

## Using a Community Vote for Wind Energy Development Decision-Making in King Island, Tasmania

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**ABSTRACT** In 2012, a large scale wind energy project was proposed for development in King Island, Tasmania, Australia. The project proponents adopted what they described as a 'best practice' approach to community engagement; an approach expected to achieve positive outcomes for developer and community by maximising community involvement in decision-making, limiting social conflict, and enhancing the potential of achieving the social licence to operate. Despite this, the community experience during the time of the proposal was one of conflict and distress, and the proposal was eventually cancelled due to exogenous economic factors. This case study explores a key element of the engagement process—holding a community vote—that caused significant problems for people and process. The vote appeared to be a democratic means to facilitate community empowerment in the decision-making process. However, in this study, we show that the vote resulted in an increase in conflict and polarisation, challenged the legitimacy of the consultative process and credibility of the proponents, and ultimately led to legal actions taken by opponents against the proponent. Factors including voter eligibility, the benchmark for success of the vote, campaigning, and responses to the outcome of the vote are examined to demonstrate the complexity of decision-making for renewable energy and land use change more generally.

### KEY MESSAGE

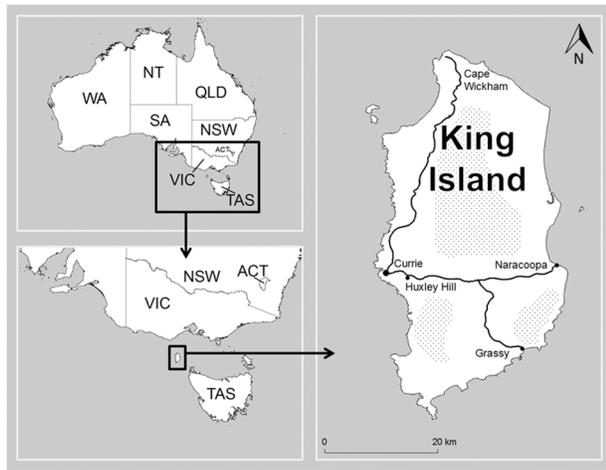
This case study demonstrates the complexity of community involvement in decision-making about company-led wind energy development. While the case study explores wind energy development, there are implications for community-based decision-making across a range of land use change and other issues. The study focuses on the process and implications of holding a vote as a means to measure and secure community support for a wind energy project. This case demonstrates the importance of attentiveness to the complexity of the social dimension of environmental issues. This will be of special interest in curriculum concerning community and stakeholder engagement and public participation.

### INTRODUCTION

Wind energy is considered an important contributor to the energy mix as society transitions in response to climate

change. Generally, there is broad in-principle support for wind energy from the public [1]. However, specific wind energy developments often experience local opposition and social conflict [2, 3]. This was the case in 2012 when a large-scale wind energy development, the TasWind project, was proposed in King Island, a small island community in the Australian state of Tasmania. Due to the proposal, the King Island community experienced significant social conflict and disharmony despite the consultative efforts of the project proponents.

This case study explores the experience in King Island, where the TasWind proponents adopted what they described as a 'best practice' community consultation approach. As such an approach is expected to minimise conflict, this case study examines one key element of the consultation strategy—a community vote on whether the project should proceed—and provides insight into why the King Island experience was one of conflict. This case



**FIGURE 1.** King Island is a regional Island community in the Australian state jurisdiction of Tasmania. Figure from [4].

study is based on 30 in-depth interviews ( $n = 30$ ) conducted with members of the King Island community in 2015 (detailed methods are available in [4]).

## CASE EXAMINATION

### *A Background of King Island*

King Island is a small, regional island community in the southern Australian state of Tasmania (Figure 1). The Island is approximately 64 km long and 27 km at its widest point [5]. As of 2013 records, the resident population was 1,605 people [6]. However, King Island has experienced long-term population decline, resulting in the challenges posed by associated economic decline. The local economy is largely based on beef and dairy farming [7], although the tourism sector is growing especially with the development of luxury golf courses and facilities [8].

The challenges of population and economic decline were compounded when in 2012 the local abattoir was closed by its multinational corporate owner [7]. This led to an immediate depression of the local economy due to job losses, and significant flow on effects throughout the community as a result. Despite the challenges of regional decline (which are not unique to King Island), members of the King Island community value their cohesion and relative isolation from the rest of the world. King Islanders have a strong sense of identity as King Islanders, not as Australians or Tasmanians.

