

## **Labor promises a comprehensive overhaul of federal environmental framework**

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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Australia will get the biggest overhaul of its federal environment laws in two decades if a Labor government is elected next year.

Labor would establish a new Australian Environment Act and create a federal Environmental Protection Agency in its first term.

The commitments were flagged by Bill Shorten and approved by delegates at the ALP national conference, which is meeting in Adelaide.

The new legislation would replace the present Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act which was passed under the Howard government's environment minister Robert Hill in 1999.

The new agency would oversee and enforce the revised act, conduct inquiries and advise the minister on environmental approval decisions.

Environment shadow minister Tony Burke said the current act was now twenty years old and had not been significantly reformed.

"It is time to bring it into the twenty-first century. In 2018, it is bizarre that the national environmental law does not properly factor in climate change", Burke said.

He said the new EPA would have "the mission to protect Australia's natural environment".

"It will be informed by the best available scientific advice and ensure compliance with environmental law."

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It would “have the ability to conduct public inquiries on important environmental matters”.

“The new legal framework will compel the Australian government to actively protect our unique natural environment and demonstrate national leadership”

The decisions are a victory for the Labor Environment Action Network (LEAN), a group within the ALP membership that lobbies on environmental matters. LEAN got about 480 branches to sign up to its push for extensive reforms.

While LEAN did not obtain its whole agenda, it won extensive elements of what it was pressing for.

The changes were promoted by the left of the ALP.

It was reported that there was resistance from Burke to some of the LEAN demands.

Burke said Labor would establish a working group of experts including scientists, environmental lawyers and public policy thinkers to refine the detail of the changes. Stakeholders, including states and territories, Indigenous representatives, affected industries, business groups, unions and civil society would also be involved.“

“The Australian Environment Act will aim to tackle problems identified by industry, which has identified inefficiencies, delays and hurdles. The new law will protect the environment while aiming to give business more certainty”, Burke said.

The Greens said the environmental protections endorsed by Labor would “fail without proper investment and a commitment to no new coal, oil and gas”.

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The Places You Love alliance of 54 environment groups said: “The ALP’s commitment to stronger laws that will help end the decline of nature and our extinction epidemic, and an independent national watchdog to enforce those laws, represents a step by a major political party towards rectifying decades of neglect of Australia’s environment”.

Labor’s reform agenda was attacked by the Minerals Council of Australia which said it would “add another layer of green bureaucracy, which will cost jobs, discourage investment and make it easier for activists to disrupt and delay projects”.

*Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.*

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