

National Press Club Address 24 October 2017 by The Hon Peter Garrett AM

'Trashing our crown jewel: The fate of the Great Barrier Reef in the coal age'.

I want to begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the lands and waters of this area, including the Ngunnawal people.

This is my fourth address to the National Press Club, and I thank the club and its sponsors, for this invitation.

Now, returning to my first love, music, I'm in town to perform with my colleagues in Midnight Oil on the Australian leg of The Great Circle Tour.

On previous visits I've addressed you as ACF President, as a member of parliament, and, later, as a government minister.

Amongst other things I've called for environmental tax reform and for the rejuvenation and democratization of the arts. These are still important issues. At some point, hopefully, they will be realised.

Still I believe this is the most critical address I have given here.

After many years of working both outside and inside the 'system', I'm convinced more than ever that we face an existential threat, greater than any other, as humans literally upend the world's climate and natural ecosystems.

To do nothing in the face of this threat, of which we are well aware, is to acquiesce to a world diminishing in front of us. We will deservedly reap the scorn and anger of our children if we fail to act now.

There is a fundamental divide in our response. But it is not between insiders and outsiders. It is between those willing to act and those clinging desperately to an empty, corrupted ideology, unwilling to open their eyes, or their hearts, to what is happening around them.

Regardless of our day jobs and our status in the political firmament it still boils down to one basic proposition. Are we part of the problem or part of the solution?

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Our world is astonishing in its diversity and beauty. But one thing is crystal clear; the oceans, continents, and atmosphere are finite.

Living within a closed biophysical system, the human endeavour to secure shelter and food, to build communities, to create culture, is impressive.

This endeavour has a redoubtable history, replete with triumph and tragedy, a songbook of sorrows and soaring moments, and it too is an unfinished journey.

Yet human's infinite capacities; for organisation, communication, innovation, desire, acquisition and so much more, have brought us to a precipice.

Our way of life now imperils life itself. Just last year a group of scientists, led by Dr Thomas Crowther, argued in the journal 'Nature' that our planet is at a tipping point. Two years ago the Pulitzer Prize for non-fiction went to a book that posits we are on the cusp of a Sixth Extinction that could eliminate our species from this planet. The threat is literally existential. To borrow a good line – “the time has come”.

My band mates and I have travelled to 16 countries this year and symptoms of this malaise were apparent everywhere we went. From Brazil, where the city of Sao Paulo narrowly avoided catastrophic water shortages following the harshest drought in recent history, to the United States, experiencing more extreme hurricanes and intense bush fires, to Canada, where the rate of warming is around twice the global average and eroding of permafrost and melting sea ice is expected to significantly threaten coastal communities.

However the most undeniable evidence of the precipice on which we stand doesn't require a visa or a passport. It exists off our own shores – the majestic Great Barrier Reef. The future of the Reef is the issue of its time, a symbol of the ultimate choice confronting all of us. The Great Barrier Reef is literally a canary down a coal mine.

The Great Barrier Reef is one of the seven natural wonders of the world. It shares that extraordinary status with the likes of Mt Everest, the Grand Canyon and Victoria Falls.

The Reef is the world's largest living organism, visible from space. Its superlative natural beauty and biodiversity has drawn millions of people from around the world to come to Australia to experience this marvel with their own eyes.

The Great Barrier Reef's natural heritage values are outstanding: The Reef contains more than 1,600 species of fish, more than 130 species of sharks and rays, and 30 species of whales and dolphins.

It includes some 3,000 coral reefs, 900 continental islands, and more than 600 species of hard and soft corals. Seagrass meadows and mangrove forests grace its shores, providing habitat for dugongs, turtles and fish. A profusion of life, from the world's largest fish – the whale shark – to thousands of small creatures, such as sea anemones, starfish and colourful sponges, add up to an extraordinary diversity.

It truly is a natural and cultural wonder.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the Reef is an integral part of their identity and culture. Today, they have a continuing connection to the Reef, and many Traditional Owners are actively engaged in its management.

