

A Call to Arms on Safeguarding Our Environment!

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Introduction

Australia stands at a crossroads. On one hand, public concern for the environment has never been more visible, with climate change and ecological degradation consistently ranking high among voter concerns. On the other, government responses—both federal and state—remain profoundly misaligned with this groundswell of concern. Despite mounting scientific evidence of accelerating ecological degradation, repeated public inquiries into environmental failings, and clear calls for systemic reform, Australia has become a textbook example of political inertia, systemic neglect, and a troubling disconnect between rhetoric and reality. This article is an expanded call to arms: for transparency, for genuine leadership, for a fundamental re-prioritisation of environmental protection, and above all, for meaningful, enforceable action to safeguard our unique and imperilled environment for future generations.

The Disconnect Between Government and Community: A Growing Chasm

Recent studies consistently show overwhelming public support for stronger environmental protections. A 2023 report from the Australia Institute, for instance, revealed that over 70% of Australians support an end to native forest logging and greater investment in renewable energy (Australia Institute, 2023). Polling by the Climate Council in 2024 further indicated that a majority of Australians want stronger climate action and are concerned about the impacts of fossil fuels. Yet, the government's actions often fall demonstrably short of these public expectations, creating a widening chasm of trust.

This disconnect is particularly evident in the federal government's approach to environmental legislation and new fossil fuel projects. The Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act 1999, Australia's primary national environmental law, has long been criticised as ineffective. The 2020 interim report from the Independent Review of the EPBC Act by Professor Graeme Samuel made 38 recommendations to reform this law, including establishing independent environmental standards and a national environmental watchdog. However, the Morrison Government shelved most recommendations, and later proposals were watered down to appease industry stakeholders (Samuel, 2020).

Despite the change in federal government in 2022, the pace and nature of EPBC Act reform under Labor have drawn significant critique for failing to deliver on promised environmental protections. While the Albanese Government committed to establishing a new national environmental protection agency (EPA) and national environmental standards, progress has been slow, and critics argue the proposed reforms lack the necessary teeth to genuinely halt biodiversity decline and climate impacts. Environmental legal experts, such as the Environmental Defenders Office (EDO), have expressed concern that the proposed new laws may still contain loopholes that allow for continued environmental destruction, particularly if they do not adequately address the "climate trigger" for new fossil fuel projects.

Labor's Environmental Commitments: A Reality Check

The Albanese Labor Government came to power in 2022 with a mandate for stronger climate action and environmental protection. Key commitments included:

- **Net Zero by 2050 and a 43% emissions reduction target by 2030.**
- **Establishing a new independent national EPA.**
- **Overhauling the EPBC Act with new national environmental standards.**
- **Investing in renewable energy.**

However, a critical examination reveals a significant gap between these commitments and their realisation, particularly concerning fossil fuel expansion and the robustness of environmental laws.

Unrealised Commitments: The Fossil Fuel Conundrum

One of the most glaring inconsistencies is the government's continued approval of new fossil fuel projects. Despite the net-zero by 2050 pledge, the Labor Government has faced widespread criticism for greenlighting projects that will lock in decades of new emissions.

- **Woodside Energy's North West Shelf (NWS) Gas Project Extension:** The recent approval of a 70-year extension to Woodside Energy's North West Shelf (NWS) gas project until beyond 2070 has drawn widespread condemnation. Environmental groups and climate scientists highlight that this deal greenlights continued fossil fuel extraction with estimated emissions of up to 4.3 billion tonnes of CO₂ (The Australia Institute, 2024). This decision is seen by many as directly undermining Australia's climate targets and its international credibility. Greenpeace Australia has described it as a "climate bomb" and a "betrayal" of climate goals, arguing it prioritises fossil fuel interests over environmental protection and the future of the Great Barrier Reef (Greenpeace Australia, 2024).
- **Beetaloo Basin Gas Development:** Despite scientific warnings about the significant greenhouse gas emissions potential, the government has continued to support gas exploration and development in the Beetaloo Basin. Critics argue that opening up new gas fields is incompatible with meeting emissions reduction targets and transitioning to a renewable energy future.
- **New Coal Mine Approvals:** While the focus is often on gas, the government has also faced scrutiny for not halting new coal mine approvals, which continue to contribute to global emissions. Environmental groups argue that a genuine commitment to climate action requires an end to all new fossil fuel projects.

