



MAPW - Health Professionals Promoting Peace

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2nd August 2017

Response to Tax Deductible Gift Recipient Reform Opportunities Discussion Paper

We write as an organisation which advocates for peace through a reduction in military spending, an increase in spending on peacemaking, mediation and diplomacy, the banning of all weapons of mass destruction and better regulation of the arms trade. We see our own role partly as promoting environmental protection, because war (and activities which prepare for war) have been and continue to be major destroyers of environmental health.

Furthermore, as health professionals we are gravely concerned that with the environment and its ecosystems and climate systems under unprecedented negative forces, human health is under great threat, both in Australia and in less advantaged countries. Many factors contribute to this. The overriding concern is now the effect of continuing to rely on fossil fuels for energy on the global climate. Every place on earth will be affected by this but Australia has its own particular vulnerabilities. Rising sea levels will inundate many coastal communities including suburbs of our large cities and worsening droughts will deeply impact our food growing capacity.

The discussion paper emphasizes the need for simplification of the system applying to the provision of DGR status to not-for-profit organisations. This is always something worth striving for, but in the proposed new system, the Register of Environmental Organisations would be eliminated.

The impetus for this appears to be come from the voice of the business community, which have lobbied strongly for change, particularly The Minerals Council of Australia, which claims that environmental groups are fostering illegal activities and preventing legitimate business activities.

Environmental groups in Australia have been crucial to the development of much of the existing regulatory protection of our environment. Most of the land set aside for permanent protection from commercial or

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domestic development, including our wonderful system of National Parks, would not exist without pressure from civil society. Civil society continues to guard against further degradation of that protected status.

The work of Environment NGOs is a mixture of practical programs for restoration of land degraded by previous profit making enterprises, and advocacy for better prevention of further environmental damage through profit making activity.

Some groups work exclusively on the former and some on the latter: some do both, but they all have their role to play in protecting the environment.

Governments in general have been reluctant to create laws to protect our environment. Many of the decisions to do so have been a result of well-researched and persistently advocated arguments based on scientific evidence by the not for profit sector. Often they are doing the work that governments have failed to do themselves. Some advocacy has been in the form of peaceful protest, the right to which is a cornerstone of a healthy democracy.

Meanwhile, big business are in a position to pay lobbyists as legitimate business expenses, to work exclusively on getting the ear of government to further their aims, which are entirely profit driven.

We need a government with an ear to the science, capable of comprehending how the future is going to look without more serious commitment to addressing our impending environmental disaster. We need leaders who can imagine a world which the economy is based on sustainability, not exploitation of our very limited natural resources.

Unfortunately governments in Australia often struggle to extend their thinking past winning the next election. When they do make decisions which aim to mitigate climate change or protect land and reef degradation, big business has shown time and time again that it is prepared to pay big money to influence an election result if it is not happy with a governments reforms.

Environment groups, along with other NGOs which currently receive DGR, promote an essential dialogue in a society which has a constant tension between economic growth on the one hand and optimizing health of people and the environment on the other.

They function as checks and balances in a robust democracy, along with high quality investigative journalism and a healthy public broadcasting system.

Many people in Australia choose to donate to NGOs to add their voice to the call for a healthy planet, healthy people and a safe future. Many of these same people would prefer that more of their personal income tax was spent on government programs which achieved these aims.

The DGR status of think tanks like the Australia Institute and the Institute of Public Affairs, which currently have DGR status, are not being challenged in this discussion paper, yet they also challenge the status quo in

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the public eye, and try to influence government policy accordingly. They too have their place alongside Green Groups and Peace Groups in advocating change.

Individuals can donate to a political party up to \$1500 per year and claim tax deductions. By the same token they should be allowed a deduction in supporting a group which advocates on behalf of their concerns, even when in some extreme cases of willful environmental destruction by businesses, some of their activities involve nonviolent resistance.

Denial of DGR status to selected types of advocacy groups looks like an attempt to shut down legitimate debate and dissent, which are a crucial part of a healthy strong democracy.

We would urge that, instead of reducing the number of organisations eligible for DGR, it should be extended. Any credible NGO with the altruistic aim of protecting humanity and the planet we entirely depend on should be allowed Deductible Gift Recipient Status.

Yours faithfully.



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