



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

BILLS

**Environment Protection and
Biodiversity Conservation
Amendment (Cost Recovery) Bill 2014**

Second Reading

SPEECH

Wednesday, 28 May 2014

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

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Questioner
Speaker Zappia, Tony, MP

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Mr ZAPPIA (Makin) (16:56): In speaking on the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Amendment (Cost Recovery) Bill 2014, I support the amendments moved by the member for Port Adelaide and shadow minister for the environment. I will begin by repeating what those amendments are:

That all words after "That" be omitted with a view to substituting the following words:

"whilst not declining to give the bill a second reading the House notes:

- (1) the government's poor environmental record;
- (2) the importance of protecting Australia's rich and diverse environment;
- (3) the need to fully examine the range of changes proposed to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act since September 2013; and
- (4) the lack of assurance from the government about the future management and protection of our natural environment."

Any legislation relating to the environment brought into this place by the Abbott government should ring alarm bells, and this legislation certainly does. It may appear to be simple legislation associated with cost-recovery, but the reality is that it goes to far more than that. One has only to look at the Abbott government's track record since coming to office with respect to the environment to understand why this legislation should be of concern, and I am going to go to some of the track record of the Abbott government since coming to office.

Budgets do not lie because budgets effectively enable governments to put their money where their mouth is. The money that is allocated in a budget clearly identifies a government's priorities and its long-term plans for the country. And if you look at the budget that was handed down only this month and carefully look at the expenditures that were cut from the environmental initiatives within that budget you get a very clear picture of what this government's priorities are, and how low a priority protecting the environment has.

Firstly, there is the \$1.3 billion cut to the Australian Renewable Energy Agency, which not only cuts thousands of jobs, expertise and innovation, and perhaps pushes them offshore but it undermines our competitiveness. This is the competitiveness that would enable us to in the future perhaps compete with other nations in respect of clean environmental programs, clean energy and the like. Most countries around the world are doing exactly that today—spending more money on innovation and technology with respect to green energy projects, rather than less. But Australia is going in the opposite direction.

I talk about energy programs because they are directly related to the environment. Carbon emissions and global warming have a direct impact on the environment, so when you affect those programs you directly affect our ability to manage the environment. Then there are other cuts, such as the cut to the Clean Energy Finance Corporation. What I do not understand about cutting the Clean Energy Finance Corporation—which also funded many of the initiatives I just referred to in relation to new technology and projects to enable us to remain energy sustainable and efficient as well as using the green energy innovations that are now available to us—is that the corporation was making money for the government. Closing down a corporation that is actually making money for the government highlights the disdain that the government has for the environment. You would not do it if you were not somehow trying to stop government investment in and protection of the environment. Even if you did not support that particular corporation on ideological grounds, you would think the fact that it was making money for the government, returning money to the government coffers, would mean that the government that claims we have a budget crisis would keep it. But, no, because it was an initiative linked to the environment, the government wanted to cut it.

The government then reduced the funding for the Carbon Capture and Storage Flagships Program as well as for the National Low Emissions Coal Initiative—again, two important environmental programs. The Australian Climate Change Science Program, which replaced an earlier program, will be cut by \$21.7 million. The Caring for our Country program has been cut by the \$483 million and the Environmental Stewardship Program has been cut by \$25.8 million. The National Water Commission is to be abolished and the Office of Water Science is also to be abolished. The water buybacks for the Murray-Darling Basin will be capped at 1,500 gigalitres and there have been \$168 million in cuts to water funding programs, as well as \$239 million of cuts to infrastructure project spending to make water use in the Murray-Darling Basin more efficient.

These are all cuts that go to the heart of programs and projects that were there to try and protect our environment, which was the indirect benefit and outcome of many of those programs. Going to direct funding, there have been funding cuts to environmental organisations across the country. These are organisations such as the Environmental Defender's Office, the Conservation Council of Australia and so many others that have been doing much of the good work in analysing and reporting back to the broader society on how our environment is going and on the general state of the environment. These are not-for-profit organisations that rely on government assistance. Unlike business organisations that have their own funding streams, these organisations rely on government support, yet that support has been entirely cut out, just as government support has been cut for the national wildlife corridors initiative.

Other cuts include: cuts to the CSIRO of \$111 million; the cooperative research centres, \$80 million; the Australian Research Council, \$75 million; and cuts to the Australian Institute of Marine Science. Again, these are all government organisations that provide invaluable research work with respect to our environment. It is their research work that so many government departments, community groups and industry rely on in making environmental assessments. It is their work that enables us to understand the environmental changes and trends that are occurring throughout Australia and throughout the world, for that matter.