### *About the TasWind Proposal*

It was into this setting of long-term population and economic challenges for King Island, and the sharp impact of

the abattoir closure, that a proposal for an AUD\$2 billion wind energy development was raised with the Island community by Tasmanian State-owned corporation Hydro Tasmania [9]. The proposal outlined around 200 turbines of 150 m in height across approximately 20% of the Island's land area [10, 11]. The proposal was expected to produce 600 MW of renewable energy for export to Australia's mainland via a proposed undersea cable linking King Island with the Australian state of Victoria [12]. As this proposal was for energy to be exported to Victoria, it was independent of the existing five turbines on King Island that generate energy for use by the Island's inhabitants.

Throughout the construction period, the proposal was expected to bring significant economic benefits to the Island (e.g., employment and associated economic activity, redevelopment of the King Island port, improvement of road facilities), with the expectation for modest ongoing economic benefits once operating (e.g., turbine host, neighbour, and community payments). Hydro Tasmania also committed to support local initiatives such as redeveloping the abattoir facility and contributing funding to sport and community events.

Although Hydro Tasmania announced in 2014 that the TasWind proposal would not proceed due to exogenous economic factors [12], in the intervening 2 years, the King Island community was affected significantly by the process of community consultation, engagement, and decision-making.

### *Approach to Community Consultation*

The proponent, Hydro Tasmania, adopted what they described as 'best practice' community engagement and undertook a range of activities in the Island that reflected recommendations from the academic literature [9].

The proponent engaged the community early in the project development process, meaning that community input to the project was possible at the pre-feasibility stage. The committee was composed of 17 King Islanders (and led by one of them elected by the committee members), who were recommended by the King Island Council or responded to a public request for Expressions of Interest for involvement. This was expected to allow for better integration of the community's preferences [13] and to limit the changes which may be required to a finalised project plan later in the process [3]. A community consultative committee was established by the proponents to serve as an intermediary between the company and the community. The establishment of committees is expected to

allow for improved dialogue [14] and to help the community feel they are being listened to, although committees can have limited effectiveness in reducing social conflict, especially in cases where the proponent exerts too much control on the committee [15].

Company representatives were based in the Island, meaning that there was a familiar face fronting many of the engagement activities. A shop front for the project was established in the main town to serve as a clear point for contact between the company and community throughout the process. These means to provide community access to company representatives could be expected to improve both the quality and quantity of contact between the community and company, encouraging community trust in the proposal [16].

Activities such as public meetings, including discussion and the presentation of independently developed visualisations (how the turbines would look) and auralisations (how the turbines would sound), were held. Regular communication materials were distributed to the community, including newsletters and updates, and the company brought in independent experts to brief the community on issues such as the potential impacts on local ecology. Additionally, the company provided financial support for local institutions and committed financial support to important community developments (e.g., infrastructure and facilities) if the project was successful.

Critically, the company administered a vote, where the community was told that their support would be a requirement for the project to proceed beyond the pre-feasibility phase (to the feasibility phase, during which a report on the viability of the project would be conducted). Such a measure is rarely enacted in major developments as it gives communities the power to veto [2].

#### *Impacts and Outcomes of Community Consultation*

Despite the consultative activities undertaken by the project proponent reflecting aspects of what is expected of 'best practice' community engagement, the community experienced significant conflict during the 2 years between the time the project was announced and the statement that it would not proceed due to exogenous economic factors. Much of this conflict was centred on the dispute between opponents (including an incorporated opposition group that formed in response to the proposal) and supporters of the project (including both the company and a number of vocal supporters within the com-

munity). This contradiction makes the King Island case study particularly fascinating, as 'best practice' community engagement is expected to limit social conflict and encourage social acceptance of the proposal [14, 17–20]. In this section, some key impacts and outcomes of the consultation process are discussed.

#### *The Community Vote and Consequent Legal Actions*

Unlike most major proposals, in the King Island case, there was a notable transference of decision-making power from the proponents and to the community. This was largely due to the presence of a formal vote concerning whether the King Island community wishes for the proposal to proceed from the pre-feasibility stage to the feasibility stage. The vote, however, was not part of the proponents' community engagement plan from the outset of the TasWind proposal.

THE 'SOCIAL LICENCE TO OPERATE' AND COMMUNITY ACCEPTANCE From the early discussions around the TasWind proposal, the proponents had indicated they wished to attain a 'social licence to operate' (SLO) as a precondition for developing the proposal. The SLO represents the idea that major projects require social approval, in addition to formal regulatory approvals, in order to operate successfully and free from the reputational and financial losses that can result from a lack of social support [21]. No formal licences are awarded to indicate a proponent that has attained the SLO, instead the term 'licence' is used metaphorically to emphasise the importance of social acceptance along with regulatory approvals. Generally, the SLO is considered to be met when stakeholders, especially those local to the project, are accepting of the project or proposal [22].

