

Australian Greens bow to Labor and big business on environmental agency

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Recent developments have shown how far the Australian Greens are prepared to go to try to prop up the Albanese Labor government, even at the expense of their claims to fight for policies to avert the climate change catastrophe.

The Greens signed an agreement with Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek on November 26, in the final parliamentary week of the year, to support Labor's token "Nature Positive" legislation, primarily creating a toothless Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

The EPA was supposedly to be "a modern national environmental regulator" with "stronger new powers and increased penalties to better enforce Commonwealth environmental laws."

That means it would enforce existing environmental laws, which are wholly inadequate to address the pressing environmental issues that humanity faces—even a 2020 statutory review found they were failing to protect nature.

Moreover, the role of the EPA was to be a purely advisory one. Its described function was "to advise and assist the minister, and to make recommendations for the continuous improvement of environmental protection laws."

In this way, the EPA was to be subordinated to the decisions of whatever government was in office. But successive Labor and Liberal-National governments have shielded the interests of big business, including the fossil fuel companies, whose emissions are driving global warming.

The Greens, while occasionally criticising the obvious weakness of the proposal, insisted for a long time that their support for this legislation was contingent on the inclusion of a "climate trigger." As recently as November 18, they had described this mechanism as "key to broadscale environmental law

reform," only to drop it a week later.

All that the climate trigger would have done was make the carbon footprint of any major proposed industrial or mining project a "matter of national environmental significance" (MNES) to be considered in the EPA approval process.

There are nine such MNES categories in the current legal framework, corresponding to different aspects of the environment, but climate emissions are not one of them. When any new project is likely to significantly impact any of those categories (a "trigger"), it is meant to be assessed and approved by the environment minister before it proceeds.

A climate trigger would mean that projects likely to emit high amounts of greenhouse gases would need to be deferred for assessment, but many high-emitting fossil fuel projects are already submitted to the environment minister for approval due to their impact on other MNES.

Plibersek has approved four coal mines under the existing laws, which is incompatible with halting global warming to below 1.5°. No legal mechanism compelled her to sign off on those approvals, yet she did so anyway. There is no reason to believe that the inclusion of a climate trigger would have altered any such decisions.

The insistence of the Greens on a climate trigger was thus a distraction from what is necessary for climate action.

The Greens dropped even this cosmetic proposal in their agreement with Labor. In an "offer of goodwill" to the government, Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young announced the Greens would rescind their demand for a climate trigger if the government agreed to act on native forest logging.

That demand was apparently ditched too at the last

minute. The *Guardian* reported that the deal between Plibersek and the Greens “involved a further concession from the Greens—to drop their demand for an agreement to end native forest logging in return for including a framework for new national environmental standards that would be applicable to regional forest agreements.” It was unclear exactly what this “framework” would entail.

Regardless, the deal that Plibersek and the Greens signed was vetoed by Prime Minister Anthony Albanese. Following a phone call with Western Australian Labor Premier Roger Cook, whose government relies heavily on mining revenues, Albanese committed himself once again to doing the bidding of the fossil fuel and mining industries.

In doing so, Albanese even dumped the Labor Party’s own election promise to establish an EPA, a proposal that had been in the party’s national platform since 2018. This shattered any remaining pretence that Labor would take any real measures to halt the climate disaster.

Felicity Wade, the national co-convenor of the Labor Environment Action Network (LEAN), which had tried to maintain illusions in Labor, told the media, “today is a hard day for true believers, vested interests won.” She said the EPA had been “core to our claim of caring about the natural environment.”

In response, Greens leader Adam Bandt refused to criticise Albanese for killing off the bill, even though he admitted: “It’s pretty clear what happened this week—the logging and mining corporations told Labor not to protect the environment and forests, and Labor did what they were told.”

Whatever tactical differences erupted between Albanese and Plibersek, both are leading figures of a Labor government that is entirely committed to the interests of the mining and fossil giants that form a substantial part of Australian capitalism, regardless of the worsening repercussions for the planet and its population.

The climate policies of successive Australian governments, continued and expanded upon by Albanese’s, would lock in between 2 and 3 degrees Celsius of warming if replicated by all other countries. That was the finding of a Climate Action Tracker report from November, which deemed Australia’s action on climate change as “insufficient.”

The report stated the Labor government has given “the appearance of action where there has been little.” Instead, it has been “continuing its long-standing support for fossil fuels both at home and abroad, despite promising new investments into clean energy.”

It is this very government that the Greens are seeking to bolster with a formal alliance, should the next federal election, due by May, result in a minority government. Supposedly, this collaboration would entail the Greens attempting to push Labor into cutting emissions in line with what is scientifically necessary.

This is a fraud. Scientists have repeatedly warned that the Earth will reach an inhospitable level of warming if emissions are not drastically cut immediately

To halt the climate crisis, nothing short of the complete transformation of society is necessary to overturn the capitalist profit system, the root source of environmental degradation. The Greens have plainly demonstrated their role as a party of the political establishment, working with Labor to uphold this system.



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