

Australian Greens additional comments

The Abbott Government's Attacks on the Environment

1.1 Since coming to office, the Abbott Government has launched an unprecedented attack on our natural environment, our national environment laws and the voices of the environment.

1.2 The Australian Greens are disappointed that the scope of this inquiry was substantially narrowed by a decision of the Committee to focus almost exclusively on funding for community environment organisations, the Environmental Defenders Offices, the abolition of the Biodiversity Fund and cuts to Landcare and Caring for Our Country. This decision means that the final report of the Committee omits substantive discussion of clean energy, our national environment laws and World Heritage matters.

1.3 The Australian Greens would like to thank everyone who made a submission to this inquiry including environmental organisations, unions, renewable energy organisations, academics and over 1,000 members of the public whose submissions were not published. Your time and passion for our precious places and species and our safe climate are appreciated.

Attacks on the voices of the environment

1.4 The Abbott Government has launched an insidious attack on the voices of the environment which threatens not only a safe, clean future for future generations, but also the fabric of our democracy.

1.5 This is far from the first time the Abbott Government has tried to silence independent voices standing up for the environment. The government abolished the independent Climate Commission and for the first time in almost 20 years, totally axed federal support for Environmental Defenders Offices around Australia. In total, these cuts amounted to \$10 million over four years. These were the only cuts specifically excluded when the Attorney-General backed down on cuts to other legal assistance in March 2015.

1.6 This government has also cut grants of \$5.4 million over four years under the Grants to Voluntary Environment, Sustainability and Heritage Organisations (GVESHO) program, which has provided core funding to organisations such as conservation councils since 1973.

1.7 Using a House of Representatives inquiry, and with the support of the Minister for the Environment, Coalition MPs are seeking to strip away deductible gift recipient status from groups on the Register of Environmental Organisations, under the premise that it is improper for environment groups to engage in law reform or to criticise the Abbott Government for its appalling environmental track record and agenda.

1.8 The Abbott Government is pushing forward with this attack despite the fact the High Court has ruled that advocacy with tax-deductible status have the right to

advocate and engage in political debate and that this is "indispensable" for "representative and responsible government".

1.9 Time and time again, everyday Australians have banded together to save our world-renowned environmental assets from short-sighted, government-endorsed destruction. Through protest, the community and the environment movement have worked together to end whaling in Australia, stop sand mining on Fraser Island, save the Great Barrier Reef from oil rigs and stop the Franklin River from being dammed.

1.10 By pretending that the only worthy environmentalism is planting trees or cleaning up litter, the Abbott Government allows big business and mining magnates to continue their destruction unchallenged. Local, on-the-ground efforts are vital, but systemic issues cannot simply be ignored. The environment movement's job is not just to clean up after destruction — it is to help the community raise its voice to stop it in the first place. Not content with just ignoring, ridiculing and de-funding those voices, the Abbott Government now wants them silenced.

1.11 Apart from being alarmingly undemocratic, the government's plan to strip tax-deductibility from environmental organisations would set a blatant double standard. There's no talk from the Coalition of removing tax deductibility for donations to Tony Abbott's favourite think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs. Instead, the government has ruthlessly pursued the IPA's wish list of scrapping our effective price on carbon, scrapping federal environmental protections by handing them to the states, repealing the mining tax, cutting university funding and attacking Medicare.

The invaluable role of the Environmental Defenders Offices

1.12 For 30 years, the Environmental Defenders Offices (EDOs) have been providing free legal advice to community members who want to use the law to protect the environment in the public interest. It is an invaluable service, and is the only means through which members of the public can be empowered to understand and enforce environmental laws in the public interest without charge.

1.13 It is part of a functioning healthy democracy that citizens are able to hold government to account and enforce the rule of law. Frequently government enforcement of environmental laws is under-resourced and overlooked (as countless reports attest, including recent reports by both the Queensland and the federal Auditors General), so the role of the community in enforcing laws is all the more important. Giving communities a voice as the EDOs do warrants government support and it is outrageous that the Abbott Government has removed all federal funding for EDOs for the first time in the 18 year history of federal funding. Given the program of attacks on our natural environment by this government, never has the EDO been more needed.

1.14 The Productivity Commission's recent report on Access to Justice Arrangements found that community legal centres (CLCs), of which the EDOs are an example, are vital. The report found that they save governments money in the long term and deserve an additional \$200 million in government funding. EDOs are expert environmental lawyers and their law reform submissions are of impeccable standard in using the lessons learned from practicing to identify systemic reforms which would

be more efficient and effective. CLCs, and EDOs, save government money and help fix flaws and oversights in our laws.

1.15 They are a public good and should be overwhelmingly supported and funded by governments of all political persuasions as a service and a crucial element of a healthy democracy.

Disclosure: I was proud to work as a solicitor at the EDO Qld for 9 years prior to commencing my term in the Senate, and I regularly donate to EDO Qld in recognition of the outstanding work they provide to the community and our natural environment.

Recommendation 1

1.16 The Abbott Government should abandon its ideological attack on deductible gift recipient status of the voices of the environment.

Recommendation 2

1.17 The Abbott Government should restore funding to the Environmental Defenders Offices to at least the level which existed in September 2013 (including both recurrent and supplementary funding) and should consider increasing that funding based on the Productivity Commission's recommendations for \$200 million increase in funding for community legal centres.

Recommendation 3

1.18 The Abbott Government should remove the gag clauses in funding agreements with non-government organisations which prevent them from advocating for better protections for the environment and which prevent them from standing with the community against extractive industries such as coal and unconventional gas to protect our land, water and a safe climate.

Recommendation 4

1.19 The Abbott Government should restore core funding for the voices of our environment under the Grants to Voluntary Environment, Sustainability and Heritage Organisations (GVESHO) program.

Cuts to the Biodiversity Fund and other programs

1.20 The abolition of the Biodiversity Fund, starting under Labor with cutting the Biodiversity Fund in half, and concluding under the Abbott Government with the abolition of the remainder, was staggeringly short-sighted and represents a huge loss to our environment and to future generations.

1.21 The Abbott Government's cuts in the 2014 Budget to the Landcare and Caring for Our Country are also a disaster for our environment. Landcare experienced a cut of \$484 million in the 2014 Budget with the money redirected to more questionable programs.

1.22 In the 2015 Budget, the Abbott Government made further \$100 million in cuts to environmental programs including Landcare and Green Army, to fund commitments on the Great Barrier Reef. While those commitments are welcome though do not go far enough and are not adequately funded, that money should not

have come at the expense of other environment programs. Expenditure on the environment needs to be increased, rather than reducing and reshuffling the deckchairs on the Titanic.

Recommendation 5

1.23 The Biodiversity Fund should be fully restored, up to a total level of \$946 million, inclusive of projects already funded under previous funding rounds.

Recommendation 6

1.24 Funding for the National Landcare Programme should be restored to September 2013 levels.

Recommendation 7

1.25 Funding for welcome commitments on the Great Barrier Reef should not come at the expense of other environment programs.

**Senator Larissa Waters
Senator for Queensland**