The Reef is of huge economic significance too. A report by Deloitte Economics for the Great Barrier Reef Foundation found the economic, social and iconic brand value of the Reef to be \$56 billion.¹

¹ <https://www2.deloitte.com/au/en/pages/economics/articles/great-barrier-reef.html>

In 2015-16 the Reef generated \$6.4 billion. Nearly 90% - or \$5.7 billion - was contributed by tourism, an industry that has continued to grow. In the past decade alone, visitor days and nights have increased by 17% in the Reef region.

But it's the employment numbers that fill out the big picture.

The Reef enables more than 64,000 jobs in Australia in a wide range of employment opportunities. Tourism supports nearly 59,000 full time equivalent jobs. Jobs that can't be done by machines increasingly infiltrating the mining sector. Jobs, which if the Reef is managed well, can be done year in and year out, without damaging the natural asset on which they depend.

A potted history of the challenges to the Reef goes like this.

In 1967 a cane farmer in North Queensland applied to mine coral limestone for use as fertiliser. Four, (that's right four), intrepid individuals stepped up to object. They won the day, but a bigger threat was quietly forming.

By 1969, the Queensland government under Jo Bjelke-Petersen had approved petroleum exploration licences over most of the Great Barrier Reef.

Years of gruelling campaigning by fledgling environment groups, including the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Australian Marine and Conservation Society followed. Eventually the Whitlam government laid the groundwork, and the Fraser government in turn passed the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Act of 1975, banning oil drilling and mining in the entire Great Barrier Reef Region. It was a world first and an extraordinary achievement.

In 1975 the Reef was inscribed on the World Heritage list for places of global environmental and cultural significance. At the time, it seemed the Reef would be safe forever.

Despite the establishment then of The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, and the gradual creation of conservation zones, by 2004 commercial and recreational fishing were still allowed in more than 95% of the Marine Park, depleting its rich biodiversity.

In 2004 the world's largest network of green (no-fishing) zones came into effect following strenuous public campaigning by local and national groups, this time with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) playing a prominent role.

2009 -10 saw the mining boom in full swing and a concerted push by industry for expansion of coal ports, along with dredging and dumping of dredge spoil in the World Heritage area.

The 'Fight for the Reef' campaign, again led by conservation organisations, reached out to the Australian people, and the World Heritage Committee, responsible for global oversight of the health of the Reef.

Eventually both the federal and Queensland governments banned dumping of capital dredge spoil from new works, and in late 2015 the Queensland government passed new legislation to restrict port development to four existing ports.

Yet after all this effort, the Great Barrier Reef now faces an even greater threat. To quote Sir David Attenborough:

“The Reef is in grave danger. The twin perils brought by climate change – an increase in the temperature of the ocean and in its acidity – threaten its very existence.”²

We need to pause and reflect on this for a moment.

It is a hard thing to accept that the existence of the Great Barrier Reef is threatened. We don't want to believe it. We assume the Reef will last forever. As Australians, it's important to us, a part of our DNA. The vibrant colours and dazzling array of seascapes and sea life epitomise who we are as a nation. We should be proud and honoured to be its custodian on behalf of the world.

Imagine, though, in 30 years-time the Reef as we know it, no longer exists. We've lost it on our watch, when we weren't watching closely enough. And its loss is by our hands.

This isn't a future any Australian wants. But it's the path we're on now, unless Australia and the world acts decisively on the global warming emergency we face.

Two summers ago, a massive pool of abnormally warm water sat for weeks over the northern third of the Marine Park, off Cape York Peninsula. The usual ocean currents failed to materialize and there was no cool relief. In the end, two-thirds³ of the corals in that region suffered severe heat stress and died.

This ecological tragedy occurred in what had been the healthiest section of the Reef, the part unaffected by agricultural pollution.

