

REMEMBER NATURE AT THIS ELECTION

Exploring what the Conservation Amendment Bill means in a wider socio-economic context

A sunset view west from Pt1749 on Red Hills Ridge, Richmond Forest Park. All photos: Peter Laurenson, www.occasionalclimber.co.nz. The images featured with this opinion piece each show areas of our public land opened to commercial exploitation under the Conservation Amendment Bill.

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I believe the ideas I share in this opinion piece align generally with FMC's aims, but it is not from FMC. FMC is apolitical and seeks to work constructively with the government of the day to achieve its aims on behalf of its members. Although I am the editor of FMC's *Backcountry*, as we approach the general election, this message is from a citizen of

Aotearoa, a father and family member, a voter, trumper and occasional climber.

After his presentation at a Nelson/Marlborough NZAC club gathering last year, I asked photographer and environmentalist Craig Potton, 'What is the most important thing an individual can do to address climate change constructively?' He answered, 'Get political.' While there are many ways individuals can reduce our carbon footprint

and tread more lightly in nature, only through influencing the decisions and actions of politicians will society achieve the really big changes that matter most. And it seems that we who cherish the natural environment and hope for greater economic and social equity have not exerted enough influence over the past almost three years.

The current coalition government got the ball rolling rapidly at the beginning of their term with the Fast-track Approvals Act. Now one of their latest initiatives is the Conservation Amendment Bill. As with

Fast-track, the proposed amendments to Aotearoa's conservation legislation are being justified in terms of streamlining and improved efficiency to enable economic benefits.

Another claim behind both Fast-track and the Conservation Amendment Bill is that, due to the 'trickledown effect', economic growth is good for all. This view seriously undermines my faith in the coalition government's actions, because the 'trickledown effect' is not occurring to anything like the extent necessary to address



My sons Ed (right) and Will on top of Maungahuka, with the main range stretching away to the left. Tararua Forest Park offers countless opportunities for families to share outdoor adventures

escalating wealth inequity and its associated ills in Aotearoa (or indeed the wider world).

At this point you may be wondering why I'm talking about climate change and wealth inequity when the issue of the moment is the Conservation Amendment Bill. The three are inextricably linked. Although the Conservation Amendment Bill has a narrower focus than Fast-track, its potential outcomes are still of serious concern. Some in the tourism and mining industries are celebrating the commercial opportunities the Bill could present. But the enhanced profit enabled for private sector players (some of whom will be based offshore) may translate into reduced free public access for the wider tax-paying public, and increased exploitation of and harm to nature on our conservation estate. Both these outcomes will reduce public wellbeing and worsen our already poor response to climate change, which of course will hurt the poor more than the wealthy.

Both Fast-track and this Conservation Amendment Bill demonstrate the coalition government's repeatedly stated belief that 'it's all about the economy'. Such a vision for our country falls dramatically short of what I expect from government, and economic, social, cultural and environmental results endured during the current term of government speak for themselves. The economy is an important part of a healthy society, powering wealth creation, innovation and technological advances. Left entirely to its own devices, however, it all too often lacks a social or environmental conscience. A government must have the vision and courage to step in where the private sector falls short, to look beyond constant exploitation of a country's natural capital, and to use its unique abilities to source and apply funds and to exert influence through leadership and legislation to ensure that socio-cultural

and environmental interests share equal seats at the table alongside financial and economic interests. That is how an ongoing sustainable way of living can be realised. Unfortunately, what has unfolded during this term of government is deregulation of the private sector in tandem with reduced investment in social and environmental support – effectively, capitalism without a conscience.

Conservation Minister Tama Potaka had this to say about the Bill: 'The purpose of the reform is not to maximise economic development. The purpose is to ensure DOC has the tools necessary to manage land effectively and achieve better conservation outcomes' (RNZ article 18 June 2026). I believe actions speak much louder than words. Minister Potaka's claim contradicts what I've seen his government doing throughout the current term. The Bill's push to increase DOC's focus on economic

opportunities is deeply concerning. DOC is our nation's primary guardian of the conservation estate. There are many other levers and agencies already in place to assist economic development, so why dilute DOC's primary purpose (even more than has been done previously)?

The Bill also removes consultation opportunities for iwi, the NZ Conservation Authority, conservation boards and the public, and increases the direct influence of the minister over how conservation land is used commercially and potentially how it is disposed of, sold or exchanged. Trust therefore becomes an important consideration. Can we trust this government to oversee the sustainable management and use of our natural environment and conservation estate? The recent Fonterra Z-Energy behind-the-scenes lobbying scandal, in which two of Aotearoa's highest CO₂ emitters gave government officials

a draft law to prevent citizens from suing major polluters, is simply damning. Despite official advice, the government then passed climate legislation to that effect, making New Zealand the first nation on earth to take sweeping, retrospective action in its national climate framework to preclude common law liability for climate-related harms. When the process was publicly exposed, the government initially denied it, then offered an implausible explanation. How can I trust a government that is prepared to act in this way?

But you don't need to take my word for why the Conservation Amendment Bill is largely a bad idea. Conservation and legal experts at both FMC and Forest & Bird have examined the Bill in detail and, along with many other organisations and individuals (including myself), have made submissions to express their opposition to aspects of the content. View FMC's submission www.fmc.org.nz/what-we-do/campaigns/conservation-amendment-bill.

Public submissions on the Conservation Amendment Bill closed on 13 July (extended from 2 July following the extent of public opposition to the bill being expressed), but public influence doesn't stop there. Given the government's U-turn on the permanent sale, disposal or exchange of public conservation land, announced on 25 June (although at time of writing not finalised), it is clear that public influence can make a difference. Lobbying your local MPs, engaging with other members of the public and making your vote count in the coming general election are all ways to encourage a more equitable and therefore sustainable outcome in 2027 and beyond – including continued wide-ranging public access to our conservation estate and the ongoing preservation of its health.



Sunset at a tarn at 1,510 metres on the Alexander Range, West Coast. Experiences like this on public conservation land should not have to be purchased by those who already own it