My friend the member for Wills quite properly alluded to the Abbott government's push to delist about 74,000 hectares of the Tarkine forest area in Tasmania from World Heritage listing.

Mr Hutchinson: No, not the Tarkine.

Mr ZAPPIA: I am pleased to hear that it appears that might be stopped at international level, but that decision was consistent with the decision of this government to try to wind back the marine conservation areas introduced—again, for good reason—by the Labor government. This government is trying to wind all of that back as well.

This legislation is dressed up as an environmental cost recovery bill. No-one on this side of the House has any particular problem with that aspect of it. It sounds pretty straightforward. But the truth of the matter is that the transfer of authority and the delegation of authority to the states, perhaps to local government, in order to carry out the work they will then be entitled to be compensated for by charging a cost recovery fee. What are we doing when we transfer the authority to the states or, even, to local government?

Last year in this place I moved a private member's motion which raised my concerns about how conservative state governments along the entire east coast are turning their back on environmental initiatives that had been in place for years and years. We have seen from Queensland to New South Wales to Victoria the grazing of cattle in our national parks and in the alpine regions. We have seen our national park networks cut back. We have seen land clearing in all of those states in areas that were previously protected. We have seen mining and logging being allowed in areas where it had previously been stopped. And earlier this year we saw the example of the shark culling program in Western Australia.

These are just some of the examples we can allude to which highlight the irresponsibility of the state governments, predominantly conservative state governments, in recent times when it comes to protecting the environment. That is exactly why the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act was brought in by the federal government and why the federal government, going back to 1973, took responsibility with respect to the environment—because the states were negligent in some cases in upholding the environmental protection standards that Australians across the country expected. What we are now seeing is a government that wants us to return to those days when the responsibility lies entirely with the states. In fact, it might even go to local councils. I have no criticism of either the states or local councils if they are going to do the job right but the truth is their track record is not terribly good. The truth is we have seen only this year the budgets of state governments, with respect to their environmental commitments, being cut back drastically. So even if they wanted to do the right

thing, the reality is they are cutting back the very resources they will need to be agents of the federal government in carrying out the assessment processes we are asking them to do. Likewise, I expect that local governments across the country, as a result of having their financial assistance grants frozen by this government—grants that they rely on—will do exactly the same and tighten their belts. In turn, that means things like environmental programs are likely to be the first to go.

That is what concerns me about this legislation: we are asking levels of government that have previously had, at best, a questionable track record and now, possibly, do not have the resources to do the very job we are asking of them. That in turn will lead to poor environmental outcomes, because when the assessments are made they will either be rushed or they will not be properly scrutinised. When they are not properly scrutinised, they are likely to have flaws in them that the community would not be happy with if it knew about them.

One of the issues that is often raised by members opposite is the issue of duplication of process, additional cost and the like. That question needs to be counterbalanced against the environmental benefits that result because of the processes we have had in place in this country now for some time. I understand that in Europe, as a result of the environmental protection measures brought in, the value to the European Union countries has been in the order of 50 billion euros in recent years. Yes, they come at a cost; but there is also a community benefit to them.

The same applies here in Australia. It does come at a cost to carry out thorough environmental assessments but those assessments are inevitably there for good reason. That good reason is to preserve and protect the environment—which also has a value, something members opposite fail to understand and accept. The environment also has a real value to this country and it will continue to have value.

What is even more concerning is that—at a time when we are seeing report after report showing global warming is real and our climate is changing, which in turn directly puts additional pressures on the environment—we are winding back environmental measures we are in complete control of. Climate change measures are not so easy to manage but the ones we are being asked to change with this legislation are, because they are entirely within the control of this government.

The last point I will make is this: the environment committee of the House is right now looking at issues associated with what is referred to as green tape and the like. I would have thought that, before we transfer powers to the states and local governments, it might be appropriate to report back as a committee—to do the very work that is associated with some of the objectives of the government's legislation that is before us.

Finally, because others have made comments about a one-stop shop: this does not create a one-stop shop. It creates offices right across the country—in other words, there are now eight offices you will have to deal with, rather than one, and perhaps even more if you bring local government into it in order to get a process cleared. It is not efficient and, quite frankly, this House should indeed be concerned with aspects of this legislation.