Scientists who had invested their life's work in conserving the Reef were stunned at the scale and severity of the event. Reports of the dying Reef appeared in the New York Times, the Washington Post and the BBC. An Essential poll⁴ taken in November that year found that more than two-thirds of Australians believed the state of the Reef was a national emergency.

Prime Minister Turnbull's response was notable for its silence. Eventually during the federal election campaign, the PM and his then Environment Minister Greg Hunt, announced a \$1 billion Reef Fund. One tenth of the Clean Energy Finance Corporation's \$10 billion would now support clean energy and technologies to reduce farm pollution in the Reef catchment.

Whilst it made for a good soundbite, the policy may be worse than doing nothing. It turns out it's much harder for the CEFC to spend a billion dollars on worthwhile projects that achieve both those goals. It was small beer, which subsequently went flat.

² Sir David Attenborough <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-07/barrier-reef-coral-bleaching-significant-minister-greg-hunt/7308394>

³ <https://www.coralcoe.org.au/media-releases/life-and-death-after-great-barrier-reef-bleaching>

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/dec/02/two-thirds-of-australians-think-reef-crisis-is-national-emergency-poll>

Early this year (2017), the Reef experienced another severe bleaching event. This time, the central third suffered the worst damage. Many reefs affected were prized tourism sites between Port Douglas and Townsville.

The tourism industry was shocked at the unprecedented back-to-back bleaching. With 64,000 jobs dependent on a healthy Reef, there was serious soul searching over what the future might hold.

Over two summers, 49% of the Reef's shallow water corals had died. The worst affected area stretched along 1,500 kms. If ever there was an urgent need for a rapid national response to climate change and the adoption of an ambitious post-2020 renewable energy target, this was it. Once again the Turnbull government failed to respond.

Not so the World Heritage Committee. This year the Committee expressed its "utmost concern" about the serious impacts from coral bleaching on World Heritage properties. The Committee urged all State Parties to undertake "*(T)he most ambitious implementation of the Paris Agreement" including "... actions to address Climate Change under the Paris Agreement that are fully consistent with their obligations within the World Heritage Convention to protect the OUV [Outstanding Universal Value] of all World Heritage properties"*.

Yet now, in the midst of the greatest crisis the Reef has faced, the Turnbull government has rejected ambitious implementation of the Paris Agreement. As a result, it is failing to meet its obligations under the World Heritage Convention to protect the Outstanding Universal Value of the Great Barrier Reef, and all World Heritage properties.

To make matters worse, it is unashamedly backing the development of the Carmichael mine, the world's largest export coal mine in the Galilee Basin of Central Queensland, which will further desecrate the Reef.

At full scale, this mega mine - about 30 kms long comprising six open cut pits and five underground mines - being developed by the Adani Corporation of India, would dig, transport and burn 60 million tonnes of coal every year for 60 years. It would require 1 million cubic metres of seafloor to be dredged in the World Heritage Area for a port expansion and send hundreds more coal ships ploughing through the Marine Park.

The mining and burning of Carmichael coal would emit 4.6 billion tonnes of carbon pollution into the atmosphere over its lifetime. This is an astonishing figure.

At a time when the world is moving rapidly to renewable energy, the Adani mine will accelerate climate change impacts around the world. How could it be otherwise? Worse droughts, floods, bushfires, heatwaves and intense cyclones, and of course, destruction of coral reefs.

The mine would obliterate the ancestral lands, water and rent the culture of Aboriginal people in the region. The Wangan and Jagalingou people have repeatedly said no to the mine on their land. Despite this, Adani has actively worked to divide the Wangan and Jagalingou to claim they've consented to the mine.

The proposed mine would use vast amounts of precious water, liquid gold for local farmers, and essential to maintaining healthy landscapes across the basin.

Adani is licensed to take an unlimited amount of groundwater, estimating they may take up to 9.5 billion litres in one year. They can also take another 11.5 billion litres of surface water every year from nearby rivers in flood, depriving downstream users and the environment of those flows.

