in the elitist celebration of pristine wilderness, on one hand, and the popular appetite for consumerism on the other. Somewhere between these polar opposites the possibility of harmony, mutuality and consensus waits to be realised. Perhaps it is already present. Perhaps, despite our argumentative ways, Australians really are able to accept the umpire's decision and make the best of things.

If so, Bastion Point may symbolise another truth – that hard-fought battles always produce a better result than if the combat had not been joined. Cr Peter Neal was right when he said "In 12 months' time I would like to think we look at this development and say what a great place for all to use, and that is why I have taken this decision."

With which sentiment we agree.