



Worries changes to heritage laws will favour developers

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Reporter: Jennifer Macey

MARK COLVIN: The Federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell is pushing through big changes to Australia's heritage laws.

Senator Campbell says the changes are designed to cut red tape and provide greater certainty.

Conservation groups think they're about giving the minister a freer hand to favour developers over the nation's heritage.

Jennifer Macey reports.

JENNIFER MACEY: The Sydney Opera House, the Glass House Mountains in south-east Queensland and even the first house where Don Bradman lived are all on the National Heritage list.

Many more candidates are queued up waiting to be listed for cultural or environmental significance. The Grampians National Park in Victoria, Fremantle Port and the Burrup Peninsula in North Western Australia, are all in that category.

The Burrup Peninsula in particular has been a flashpoint for controversy, because on the one hand Woodside Petroleum wants to build a natural gas plant, while on the other, it's said to be the world's biggest site for prehistoric rock carvings.

The man who has to make the decision on the Burrup is the Federal Environment Minister Ian Campbell, and today he introduced a bill to give himself a lot more freedom to act.

IAN CAMPBELL: The clear objective of the legislation is to give Australia very high quality environmental and biodiversity conservation and protection for our heritage, and that is not necessarily achieved by having turgid processes that are inflexible.

JENNIFER MACEY: Changes to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act will give the minister more power to determine what areas of Australia are heritage listed and allow the minister to overrule a public nomination for listing.

IAN CAMPBELL: We know that there's a lot of focus on the Burrup at the moment

and it's actually quite a good, it's quite a good example to use because it's one of these classical situation where you have phenomenally important cultural heritage, phenomenally important environmental issues and, of course, massive economic interests at stake.

That tends to be how environmental issue work. The most important economic developments always tend to turn up on the most important environmental sites. That's what keeps the game interesting.

JENNIFER MACEY: Greens leader Bob Brown says the changes are anti-environment and pro-development.

BOB BROWN: The problem is the corporate sector doesn't want environmental best practice and the minister, instead of going into Cabinet to defend the environment has caved in. He's sent up the white flag and he's accepted this legislation, which, as the attending note says, is for companies, partnerships and individuals undertaking development to get benefit and the environment loses out.

JENNIFER MACEY: He says areas like the Burrup Peninsula will be under threat.

BOB BROWN: At his press conference today he went as close as you want to, to making it black and white that he won't stand for this fabulous piece of this nation's heritage, which should be listed on the world heritage site, he won't protect that from further incursions by Woodside. He's going to allow that to happen.

But he did say that this legislation is going to make it easier for him to sell out on the Burrup and it will make it easier for him to sell out on other heirlooms of Australia's natural and cultural heritage in the years ahead.

JENNIFER MACEY: Conservation groups are angry that they're being shut out of the heritage listing process.

Humane Society International's Nicola Beynon says the changes make it more difficult for public groups to challenge government decisions in court.

NICOLA BEYNON: Since 1982 these provisions to challenge the minister's decisions have been used by Humane Society International and other conservation groups to challenge poor decisions in relation to the export of kangaroos, possums and commercially over-fished marine species, such as Southern Blue Fin Tuna. So they've been very important provisions and they're going to be taken away from us in this amendment bill.

JENNIFER MACEY: Senator Campbell says he hopes to have the bill passed before Christmas. In the meantime it will be fiercely resisted by conservation and heritage groups.

MARK COLVIN: Jennifer Macey.