These approvals are not merely isolated incidents; they represent a systemic policy failure to reconcile climate commitments with ongoing fossil fuel expansion. Critics argue that the government's "safeguard mechanism" for industrial emissions is insufficient to offset the emissions from new projects, effectively allowing for a net increase in emissions from the fossil fuel sector.

Critiques of Current Australian Environmental Policy

Current Australian environmental policy faces multifaceted critiques from environmental organisations, scientists, legal experts, and even former government officials:

1. Weak Environmental Laws and Lack of Independent Oversight:

- **EPBC Act Reform Delays and Dilution:** As noted, the promised overhaul of the EPBC Act has been slow. Critics, including the Environmental Defenders Office (EDO), argue that the proposed reforms do not go far enough to address the fundamental flaws of the Act, such as its failure to protect critical habitats and its inability to effectively regulate cumulative impacts. There are concerns that the new national environmental standards, if not robustly defined and enforced, will continue to allow environmental destruction.
- **"Watered Down" EPA:** While an independent EPA is promised, questions remain about its funding, powers, and true independence from political influence. Without strong enforcement powers and adequate resources, an EPA risks becoming another bureaucratic layer rather than an effective environmental protector.

2. Climate Policy: Ambition vs. Action:

- **Insufficient Targets:** While the 43% emissions reduction target by 2030 is an improvement on previous governments, many scientists and climate advocacy groups argue it is still insufficient to meet Australia's fair share of the global effort to limit warming to 1.5°C.

- **Safeguard Mechanism Loopholes:** The reformed safeguard mechanism, designed to reduce emissions from Australia's largest industrial polluters, has been criticised for containing loopholes that allow for the approval of new fossil fuel projects and the use of offsets rather than direct emissions reductions. This means that while some sectors might reduce emissions, the overall national emissions profile could still increase due to new fossil fuel developments.
- **Lack of Just Transition Planning:** There is a perceived lack of comprehensive planning for a just transition away from fossil fuels, leaving communities reliant on these industries uncertain about their future.

3. Biodiversity Crisis and Land Clearing:

- Australia is a global biodiversity hotspot, but it also has one of the highest rates of mammal extinction. Current policies are widely seen as failing to halt the ongoing crisis of habitat loss and species extinction.
- **Continued Land Clearing:** Despite the biodiversity crisis, extensive land clearing continues across the country, driven by agriculture and urban expansion, often under state-based regulations that are less stringent than national environmental protection requires. The EPBC Act has been ineffective in preventing this.

4. Water Management and the Murray-Darling Basin:

- **Ongoing Mismanagement:** The Murray-Darling Basin continues to be plagued by issues of water mismanagement, over-extraction, and ecological decline. Despite numerous inquiries and a Basin Plan, environmental flows remain insufficient, and conflicts over water rights persist.
- **Lack of Enforcement:** Critiques highlight a lack of strong enforcement mechanisms and political will to ensure compliance with the Basin Plan, leading to ongoing environmental degradation and social injustice for downstream communities and Indigenous populations.

5. Bureaucratic Self-Interest and Corruption:

- Public trust in institutions has eroded in parallel with these developments. The NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) has repeatedly exposed how bureaucratic and political actors prioritised developer interests over public benefit. The case of former NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian exemplified how opaque decision-making and a lack of disclosure created fertile ground for corruption (SMH, 2021).
- Moreover, media investigations such as The Guardian's "Cash for Water" exposé (2018) revealed how upstream irrigators received generous allocations and subsidies while river systems ran dry downstream, highlighting collusion between water authorities and private enterprise. This systemic issue extends beyond water, impacting environmental approvals where political donations or personal connections may influence outcomes.

The Erosion of Environmental Portfolios: A Systemic Weakness

Compounding these issues is the structural downgrading and under-resourcing of environmental portfolios. In 2020, the federal Department of Environment and Energy was absorbed into the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, signalling a diminished focus. Senior environmental scientists warned this would limit independent oversight and reduce environmental priorities to a subsidiary status (The Conversation, 2020). While the Albanese Government has moved to re-establish a standalone Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water, concerns remain about the adequacy of funding, staffing, and political empowerment needed to genuinely tackle the scale of environmental challenges. Critics argue that environmental agencies

often lack the necessary resources and political clout to effectively enforce laws and protect ecosystems against powerful industry interests.