It's so preposterous it's hard to believe. Semi-arid Australia is, in effect, exporting water to India. And to add insult to injury, Adani is getting the water for free.

Adani's Carmichael mine would be a mammoth producer of pollution, a giant vacuum cleaner sucking up the natural resources - the land and water - of the region.

It is little wonder that a majority of Australians are becoming increasingly alarmed by it's looming shadow. Stopping Adani is emerging as the battle of our times, just as the Franklin Dam and Jabiluka were to an earlier generation awakening to the need to protect the natural environment and the rights of Aboriginal people.

The #Stop Adani campaign, the fourth major fight to save the Great Barrier Reef, is a defining moment that must be won if we are to have any hope of preserving a safe climate and the Reef.

We may be inured to statistics that tell a stark story, but the medical journal Lancet recently published research showing 9 million premature deaths already occurring over 2015-16 due to air, water and land pollution, 15 times the losses of life in war and other forms of violence.⁵

The burning of Adani's low grade Carmichael coal will only lead to more deaths, making a mockery of Josh Frydenberg's so called moral case for coal.

Added to this, if Adani's mine and rail link ever get off the ground, the entire Galilee Basin coal reserve could be opened up for development. The Galilee is the largest untapped coal basin in the world, containing 29 billion tonnes of low-grade coal.

That would be a nightmare scenario for the world's coral reefs and oceans, which absorb 93% of global carbon pollution. A quarter of all marine life uses coral reefs for at least part of their life-cycle, so losing coral reefs would have a devastating knock-on effect for an already depleted ocean food web.

Such a gargantuan expansion of coal mining would completely undermine a world trying desperately to reduce greenhouse emissions with actions large and small.

Yet the federal and Queensland governments still remain in thrall to Adani, despite significant reservations concerning the corporation's business practices, and both the economics and the operation of the proposed mine and existing port.

ABC's Four Corners program recently raised serious questions about Adani's corporate structure, its business practices and poor environmental record. On the program former Indian Environment Minister Mr Jairam Ramesh warned Australia:

⁵ www.thelancet.com/commissions/pollution-and-health

"The Adani Group's track record on environmental management, within the country, leaves a lot to be desired".

Local police harassed the ABC journalist making the documentary, one can only assume at the behest of Adani. Adani's complex company structures and tax arrangements are the subject of considerable scrutiny, and they lie when presenting information to the public. One recent example is Adani's targeted Facebook ad in Melbourne: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/oct/21/adani-posts-weird-video-ad-on-facebook-to-fend-off-carmichael-criticism>

There is nothing about this project that doesn't stink to high heaven, and yet amazingly, the government's own Northern Australia Infrastructure Facility is considering giving a \$1 billion concessional loan, i.e. taxpayer money, to Adani for a rail line from the mine to Abbot Point on the Reef coast.

Federal Labor has rightly been critical of the opaque nature of the Northern Australia Infrastructure Fund and has opposed the loan on the grounds that the project should be able to stand on its own two feet. The majority of Australians agree, including the majority of Queenslanders.

Unfortunately, Premier Palaszczuk has lined up with the Prime Minister, both having flitted over to India to shake hands with the Adani chairman, and would gladly see the tax payer funded loan given to Adani, despite Adani already breaching⁶ Queensland's pollution laws. From the Queensland government's perspective, it's about being seen to support jobs in North Queensland.

The government's first priority should be protecting the future of the existing 64,000 jobs dependent on a healthy Reef, most of them in regional Queensland.

Putting them at risk for 1,206 full-time jobs in Queensland - and 1,464 across Australia - that the project will apparently create, doesn't make sense. These figures come from one of Adani's own experts speaking in the Queensland Land Court. Outside Court, Adani, and both governments, regularly claim a magical 10,000 jobs.

Creating jobs that will accelerate global warming and further damage the Reef given what we now know is simply reckless.

There is one ray of light here, and a clear sign of what the future could hold. The Queensland government has a 50% renewable energy target by 2030. The policy is generating an investment boom in regional Queensland in solar and wind energy, with numerous projects expected to create up to 6,700 jobs. Good jobs that won't damage the Reef.

