Committee Secretary

House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment

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May 17 2015

Dear Sir/Madam

**Submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment Inquiry into the Register of Environmental Organisations May 2015**

Yarra Climate Action Now (YCAN) is a volunteer community group based in the City of Yarra, Victoria, which represents people who are deeply concerned about the threat of climate change to Australia and the whole of our planet. While this group is not eligible for Deductible Gift Recipient status, we rely on the research and advocacy of many agencies which are in this category.

As individuals, many YCAN members donate to groups that we know and trust, and receive reports from these groups about their activities. Green groups tend to be transparent in how they report on funds that are received.

On behalf of YCAN I am writing a submission to the Inquiry because we are deeply concerned that some members of the Committee appear to have an anti environment agenda. While we think that all sectors of society, including the not for profit sector, should have proper oversight, the timing of this particular inquiry makes us believe that there is a political agenda at play.

It seems that the federal Coalition government is trying to silence anyone who stands up for the environment. This is shown by various actions taken by those in government:

* The push by Minister Richard Colbeck for a secondary boycott ban to apply to environmental groups.
* The ‘Re:think, Better Tax system Better Australia’ discussion paper, which calls for a review of the Not for Profit sector’s tax deductibility.
* The cuts to the Environment Defenders Office (EDOs).
* The government has axed the Grants to Voluntary Environment, Sustainability and Heritage Organisations. This program had bipartisan support since it was set up in the 1970s.

This Inquiry into the tax status of environmental organisations appears to be yet another attempt to marginalize those whose ideas about climate change do not correspond with those of this government. While practical environmental work is clearly important and is worthy of DGR status, it appears worrying that the Chair of the Committee, Alex Hawke, stated on the ABC’s 7.30 Report on April 10 that ‘the environment register is for groups to do actual practical environmental work or some education and other purposes’. Many of the green groups which are targeted by this Inquiry engage in education, but advocacy and opposition is also essential if we are to protect our planet from the threats of climate change.

Statements by a range of Coalition MPs, including Matthew Canavan, Andrew Nikulic and Eric Abetz suggest that there is an agenda to silence environmental organisations. We were deeply concerned to hear Senator Canavan state on the 7.30 Report that he wishes to see between 100 and 150 groups struck off the Register.

**Comment on Inquiry Terms of Reference**

We note the Committee’s purpose is to inquire in to the administration and transparency of the Register of Environmental Organisations (the Register) and its effectiveness in supporting communities to take practical action to improve the environment.

YCAN members are uncertain about why this Committee is concentrating on ‘practical’ environmental action. This is one side of the coin: we need groups who engage in landcare and ecological restoration work.

But we also need groups who engage in advocacy to protect the environment. The environment movement, which is a voice for the environment supported by hundreds of thousands of ordinary Australians, is necessary as a counter balance to the voice of big business interests. Our country and our democracy is a richer and better place as a result of the environment movement’s efforts. With the current government’s negative stance on taking strong action to counter climate change, a stance which is out-of-step with almost every other country in the world, it is essential that environmental groups are supported by the millions of Australians who believe in their work.

Surely Mr Hawke knows that the High Court has specifically ruled that environmental groups are permitted by law to conduct both ‘on the ground’ and advocacy activities in pursuit of their charitable purpose to protect and enhance the natural environment. This is the result of the decision of the High Court of Australia in the Aid/Watch case and the subsequent legislated definition of charity in the Charities Act 2013.

YCAN does not support any attempt by the Government to curtail the important work of environment groups by calling into question their advocacy activities. Both types of activities provide practical ways of delivering tangible improvements to the environment.

Any recommendation of the Committee that seeks to curtail the lawful activities of environmental groups on the Register would go against the decision of High Court of Australia in Aid/Watch.

It would be an attack on the independence of Australian civil society, restrict the free exchange of views and opinions within our community, and have negative consequences for our environment.

We do not support a witch-hunt against the environment movement.

Yours faithfully

Kerry Echberg

Convenor YCAN