

Critically Reviewed Update: Is the Future of Australia's Economy ... Circular?

Original Report by Mariana Marabini, HOPE Researcher (Qld), 22nd of January 2019

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This update critically reviews Mariana Marabini's insightful 2019 report, "IS THE FUTURE OF AUSTRALIA'S ECONOMY ... CIRCULAR?", by integrating the latest findings and recommendations from the Senate Environment and Communications References Committee's April 2025 report, *No time to waste: Waste reduction and recycling policies* (hereafter referred to as the Senate Committee Report) ⁽¹⁾. While Marabini's original analysis correctly identified emerging trends and Australia's initial policy responses, the intervening years reveal significant shifts, ongoing challenges, and a more urgent call for legislative action.

The World We Live In - An Updated Perspective

Marabini's premise that the 4th Industrial Revolution and increasing consumer demand are driving unprecedented waste generation remains acutely relevant. Her 2019 figure of 1.18 billion tonnes of global garbage annually has likely escalated, with Australia's domestic waste generation alone increasing significantly. The Senate Committee Report confirms Australia generated an estimated **75.6 million tonnes (Mt) of waste in 2022-23**, equivalent to almost 3 tonnes per capita ^(1, p. 3). Despite a recovery rate of 66% overall, plastics recovery remains critically low at just **12.5%** ^(1, p. 6). This highlights that waste management continues to be a substantial challenge, reinforcing Marabini's initial observations.

Marabini noted the Australian Federal Government's 2018 National Waste Policy as a response to waste challenges ⁽²⁾. However, the Senate Committee Report critically assesses its subsequent iterations, including the 2019 and 2024 National Waste Policy Action Plans. By May 2024, the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water (DCCEEW) acknowledged that **only one of the seven non-binding targets from the 2019 Action Plan (export bans) was on track, with three partly met and three not met at all**, including reducing total waste generated per person and halving organic waste to landfill ^(1, p. 30-32). This stands in stark contrast to Marabini's implicit hope that the 2018 policy would adequately "address the issue until 2030." The linear "take-make-waste" mindset, which Marabini argued was unquestioned, now faces overt criticism from industry and government bodies seeking a fundamental shift.

The Nature of the Circular Economy - Australia's Evolving Understanding

Marabini accurately defined the Circular Economy (CE) as a concept aiming for zero waste by continuously reusing materials, drawing parallels with natural ecosystems and emphasizing "nutrient cycles," "energy flows," and "community of living and non-living components." This core understanding holds true. However, Australia's practical implementation lags. The Senate Committee Report highlights Australia's current circularity rate at a mere **4.6%**, significantly below the global average of 7.2% ^(1, p. 52). Despite this, recent modelling cited by the Circular Economy Ministerial Advisory Group (CEMAG) suggests a CE could add up to **\$210 billion to Australia's GDP and create 17,000 additional jobs by 2047-48** ^(1, p. 53).

A key critical update is the sector's evolving vocabulary and tone: the Senate Committee Report notes extensive evidence advocating that "waste" should be reclassified as a "resource" to reflect its value (¹, p. 21). This semantic shift reinforces and highlights a fundamental re-evaluation of materials within the economy, moving beyond simply managing disposal to actively valuing and retaining resources.

Australia's Policy Landscape: From Reaction to Legislation?

Marabini's critique that Australia's 2018 waste policy was merely a "reaction to China's restriction on importing waste" and remained "a short-term solution seeking for a local demand" (2) still holds validity in 2025. The Senate Committee Report confirms that the Recycling and Waste Reduction Act 2020 (RAWR Act) was indeed implemented following the export ban agreement (¹, p. 8). While the RAWR Act has objects relating to CE, it largely provides frameworks for *voluntary* product stewardship (¹, p. 81).

Since Marabini's report, significant policy developments have occurred:

- **Circular Economy Ministerial Advisory Group (CEMAG):** Established in 2022, CEMAG delivered its final report in December 2024, making 14 core recommendations, including legislating a **Circular Economy Act** (¹, p. 56). This proposed Act would provide a comprehensive regulatory framework to "lift the environmental performance of products entering the economy," including mandatory product stewardship and disclosure (¹, p. 56).
- **Australia's Circular Economy Framework (2024):** Released concurrently with CEMAG's report, this framework sets an ambitious goal of **doubling Australia's circularity by 2035** through targets like reducing material footprint by 10% and lifting materials productivity by 30% (¹, p. 62).
- **Productivity Commission (PC) Inquiry:** Commenced in August 2024, the PC is examining opportunities and barriers in the circular economy, with an interim report released in March 2025 (¹, p. 63-64).

Despite these developments, the Senate Committee Report reveals persistent issues that validate Marabini's concerns about insufficient determination in Australian policies:

Regulatory fragmentation between state and territory jurisdictions remains a significant impediment, creating "confusion and fragmentation across the sector" (¹, p. 35). This is evident in differing bin lid colours, inconsistent collection lists, and varied product bans across states (¹, p. 43). The report details calls for a **national, harmonised framework** and acknowledges that the "advisory approach" to CE and voluntary product stewardship schemes are *failing* (¹, p. 41). Industry stakeholders are now "calling for increased government regulation and mandatory, legislative frameworks" (¹, p. 187), acknowledging the limits of voluntary commitment that Marabini pointed out.

International Parallels and Financial Incentives

Marabini highlighted Europe's "clear orientation" towards a circular logic based on "End-of-waste" rules and financial incentives. The Senate Committee Report reinforces this, detailing the EU's **Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation (ESP Regulation)** (¹, p. 70). This regulation, enacted in July 2024, significantly broadens the scope of ecodesign requirements to almost all physical products, focusing on durability, reusability, recycled content, and information availability (¹, p. 70).

The UK's **Plastic Packaging Tax (PPT)**, implemented in April 2022, is presented as a concrete example of a financial incentive that Australia should consider (¹, p. 75). This tax applies to plastic packaging with less than 30% recycled content, aiming to stimulate demand for recycled plastic and investment in recycling infrastructure (¹, p. 75). Australian industry figures, while some express caution regarding implementation timing, largely support such measures to level the playing field and fund domestic recycling (¹, p. 76-77).

Conclusion

Marabini's 2019 report provided a prescient snapshot of Australia's nascent circular economy journey. The 2025 Senate Committee Report, *No time to waste*, provides a critical update, revealing that while Australia has indeed adopted new policy frameworks and established advisory bodies (CEMAG, PC inquiry), the pace of change and the efficacy of largely voluntary approaches have been insufficient. The fundamental challenges of regulatory fragmentation, the over-reliance on voluntary schemes, and the need for robust, real-time data persist.

The call for a legislated Circular Economy Act, mandatory product stewardship, and harmonised financial incentives, as advocated by CEMAG and strongly supported by industry in the Senate Committee Report, marks a critical inflection point. The "no time to waste" sentiment (¹, p. xxii) from the 2025 Senate Committee mirrors Marabini's original urgency, but now with a clearer, albeit still challenging, pathway towards a truly circular Australian economy.

Appendix: References

1. The Senate Environment and Communications References Committee. *No time to waste: Waste reduction and recycling policies*. Canberra: The Senate; April 2025.
2. Marabini M. Is the future of Australia's economy ... circular? HOPE researcher (Qld); 22 January 2019.