It is now widely accepted in the financial markets that coal is in terminal decline and will not recover.

The range of technologies emerging – solar rooftops, home batteries, electric cars - will give us cleaner cities, better health and save us money. Seen through the prism of investing in renewable energy it's an exciting time.

⁶ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-24/adani-will-fight-fine-over-sediment-discharge-at-abbot-point/8840560>

Yet, a cautionary pause is necessary, because by itself the market can't save us.

The reason is simple, physics. The impacts of climate change come decades after the emissions that cause it. So, if we spend 20 or 30 years letting the market deal with the fossil fuel industry, we, and our children will spend 50 – 100 years suffering the consequences.

The beautiful Barrier Reef will be gone, there would be huge and irreversible losses of biodiversity, food crises would be inevitable and refugees would be on the move in the hundreds of millions. We would most likely see economic impacts worse than the Great Depression

So we cannot and will not allow this to happen.

The future is here and it's positive: Solar, not coal. Clean jobs not dirty ones. It's utilising the ever-present power of the sun in a sunburnt land instead of digging up the very stuff that is stoking the flames of a warming planet.

Now that we have reached one minute to midnight, we have to ask. How much more dredging and coastal development? How much more carbon pollution and agricultural runoff? How many more bleaching events and severe cyclones can the Reef sustain before the resilience of the whole system collapses?

As the custodian of the world's largest living organism, Australia has a global responsibility, and a legal and moral duty, to ensure we are doing everything we can to ensure the survival of the Great Barrier Reef.

In his documentary on the Reef, Sir David Attenborough asked us: "Do we really care so little about the Earth on which we live that we don't wish to protect one of its greatest wonders from the consequences of our behaviour?"⁷

Right now, we face a choice: Shall we move beyond the age of coal and secure the future of the Reef? Or do nothing for a few more years and lose our most precious natural asset?

There is no time to lose in making that decision. We have to act as good stewards now.

What does good stewardship mean?

It means we have to drastically reduce our carbon emissions, and do our fair share of global carbon reduction.

Our current target of 26-28% is grossly inadequate and will lead to 3°C to 4°C of warming should other governments commit to a similar level of ambition. This is a temperature rise that would destroy all the world's coral reefs.

Good stewardship means no more new coal mines because the carbon budget is spent. The UK has just announced it will move to end burning coal by 2025.

⁷ Sir David Attenborough: [lbid](#)

It means we have to phase out coal-fired power stations by the early 2030's and switch to 100% renewable energy. It means an orderly phased transition in coal mining areas. It means ending fossil fuel subsidies that support dirty energy. And it means supporting a national renewable energy target to turbo charge the renewable energy boom.

Globally, it means we must be world leaders - not laggards - engaging in effective and ambitious climate diplomacy to encourage other carbon polluting nations to step up to safeguard our future.

It means giving the Reef a fighting chance to get through this period of higher sea surface temperatures by tackling local threats.

Tree clearing, now back at astronomical levels of 400,000 hectares a year courtesy of the former Newman government's decision to relax land clearing laws in Queensland, must end. Regulations on the amount of sediment, nutrients and pesticides that can flow into the Reef must be passed.

Investment in the Reef must dramatically increase to the order of \$10 billion over a decade, to solve legacy pollution from past practices and change current ones, and here effective compliance is critical.

Good stewardship means a strong Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority that drives effective policy, makes the right decisions on uses, and ensures compliance, again with adequate funding.

Above all good stewardship is what the Australian public expects of our political leaders. But it is nowhere to be seen under the Turnbull government.

In 2007 the Federal Labor government began that task, with a \$200 million additional investment in Reef Rescue; increasing research and development, assisting farmers reduce nutrient loads, and developing the first annual report card on Reef health. This was done with the expectation of a price on carbon coming into force. I wish we had the opportunity to do more.

