Campbell rejects Dampier Archipelago for heritage listing

The World Today - Friday, 22 December , 2006 12:14:00

Reporter: Alexandra Kirk

ELEANOR HALL: Greens Senator Rachel Siewert says the Federal Environment Minister's failure to protect the Indigenous rock engravings in Western Australia will make him an international laughing stock.

The minister Ian Campbell has rejected the application for an urgent heritage order to protect the site and its thousands of ancient engravings.

Labor MP Carmen Lawrence, another of the three Federal MPs who tried to force the minister's hand with the heritage application, has likened his decision to putting a car park in the middle of Stonehenge.

But the Environment Minister says he won't be hurried into a decision over the site where the company Woodside Petroleum is developing a gas project.

From Canberra, Alexandra Kirk reports.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: The Environment Minister Ian Campbell has repeatedly extended his own deadline as he seeks to reach agreement with all interested parties before deciding which of some of the world's oldest and most important rock art carvings, or petroglyphs, dating back tens of thousands of years, will be protected.

He's just given himself another extension, rejecting an emergency request to place the Dampier Archipelago on Australia's national heritage list.

IAN CAMPBELL: Well, this is basically an application from Kevin Rudd's Labor and the Greens to put a spanner in the works of the biggest natural gas project in Australian history.

It seeks to effectively close down that project or slow it down on the pretext of rock art in less than 0.2 per cent of the Burrup Peninsula.

We must remember there's 20,000 hectares, about one million pieces of art, and this Labor and Green application seeks to close down the biggest natural gas project in Australian history because of one piece of potential heritage, one piece of rock art out of a million.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: Fellow Western Australian, Greens Senator Rachel Siewert was one of the three MPs who lodged the urgent application.

She says she's angry the minister's put off making a decision until after the development's gone ahead.

RACHEL SIEWERT: The minister's going to be a laughing stock internationally for his failure to protect this site. It is undoubtedly one of the world's most important rock art sites.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: Another signatory, another Western Australian, Labor MP Carmen Lawrence is just as scathing in her criticism.

CARMEN LAWRENCE: It's an opportunity for Senator Campbell to show whether he's serious about protecting the heritage. I must say I've always had my doubts. Listening to him speak about it, he sounds more like the resources minister than the heritage and environment minister.

So I guess I'm not surprised. I'm very disappointed, however, that he didn't take this opportunity to say to Woodside, there are other options.

There's an already cleared site. We can… as he puts it, have a win-win situation here, which means protecting the heritage and using a site that's already been destroyed.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: Senator Siewert is convinced Woodside's on-shore gas plant project is a fait accompli.

RACHEL SIEWERT: The minister's a disgrace. The minister should be protecting this rock art and this site. Development planning process will continue on that particular site and by the time the minister gets around to making his decision to put it on the national heritage list it will be too late for that particular site.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: And Dr Lawrence says the precious rock art is left in a perilous position.

CARMEN LAWRENCE: Because he obviously thinks you can just chip away at it - take a bit here, take a bit there, remove a few pieces, not understanding that the site as a whole has already been degraded to some extent, but still has significant integrity, which is why people internationally and throughout Australia are saying we need to protect the whole area, not just little bits of it.

I don't think the minister understands what happens when you start to do that, but the sense of it, the continuity is lost. It's not just about pieces of rock art as he's fond of saying. It's a site that has significance for Australia's and indeed the world's pre-history.

It's a museum of kinds in itself. And I listened to the minister and I thought, I wonder how he'd respond if someone said to him, oh well don't worry about it, "we'll just put a car park in the middle of Stonehenge. We wouldn't have touched any of the major stones there", while ruining the site completely. And

that's what he's proposing to do.

ALEXANDRA KIRK: The Greens senator from the West takes issue with the Environment Minister's latest assessment of what rock art is at risk.

RACHEL SIEWERT: Just last week in Parliament the minister was saying there's 165 sites, which are artworks that are in that particular area. And suddenly, the development proposal's changed from impacting on a number of pieces of rock art to one.

Now, I have been on that site. I find it incredible that the minister's now saying that it's only one particular piece of rock art. I have not heard from any local community members that they support rock art being moved.

If the question is put to members of the community, would you rather see this piece of rock art destroyed or moved? Of course they're going to say moved. But everybody acknowledges that when a piece of rock art is moved it loses its cultural value and its cultural heritage.

CARMEN LAWRENCE: Australia is custodian of this and we are not living up to our responsibilities and the minister simply doesn't have an idea, doesn't have a clue about heritage.

He sounds like he's come out of the Charles Court School of Development and isn't thinking at all about the longer term.

RACHEL SIEWERT: So was this the last card in the pack that you played?

CARMEN LAWRENCE: No, I mean, a lot of people have now got to put pressure on the minister and keep… before the government… with any luck, there'll be another minister who'll think a little more carefully about this.

ELEANOR HALL: Labor MP Carmen Lawrence ending that report from Alexandra Kirk in Canberra.