

Green campaign against Australian coal: trail leads to John Podesta



Malcolm Turnbull says development is compatible with environmental protection. Picture: Adam Head

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A secretive cabal of foreign-funded green groups is working to delay and ultimately destroy the vast Adani coal proposal in central Queensland, as well as pursuing the wider aim of stopping Australia's coal industry. So far, it is succeeding. This is not some wacky conspiracy theory but the stated aims and strategy of a network of environmental activists funded by the so-called US "billionaires club" arrayed against global coalmining — particularly in Australia and India — as revealed in their own email trails to multibillion-dollar US environmental foundations.

The groups and their billionaire donors are encouraged and helped at the highest level of the US Democratic Party through John Podesta, the chairman of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign chairman and a former counsellor to Barack Obama. The mining industry and Australian government ministers and MPs have long suspected co-operation among foreign and Australian-based environmental groups using taxpayer-funded charity exemptions to boost their finances and hide the real source of funds while they campaign against coal.

Public confirmation of the co-ordinated campaign against the \$16 billion Adani Carmichael mine project, which claims it will create 10,000 jobs in depressed central Queensland, has come as a result of a WikiLeaks exposure of the emails of Podesta, who is getting into more political difficulty as the campaign goes on.

The leader of a group of foreign-funded Australian activists, John Hepburn, executive director of The Sunrise Project, confirmed the emails revealing the campaign against the Adani project by influencing indigenous landowners and environmental legal challenges exposed in briefings to Clinton's campaign director.

Challenges to coal projects in Queensland have been based on efforts to protect the yakka skink, a slightly poisonous reptile, and the black-throated finch as part of a wider strategy to stop Australian coalmines and coal exports. Hepburn says the revelations via WikiLeaks in The Australian are a "warning" for the Turnbull government. "That a major US philanthropist has been emailing the senior adviser to the likely next US president about the expansion of coalmining in Australia highlights a major diplomatic risk for the Turnbull government," he said last weekend.

Another group identified as part of the US-funded campaign against coal mining in Australia, GetUp!, has also confirmed the global campaign, saying the Adani mine has "too much power over the major parties" in Australia. In a celebratory email in August 2015 to the US Sandler Foundation, which funds Sunrise, after a decision against the Adani mine, Hepburn, a former Greenpeace activist and one of the authors of the strategy to block coalmining in Australia, thanks the foundation for its support and names the groups working together as "our colleagues at GetUp!, Greenpeace, 350.org, Australian Youth Climate Coalition, Mackay Conservation Group, Market Forces and the brilliant and tireless Sunrise team". The US leader of 350.org, Bill McKibben, has said previously that the campaign is about more than the black-throated finch and has set out a wide strategy to stop Australian coal exports.

The leaked emails also created a furore in India this week after revelations that last year Podesta tried to help Greenpeace in India, which was facing a challenge to its charity status and expulsion for causing delays to projects that the Indian government estimated were costing the nation 2 to 3 per cent of its gross domestic product.

After the revelations, Malcolm Turnbull revived Coalition proposals to restrict the interference of the foreign-funded groups stalling major developments — from highways and dams to mining projects — and to limit charity status, which the advocacy groups use to get taxpayer-funded exemptions and to hide donors.

Financial Services Minister Kelly O'Dwyer is looking at proposals to restrict tax-exempt charity status to environmental groups that don't put at least 25 per cent of their effort into environmental remedial work. The Prime Minister said it was right to express "concern" about the activities of the groups and it was clear there was a "very systematic" campaign being conducted in Australia. "We believe we can have strong development, stronger growth, more jobs, and at the same time make sure that our environment is protected. The problem that we have faced is that it has taken too long to get a decision. It is just the whole approval process takes too long," he said in regional Queensland this week.

Resources Minister Matt Canavan has referred to a "cabal" of environmental groups trying to destroy projects through "lawfare", exploiting environmental laws to achieve the stated aim of delaying projects for so long that they become financially unviable. Energy and

Environment Minister Josh Frydenberg says the campaign of delay involves vexatious litigation.

An Institute of Public Affairs report released this week finds that although 87 per cent of cases brought by environmental groups under the Environment Protection Act fail completely, the delays are costing the economy up to \$1.2 billion. IPA says BAEconomics had found reducing project delays in Australia by one year “would add \$160bn to national output by 2025 and add 69,000 jobs”, many in regional and rural areas.

One judge, in dismissing a failed claim against a coalmine in NSW, said the argument was no more than “an expression of dissatisfaction” with the approval. The Sunrise Project emails from May and August last year to Sandler Foundation, passed on to Podesta, confirm the network of groups operating in Australia and mock the mining industry for the “wacky idea” there is a conspiracy to stop coalmining. The emails also highlight the importance of charity status to provide tax exemptions, but more importantly to hide donors — because part of the strategy is for the groups to appear to be community-based “grassroots” campaigns with little money, in a “David v Goliath” tussle with mining companies. The Indian email reveals the same concerns are held in India and Canada, and names “the Abbott government” as trying to rein in the taxpayer-funded exemptions.

The use of charity status to funnel funds to activists without charity exemptions and to hide the source of donations is of major concern to the Australian government and the Australian Taxation Office as well as to a group of US senators who two years ago examined the “billionaires club”. A minority report of the US Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works found US’s environmental movement had grown into a billion-dollar industry described by Forbes magazine as “a well-oiled machine that receives its funding from a handful of super-rich liberal donors operating behind the anonymity of foundations and charities”.

The report — The Chain of Environmental Command: How a Club of Billionaires and Their Foundations Control the Environmental Movement and Obama’s EPA — sets out how the club funds nearly all of the leading environmental non-government organisations as well as many media outlets and supposed grassroots activists in the US. But the Podesta emails disclose the US foundations are also funding anti-coal campaigns in India and Australia. The emails revealed Podesta was told on May 27, 2015 of the campaign against Greenpeace in India and the linkages between the Indian company Adani and the Australian project as well as coal exports.

Only two days before, he had been passed the emails from The Sunrise Project in Queensland alerting the Sandler Foundation to the potential threat to its status as a charity in Australia and the disclosure of donors.

The Democratic presidential campaign chairman agreed to pass on the Greenpeace concerns about its expulsion from India to his brother Tony, with whom he founded the highly influential lobbying firm the Podesta Group, which lobbied in Washington for the Indian government.

After being told about the Abbott government's actions to tighten restrictions on environmental groups in Australia, Podesta responded that the number of groups being affected seemed to be growing. Podesta has refused to confirm the authenticity of the thousands of leaked emails, and others have suggested they were leaked and possibly doctored by Russian intelligence services. The Australian-based Sunrise Project has confirmed its US-funded campaign against Adani and the emails, but denies knowing they were passed to Podesta.

Regardless, the Turnbull government faces a concerted global campaign to finish off one of Australia's most important industries — which Turnbull says has a place for "years and years" — and it has to stop that campaign without throwing itself open to the charge of climate change denialism.