Crucially today's deficit of leadership in relation to the environment isn't confined to lack of action on climate change. This government is also overseeing the decimation of the expanded national marine reserve system that Labor introduced, on the back of no fishing zones established by the Howard government.

The jewel in the crown of this new estate was the Coral Sea, the cradle of the Great Barrier Reef. This vast sea of nearly one million square kilometres was one of the last places on Earth where massive tuna, sharks and marlin could roam with relatively low risk of being caught.

I confess to a personal stake in this issue having declared the interim Coral Sea protection zone when environment minister. Subsequently my colleague Tony Burke advanced a vast reserve over the Coral Sea, protecting half from all extraction. At the time it would have been the second largest marine national park on the planet.

Agreement to establish many other smaller marine national parks around the continent followed.

As soon as it was elected, the Abbott government pulled the network and established a review. After years of blather and red tape, the Turnbull government finally released the new maps a few months ago and they are a disgrace.

The Abbott government's changes were bad, but the Turnbull government's are far worse. The proposed changes would be the largest removal of areas from protection ever by any government.

Malcolm Turnbull is trashing the Liberals' marine park legacy and caving in yet again to a minority in his party that better approximate the punk band Suicidal Tendencies. Our seriously stressed ocean environments deserve better, much better.

Professor Terry Hughes, the director of the ARC Centre of Excellence in Coral Reef Studies, has urged us not to "give up hope for coral reefs, despite the pervasive doom and gloom".⁸ And Sylvia Earle, founder of the global Ocean Elders group, has encouraged the declaration of hope spots in the world's oceans – national parks that protect marine life from extraction.⁹

Soon it will be too late for coral reefs, but it isn't now. We need to ensure this extraordinary exemplar of the Earth's beauty and biodiversity is saved forever – on our watch.

We need to seize this moment in time because it won't come again.

If this means putting ourselves on the front line to stop the mine going ahead so be it. If it means exercising our democratic freedoms, engaging in peaceful civil disobedience, even going to gaol, that is a step I, and I expect many others are willing to take.

Let it be clear. We are placing the protection of farming communities, precious inland water resources, tens of thousands of jobs, the Great Barrier Reef itself, the rights and interests of Aboriginal people, and the health and well being of the international community, ahead of the interests of a very large corporation.

Many young Australians, and numerous local, regional and national conservation and climate action groups are already working hard to stop Adani and save the Reef. This is true 21st century patriotism, acting on the local scale for the local and global good. They need support from you in the media, political parties, the corporate sector, from communities and individuals across the nation.

The Labor party must decide which side of this debate it is on, and provide a clear alternative to the mad, anti-science climate culture wars that permeate the conservative parties at the present time.

⁸ Prof Terry Hughes <https://theconversation.com/the-worlds-coral-reefs-are-in-trouble-but-dont-give-up-on-them-yet-78588>

⁹ Dr Sylvia Earle <https://www.mission-blue.org/hope-spots/>

Should the NAIF decide to waste a billion dollars preferencing Adani, Labor should give notice that it will tear up the decision. We need stronger laws introduced to protect the environment, including placing a greenhouse trigger in the Environment Protection Biodiversity and Conservation (EPBC) act.

I know Australia's artists and musicians, writers and actors, filmmakers and digital designers will rally. Midnight Oil will play and support those who express their opposition to this mine, as we've done in the past. We won't be alone.

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Whether we are outsiders or insiders, the existential threat facing our planet and the Great Barrier Reef affects us all. We breathe the same air. We are fed from the same land.

The only question is will we decide to live sustainably and protect our future or will we continue to live unsustainably until the future no longer exists for any of us.

If the past is any guide it will take action from both non-government and government actors to make sure that the right choice is made.

It is simply untenable in 2017 to sit and watch one of the greatest natural wonders in the world be destroyed before our eyes, simply because we lacked the imagination and the will to move beyond coal.

For those of you on the inside "It's time".

For the rest of us "The time has come".