

**RESPONSE TO MINISTERIAL STATEMENT BY
PLIBERSEK, ON INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL
MATTERS – 15 NOVEMBER 2023**

(Current length: 1799 words)

At the outset, I thank the Minister for her Statement on Australia's international environment leadership.

It's interesting to learn what the Government thinks it is contributing to, and gaining from, international engagement in the Environment portfolio.

It's also a welcome – and all too rare – development to see an Albanese Government Minister at least trying to fulfil an election promise.

However, that's about where the positives end.

First of all, Labor originally promised that this would be an annual Statement on Australia's environmental leadership.

Yet this one comes after 18 months rather than 12. If that sort of timing continues, then this won't only be the first such Statement, it will also be the last one before the next election.

I would add that – quite regrettably – on the last occasion that Ms Plibersek made a Ministerial Statement to the House on an entirely unrelated matter, a number of revelations later came to light about the inaccuracies in that speech.

Almost everything she said that day about Labor's work and plans on Indigenous cultural heritage protection has since proven to be completely untrue.

Embarrassingly for the Government, the organisation representing the PKKP Traditional Owners at Juukan Gorge also expressed anger at being referenced in speech and having not even been consulted about it.

Today's Statement, on Australia's international environment leadership, is even more misleading.

It's also underpinned by a noticeable change of tone. At the National Press Club in July last year, Ms Plibersek proclaimed that, when it came to environment policy, "we can't waste another minute".

Now, nearly 18 months later the content of this speech displays no urgency to act but rather panders things that could potentially happen in the far-off future.

And, some of the claims by the Minister couldn't be left unaddressed.

By way of example, she wants us to believe that her Nature Repair Market, and I quote "is bringing new funding to the work of protection and restoration".

Meanwhile, back in the real world, Labor doesn't even have a Nature Repair Market, let alone one that's delivering new funding. That's because it haplessly botched the drafting of the relevant Bills – and the legislation was therefore almost universally rejected by stakeholders and other MPs.

I also note that the Minister bemoans the loss of Amazon rainforest to bushfires. Yet she's a senior member of a government that was responsible for the axing of the nation's natural disaster volunteer portal. How do you square that circle?

Not to mention that her Party is also now in a headlong rush to curtail the work of Australia's forest industries – spearheaded by the Victorian and Western Australian State Labor governments' bans on native forestry.

This is an approach that will inevitably cause more trees to be ripped out of areas like the Amazon Basin, and many other parts of the globe where they do not observe anything like the same environmental controls over forestry activity as we do in Australia.

In her Statement, the Minister also talked about retractions in Antarctic sea ice. Yet she failed to mention that she has been presiding over a months-old funding crisis that has compromised critically important Antarctic science and resourcing.

Nor did she acknowledge that she is failing to heed the calls of multiple experts who are beseeching her to restore these programs at such a crucial time.

She talked about and I quote “doubling the rate of renewable projects being approved”. Yet she failed to note that the rate of EPBC Act approvals, and the timeliness of them, has actually dramatically declined during her time in charge.

Tellingly, there was also no talk from her of what she will do to reverse this Government’s dreadful track record in putting endangered species, and prime agricultural land and marine environments, in harm’s way from many of these renewable projects, a situation worsened by a broken community engagement process which ignores calls from environmentalists and farmers about such matters.

It's also worth noting that despite her boasting, and the radical zealotry of her colleague – the Minister for Climate Change and Energy, Chris Bowen – about their 82% renewable energy target by 2030 the rollout of renewables on their watch has slowed, not fastened.

Its running at half the pace they promised and this won't change anytime soon given investment in renewables has stalled. That's right, final investment decisions on new renewable generation projects has dropped by 40% since Labor came to office.

Incredibly, there was another line in her Statement that said that the Government was "also delivering on our pledge to stop new extinctions in Australia".

She might want to talk to Conservation Volunteers Australia about that, given they have uncovered that Australia has listed more threatened species in the past two years than the previous ten.

The Minister assured the Parliament that she is interested in cutting plastic waste and pollution too. That passes as very strange given that she has devised no solutions to the REDcycle crisis or many other problems – and that she unilaterally terminated the Sea to Source program.

This had long been the Federal Government's flagship marine plastic reduction program, jointly involving the CSIRO and CVA. In fact, Ms Plibersek's actions represented the first instance of CVA being defunded by the Commonwealth in close to 40 years.