As a means to measure whether the proposal was likely to achieve the SLO, the proponents committed to hold a community survey in order to measure levels of community acceptance. From the start, the planned survey was not intended to be a formal or binding mechanism, rather the intention was to serve as an indicator of community acceptance. However, the community consultative committee and other active and vocal King Island community members felt that given the proponent's commitment to the SLO and their intention to collect data from the community on acceptance via the survey, the survey should become a vote. Holding a vote, it was argued, would mean the proponents were accountable to their commitment to

proceed with the proposal only if they attained the SLO. The community consultative committee put this argument to the proponents, and the proponents agreed that the survey could become a vote.

**VOTER ELIGIBILITY** The vote was to be administered by Australia's federal agency responsible for managing elections, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). While this offered credibility to the vote, it was also disputed by those who felt the need for voters to be formally enrolled in the electorates as per AEC records would exclude some legitimate voters, such as part-time residents or absentee landowners. The consultative committee and others in King Island argued to extend eligibility to include all those who are rate payers or rent payers in King Island. The proponents agreed to this change, leading to the withdrawal of the AEC. Some in the community, though, challenged whether the new eligibility rules were fair, as they meant that full time and seasonal residents had an equal say in a permanent change to the landscape and economy of the Island. The withdrawal of the AEC undermined the credibility of the vote, and the adjustment to eligibility was seen to represent 'moving goalposts', even though it was in response to requests from the community consultative committee.

**THE BENCHMARK FOR THE VOTE TO BE CONSIDERED SUCCESSFUL** More controversially, there was a lack of specification from the proponents on what was to be considered a benchmark of success for the vote. Some in the community felt that the vote should follow typical electoral rules, and which ever 'side' achieved greater than 50% of the vote would be considered successful. Others, however, felt that given the vote was serving as a measure of community acceptance, a much higher percentage of support such as 75% or even 90% should be used as a benchmark as a way of demonstrating support from a united community.

This issue was settled at a public meeting when a company representative was questioned on this issue by a community member. The company representative stated in what was described as an 'off the cuff' way that the proponents wished to achieve around 60% support from the community in order for the vote to be considered a success (and therefore, for the SLO to be attained and the prerequisite for progression of the project to be met). This figure became well known in the Island and was reported in local news media. While many community members were satisfied to have received certainty

around the figure, there were others who felt disempowered by what they felt was a company representative developing rules about the future of the Island in an improvised manner. From this perspective, while the community was being given the power to vote, they were being denied the power to determine what would be considered necessary for the vote to be viewed as successful.

**CAMPAIGNING ABOUT THE VOTE** Meanwhile, community members, especially those involved in the formal opposition group the 'No TasWind Farm Group' (NTWFG), had turned their energy and attention on to campaigning around the vote. The NTWFG adopted election-style campaign tactics and engaged with a public relations firm to support the campaign. Some community members supportive of the proposal undertook campaign-like activities, but there was not the same level of organisation as the NTWFG. Key campaign activities included the use of signs and posters around the community, community meetings, distribution of flyers, and debate via social media and the local newspaper. Due to the campaigning around the vote, the conflict in the community shifted from being primarily between the NTWFG and the proponents to being between supporters and opponents in the King Island community. This meant that the proposal was very prominent in day-to-day King Island life, resulting in increased distress among those who were adversely affected by the proposal or the conflict which followed it.

A consequence of the vote, in addition to the campaigning, was that all community members would be required, at the time of the vote, to commit to a 'yes' or 'no' stance on the proposal. For those who were ambivalent or unsure about the TasWind proposal, the expectation that they would have to vote 'yes' or 'no' closed down debate around the complexity of the proposal. In combination with the conflict stemming from the campaigning, the dichotomous nature of the vote meant that some people withdrew from the discussions around the proposal. As much of the campaigning was undertaken by the NTWFG, there were some who felt the NTWFG intentionally undermined social harmony in the Island through their activities. In contrast, the NTWFG argued that their campaign was undertaken in order to address what they saw as a significant power imbalance: a small community group attempting to oppose a large, government-owned corporation on a multi-billion dollar development proposal. As the NTWFG campaigned to address their per-

ceived power imbalance and as a result amplified their voice, others in the community felt that the campaign created a new power imbalance: that of between the NTWFG and the rest of the King Island community.

