Senator RHIANNON (New South Wales) (21:10): There is a great tragedy occurring in Sydney—in the centre of Sydney and in many of our suburbs. There is a slaughter of trees—a real carnage—going on under the Baird government. It is causing great distress to people, and I very much congratulate those people who are taking a stand. But at the moment the trees are not winning. The people are not winning. It is much harder because of the savage and very unfair laws that have been passed.

Probably a number of senators who may not be from New South Wales will travel in from the airport at times and go down Anzac Parade. Anzac Parade now is an area where there has just been devastation—hundreds and hundreds of trees cut down, totally unnecessarily. The government argues that it is for a new light rail system, but so many people have shown—as the government knows itself—that originally the route did not require these trees to be cut down, but now it is occurring. Some of the trees are over 100 years old; some are estimated to be 130 years old. Most of them are amazing fig trees, native to Sydney, called Port Jackson figs. There are many other species as well. Most of them are habitat trees, with a range of wildlife—many native birds, insects and reptiles. A real ecosystem can be found in each of those trees.

They are being felled for this Sydney transport project. It is a transport project people have worked on for a long time, knowing the benefits of light rail. But what we have seen here is that the company, ALTRAC, and the New South Wales government, with very little consultation—certainly no meaningful consultation—with local councils and communities, have gone ahead and rerouted their plans. There are many alternatives, as I have said. I congratulate the Greens transport spokesperson in the New South Wales parliament, Dr Mehreen Faruqi. She has identified, along with many of the other people who work in this area, where the rail line should be going and how we could have retained the trees and our green spaces that are so precious and ensured that they were protected, while bringing in light rail, which does revitalise so many areas. But the government has got it deeply wrong.

These trees, as I said, are priceless. They are so valuable locally, nationally and, I would say, internationally. I give particular emphasis to the international aspect of it, because many of these trees are along Anzac parade. Although most of them were planted before the Anzac tragedy occurred and so many young soldiers lost their lives, they were then named as part of Anzac Parade, and these trees were identified with the heritage and attributed to that great sacrifice. Many of them were planted in the 1870s by Charles Moore, who was founding father of Moore Park. For those of you not from Sydney, when you travel along Anzac Parade—as many of you would—into the city, it is on your right-hand side—a beautiful, big park beside Centennial Park. That is where so many of these trees were planted. As I said, Charles Moore was the founding father of Moore Park. Subsequently, a few decades after they were planted, the trees were dedicated to the Anzac soldiers. That happened in 1917, when what had formerly been called Randwick Road was renamed Anzac Parade. There are beautiful photos of that period, with people gathered together to mark that very important occasion of the renaming of this street and the dedication of the trees to the memory of the Anzacs. Now, nearly 100 years later, we have seen the slaughter and the destruction.

I particularly wanted to speak about it because I do not live far from there. I often go past this area. I know many people there, and I have met more people protesting. But some people cannot go there anymore, because they are just so distressed by what they are seeing: the chainsaws, often late into the night, and the big lights blazing so this destruction can go on with great rapidity.

I particularly congratulate the Total Environment Centre. They have provided great leadership on this issue with their big ‘Hands Off Our Trees’ campaign.

We had a huge rally on Valentine’s Day when we came together to show our love for the trees and to send a very strong message and there were many there. As I said, Randwick council has played a particularly good role. Murray Matson, a councillor; Lindsay Shurey, also a councillor; Matt Thistlethwaite, the local MP; and Clover Moore and Alex Greenwich, also local MPs from the other side of Centennial Park—and Clover Moore
is now the Mayor of Sydney; she was a former MP—have also added their voice to this huge campaign that is
growing all the time. The other night the protests continued—it is often late at night when much of this carnage
occurs. A young mother of two was arrested. I really want to say how upset people are. They find it hard to
believe that in 2016 any government would go ahead and just cut down over 1,000 trees in some of the most
built up areas in Sydney.

One of those who took part in the protests the other night was James Matheson. He was very inspired to save one
of the 130-year-old Moreton Bay figs. He is a former Australian Idol host who took up the cause very strongly,
in very moving way. He said in one of his comments ‘130 years to grow, destroyed in an hour, so sad’. People
are writing their own dedications, their own messages. As I said, this is having a huge impact amongst many
Sydneysiders. He also went on to say the light rail project will see more than 1,000 trees affected through Sydney.
‘Trees are part of our community,’ he said, ‘They are part of who we are. They are a thing of beauty. They provide
a connection between ourselves and the land.’ He appealed to people to come down to the protests. Often these
protests have been quite spontaneous and often they have been organised over weeks. People drive past, they
see what is happening, the word is spread through social media and people gather together. But the hardship
is considerable.

I also particularly want to pay tribute to Jeff Angel, long-term leader of the Total Environment Centre. He has
worked tirelessly with his colleagues in building this campaign along with John Bellamy, also a member of the
Total Environment Centre, who does not live too far from this area. They have also taken up the serious problem
that we have.

Sadly in New South Wales, it is not just around this area of Sydney. Under the laws that have been brought in
by the Liberal-National government, because we have such weak environmental laws to protect the trees, it is
very easy for a company like Altrac and for the New South Wales government itself to come forward with plans
that are put in place so then the chainsaws appear, the destruction goes for hours and hours and we end up with
woodchips, some sawdust and 130 years of living beauty destroyed in such quick time.

Word is that the New South Wales government is about to bring in land clearing laws that will make it even
easier for this destruction in other parts of the state. So we have a very serious problem in New South Wales. I
congratulate all those who feel passionate about it who are taking a stand—MPs and councillors, activists and
local residents. In this case with regard to the thousand trees around Anzac Parade and other areas, we know there
is another way. The light rail should have been maintained on its original track. We could have had light rail and
the beautiful green canopy that people love, that is home to so many animals and so much unique wildlife. We
could have saved both, and Sydney would have been a better city for it.