Ignored Inquiries and Diluted Recommendations: A Pattern of Neglect

This pattern of neglect stretches back decades, demonstrating a systemic reluctance to act on expert advice:

- **The Murray-Darling Basin Royal Commission (2019):** This commission produced a scathing critique of mismanagement and called for urgent regulatory reform, water integrity measures, and a re-evaluation of the Basin Plan. Yet, many of its fundamental recommendations regarding sustainable limits and enforcement have faced significant political resistance and have not been fully implemented, leading to ongoing ecological stress and social inequities in the Basin.
- **The 2016 Senate Inquiry into the Great Barrier Reef:** This inquiry made robust suggestions regarding the impacts of coal development, water quality standards, and agricultural runoff. Few were enacted with sufficient force. Instead, approval was given to projects like the Adani Carmichael coalmine, with federal ministers overriding expert scientific advice (ABC News, 2019), demonstrating a prioritisation of short-term economic gains over long-term environmental health.
- **The Bushfire Royal Commission (2020):** While not solely environmental, this commission highlighted the devastating impacts of climate change on bushfire intensity and frequency, and made recommendations for improved climate resilience and land management. Critics argue that the pace of implementing these recommendations, particularly those related to emissions reduction, remains too slow given the escalating climate risks.

This consistent pattern of inquiries leading to strong recommendations that are subsequently ignored or diluted highlights a fundamental flaw in Australia's governance of environmental matters. It suggests a lack of political will to implement the necessary, sometimes difficult, reforms required to genuinely safeguard the environment.

Contrasts from the Global Stage: Pathways to Progress

Other countries have demonstrated what committed leadership and robust policy can achieve, offering valuable lessons for Australia:

- **Costa Rica:** This nation generates over 98% of its electricity from renewable sources and has achieved a remarkable reversal of deforestation through pioneering payments for ecosystem services. Their success is underpinned by strong political will, transparency, and deep community engagement, demonstrating that economic development and environmental protection can go together (UNDP, 2021).
- **Germany's Energiewende:** Germany's ambitious energy transition policy has seen significant progress, with renewables accounting for over 50% of electricity generation in 2022. This transformation has involved substantial investment in renewable energy infrastructure, supportive regulatory frameworks, and public participation, showcasing a large industrialised nation's capacity to decarbonise.
- **New Zealand's Climate Change Response (Zero Carbon) Amendment Act:** This legislation sets legally binding emissions reduction targets and establishes an independent Climate Change Commission to provide expert advice and monitor progress. This institutional framework provides a level of accountability and long-term planning that critics argue is still lacking in Australia.
- **European Union's Green Deal:** The EU's comprehensive strategy aims for climate neutrality by 2050 and includes ambitious targets across various sectors, backed by significant

investment and regulatory measures. This integrated approach demonstrates a commitment to systemic change across the economy.

These examples show that effective, transformative climate and environmental policies are possible with the right legislative, fiscal, cultural, and political frameworks. They underscore the importance of genuine political will, strong independent institutions, and a willingness to challenge entrenched interests.

Conclusion: A Moral Imperative for Action

Australia must decisively break its cycle of neglect and political inertia. The environment cannot continue to be an afterthought, a bargaining chip for political expediency, or a casualty of short-term economic interests. The evidence of ecological degradation and climate vulnerability is overwhelming, and the public's demand for action is clear.

There must be genuine accountability for inaction, a fundamental re-prioritisation of environmental agencies through adequate funding and empowerment, and authentic, deep community engagement that values Indigenous knowledge and local perspectives. This is more than a policy debate; it is a moral imperative. The long-term health, prosperity, and liveability of Australia depend on it. If governments continue to fail to act decisively and transparently, then the responsibility falls on all of us—citizens, civil society, and ethical businesses—to demand the profound and systemic change we desperately need to safeguard our environment for future generations.

Appendix: Cited Sources

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