A swathe of other environmental measures and programs all over the country have been cut and terminated by this Environment Minister, too.

Perhaps worst of all, she brazenly asserted just a few minutes ago that she was allegedly responsible for and I quote "stronger national environmental laws". That comment takes a lot of courage and maybe some crossed fingers.

Because, despite her promises (made on multiple occasions) that she would deliver such laws by the end of this year, they're nowhere to be seen. And we now know, from recent admissions by senior officials of her Department, they're still miles away.

There is no new EPA in existence, and it is therefore – by definition – not undertaking anything in the way of enforcement, as she asserts.

On the 30 by 30 pledge, one thing that the Minister continually fails to acknowledge is that Australia has already met the 30% marine protection target. It was actually well and truly exceeded - at a level of 43% - before she even became the Minister.

I also note her attempts today to again paint herself as a major player at COP15 last year, but the overwhelming majority of the media reporting on the conference outcomes – Australia wasn't even mentioned.

When it comes to what she actually did there or what commitments and agreements she made, there's essentially nothing on the public record.

I have in front of me, for example, two so-called 'answers' to Coalition Questions on Notice that asked the Department to specify the actions and financial commitments to which the Minister obligated Australia at that conference.

Those would have been matters that were actually worth detailing to the House today. Yet there still remains no serious clarity about them.

Similarly, there are myriad of questions, requests for media interviews, and stakeholder correspondence that haven't been answered by the Government in relation to the agreement with UNESCO made in-secret by this Minister and the Prime Minister in Paris in July 2022.

This agreement represented a complete cave-in by the two of them to a list of 10 demands by UNESCO that are now causing havoc to hundreds of workers, and their families, across Queensland and beyond. Worse still, they took that action without any consultation with the Australians who would be most affected by it.

Accordingly, the lives and livelihoods of many fishers, farmers and other workers in primary industries are now under siege. They're in despair. Even after so many months, they also still have no information about what compensation they will receive – if any.

They're crying out (literally and metaphorically) for help from Ministers Plibersek and Watt, and yet they're being ignored.

And how could any discussion of the international consequences of this Government's approach to environmental policy be complete without mention of their catastrophic decision to provide \$8.3 million of taxpayer funding to the Environmental Defenders' Office?

Basically – the allocation of taxpayer money for legal activists which is causing a myriad of problems, including inflicting enormous damage on foreign investment in Australia and drastically increasing sovereign risk along with the over reach of market intervention on the energy sector has.

They love strutting the red carpet abroad, as almost every Australian now knows that the Albanese Government (from the Prime Minister down) has been obsessed with international travel – and attending overseas forums and events, all while Australians suffer in the midst of a fully-fledged cost of living crisis that deepens by the day because of a distracted Labor Party.

International collaboration, and the cultivation and maintenance of effective foreign relations, are very important. International agreements are also very valuable when they're negotiated and executed effectively.

However, in each such negotiation, there's always a fundamental question that needs to be asked. And that's: what (if anything) is each one of these agreements and negotiations genuinely delivering for Australia's national interest?

From the Environment Minister's speech today, there can be no confidence that the Albanese Government has seriously asked itself that question.

Of course, the bottom line is that there can be as many grand, set-piece speeches, media releases, and announcements as you like. But it's what a Minister and a Government delivers (or fails to deliver) that actually matters.

Indeed, by complete contrast to the present administration ... and for all of the Minister's extraordinary attempts over the past 18 months to blame the Coalition for her own problems and failures ... it was the Liberal National Coalition which delivered real outcomes in this portfolio.

Among many others, these included:

- unprecedented reductions in Australia's greenhouse emissions;
- record investment in renewables and low emissions technologies;
- a \$1 billion transformation of the waste and recycling sector;
- more than \$3 billion of new expenditure on the Great Barrier Reef (compared to the less than \$200 million under the Albanese Government);
- \$6 billion of investment on threatened species protection;
- the delivery of two Threatened Species Strategies;
- the rollout of our Environment Restoration Fund; and
- more than \$2.8 billion to enhance Australia's Antarctic operations and science capabilities.

And we are determined that the same level of hard work and the same demonstrable record of success will be on display when we are returned to office again.

From now though, the void under Labor continues.

All of us have been left to watch in bemusement as Labor talks the big game but fails to put into practice almost anything of genuine meaning and substance.

And, if any further confirmation of that was required, then today's Ministerial Statement truly bore that out.

I thank the House.