**OUTCOME OF THE VOTE** The vote was held in June 2013, and 878 votes were cast in total. The result came in at 58.7% support, just short of the 60% benchmark figure. Given the number of voters, the difference between 58.7% and 60% was around 12 individual votes. This outcome was problematic. The opponents, and the NTWFG in particular, viewed the outcome as positive for them, as they saw it as categorically failing the test set by the proponents. Supporters, meanwhile, felt that the result showed majority support and a figure 'close enough' to 60%, indicating that the vote had succeeded in demonstrating community agreement for the proposal to continue to the feasibility stage. The proponents agreed with the latter perspective and elected to proceed with the feasibility study, despite technically failing their own measure of the SLO. In response, the NTWFG initiated legal actions against the project proponents, based on the argument that the company had promised one thing and done another. These legal actions, however, were not settled in court as the case for the proposal became financially unviable (due to external economic factors) and the proposal was cancelled by the proponents.

#### *Resolution and Lasting Impact in King Island*

As one of several community consultation initiatives, the vote had significant impact on the community through leading to the exacerbation of conflict and offering confusing signals about the location of decision-making power. The proponents transferred voting power to the community, but retained the power to determine what would be considered successful. Many in the community acted on their power by casting a vote, but when the outcome did not meet the benchmark of success as decided by the proponents, the proponents proceeded with the proposal regardless. As a result of this, some community members felt wronged by the decisions of the proponents, while others felt that the strong local opposition were to blame for complicating the decision-making process. Others, meanwhile, considered that the vote represented a new norm of community decision-making, expecting that future large proposals would be accompanied by community voting by default.

Voting (local referenda) has been proposed as a means to allow for community participation in decision-making

around energy developments [13, 18, 22]. Through adopting mechanisms that support fairness in participation, there is an expectation that proponents are more likely to achieve their SLO. However, as voting is relatively rare in practice, there are few cases to examine the outcomes [23]. Available evidence indicates that voting can have little impact on community acceptance [24], and there are cautions that voting may politicise developments [25]. In the King Island experience where a corporate proponent was proposing a very large scale development, this was certainly the case. In situations where decision-making concerns a community-led, not company-led as with the King Island case, wind energy development, there is some evidence to indicate voting leads to positive outcomes [23, 26].

### **CONCLUSION**

The King Island community experienced social conflict and disruption for close to 2 years. Despite this, there has been no material change to the Island. The community is still affected by the challenges of life in a regional, primary industries based island, though now has the added strain of the legacy (*sensu* [27]) of the TasWind proposal. The community members who opposed the proposal are relieved by the outcome, although there are many in the Island who are disappointed at what they see as a missed opportunity.

While the project proponents adopted what was described as a 'best practice' approach to community consultation, unintended consequences caused poor outcomes for the King Island community. The SLO was contested and ultimately the proposal was cancelled, although this outcome was not attributed to the community conflict. The vote was especially problematic. While a vote may seem a familiar and democratic means to allow for community members to have a say in major development projects, the consequences may instead encourage conflict, campaigning, polarisation, and distress. This underscores the importance of adopting contextually appropriate mechanisms for community consultation initiatives in order to minimise harm on local communities and enhance the likelihood of achieving the SLO.

### **CASE STUDY QUESTIONS**

1. What would make members of a community, who were facing a large scale land use change like a wind energy development, desire a vote on the proposal?

2. Do developers really need the ‘social licence to operate’? Why?
3. What are the risks to developers of holding a community vote in terms of the ‘social licence to operate’?
4. What are three key aspects of the vote that exacerbated conflict in the community?
5. What is an alternative approach to empowering the community in the decision-making process which may not have led to conflict?
6. Was it just the process that caused community conflict, or was it likely there would be opposition to the proposal regardless of the community engagement process adopted?
7. Can you think of other instances of community-based decision-making that employed a vote? Were there similar outcomes to the King Island experience?
8. Do you think the outcome of the vote would have been different if the voter eligibility requirements had not changed? Why?
9. Can the power imbalance between a corporate development proponent and a community ever be levelled through consultation processes?
10. Do you think the outcome of the case study would have been any different if community ownership was offered to the residents as an option?

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

RMC conducted field work, analysed data, and wrote the manuscript. GBW and JL supervised the project, contributed to data interpretation, and wrote the manuscript.

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### COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

### SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Please refer to the teaching notes documentation for additional information and guidance with using this case study in the classroom. Template teaching slides (pptx) have been prepared for adaptation to teachers’ needs.

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