

Dear Sir/Madam,

As usual I am disgusted with the LNP constant attack on the environment.

I can find nothing better to say than those words written by Tim Winton. Please read them.

Five years ago I stood in the Mural Hall of Parliament House to speak at a bipartisan event hosted by MPs pushing for a national system of marine parks. Most of those present believed it was an idea whose time had finally come. Polling supported it. But with Julia Gillard's minority government just barely clinging to power, it was a tough time to be asking parliamentarians for an act of courage.

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Yet that was basically my line. Because back when the nation was younger and poorer, it took great vision and mettle for our forebears to reserve country for the first national parks. It was that sort of gumption I sought to foster. I believed we still had it in us. Australians have always loved the ocean, but now, more importantly, we understand how vital the sea's health is to the future of our island home.

In the corridors of Parliament House that day, as I met MPs of every stripe, I felt a great sense of promise, even pride. And it seemed for a while such hope was not misplaced. In 2012, after an exhaustive scientific process and wide community consultation, Tony Burke declared a system of marine national parks, one of the biggest and best in the world, the most significant conservation gain in Australian history.

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That took courage. Because it put science before politics, prudence ahead of expediency. And it was popular. But as soon as he came to power in 2013 Tony Abbott announced an immediate moratorium on these parks and instigated a review. The purpose was purely political. To delay implementation, corrode consensus and deny the science. A move straight out of the culture warrior's playbook.

After decades of forward-thinking leaders, the nation had fallen into the hands of a man whose loyalties were only to the past. It was a low moment. But Abbott's reign was as brief as it was fruitless. It was a relief to see him replaced in 2015 by a man who'd actually done things, who believed in the future. Malcolm Turnbull did not scorn science. He seemed to understand the value and fragility of our natural estate. So there was new hope the marine parks review would now be expedited and redirected towards real conservation outcomes. With coral reefs bleaching and miners pressing for even more coal ports and seabed to drill, the need for protection had only grown more urgent.

Well, that moment of promise is long gone. Turnbull's period in office has basically been a hostage drama. The bargain he made with powerbrokers rendered him captive to the party's most illiberal wing, and if his performance on climate, energy and marriage equality aren't evidence enough, last month's announcement that marine parks would be slashed beyond all recognition puts it beyond dispute.

The agents of inertia control his government. And what's worse he's looking like a hostage who's begun to identify with his captors. How else to explain his radical lurch backwards on parks? The draft management plans recently released for consultation by Josh Frydenberg don't just signify the gutting of the national system, they represent the largest removal of protection for Australian wildlife in our history. What the government is proposing is a nihilistic act of vandalism. Forty million hectares of sanctuary will be ripped from the estate. That's like revoking every second national park on land. Under its new plan, 38 out of 44 marine parks will be open to trawling, gillnetting and longlining, 33 will be open to mining, and 42 exposed to the construction of pipelines. In total defiance of the scientific advice upon which the original system was designed, 16 marine parks will now have no sanctuary zones at all.

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The science shows that partial or low-level protection simply doesn't work. What the government is putting forward will radically diminish protection of habitat. It will also undermine sustainable regional economic development. What began as a quest for excellence based on the best possible science is now so miserably degraded it's turned the greatest step forward in marine conservation into a regime that doesn't even aspire to be second-rate.

Tim Winton hoped we had the gumption to create a system of marine parks just as earlier generations created national parks. Photo: Louise Kennerley

A prime minister who once spoke feverishly of agility and excellence is now a champion of mediocrity. In 2012 we had a plan that established world-class preservation. Five years later, with the world's coral reefs dying before our eyes, we're offered a system that doesn't even meet even the most basic scientific standards of protection.

But this announcement was never about science or conservation. As the Prime Minister's deputy made plain when discussing the Murray-Darling, the only point of environment policy is to stick it up the greenies. The shame of it is, the Liberal Party has a worthy environmental record, especially with oceans. Malcolm Fraser declared the Great Barrier Reef a marine park in 1975 and in 1978 he ended whaling. And remember, the national push for marine parks began under John Howard. So this government is trashing its own party's proud legacy.

Such are the achievements of the culture warriors minding the exits at the Lodge. We deserve better than this fudging and scheming, and so do our seas. It's not too late for excellence. Or a legacy to be proud of. Sanctuaries and science can still be restored to marine parks. But that will take statesmanship, principle and courage. Australia needs a leader, not a hostage, a prime minister with the grit to defy his handlers and hear his people.

Regards,

John Jeayes

0402 717 484

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politics is the art of the possible
environmentalism is the art of the impossible
it just takes a little longer