

The Washington Post

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Australia's prime minister pledges to outlaw climate boycotts, arguing they threaten the economy

By **Adam Taylor**

November 2, 2019 at 2:32 a.m. GMT+11

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison railed against environmental protesters in a lunchtime speech on Friday, warning of a “new breed of radical activism” that was “apocalyptic in tone” and pledging to outlaw boycott campaigns that he argued could hurt the country’s mining industry.

The remarks were made to an audience at the Queensland Resources Council, an organization that represents peak mining interests in the northeastern Australian state. The proposed limits on protest quickly drew condemnation from human rights groups and activists.

“From ending slavery to stopping apartheid, boycott campaigns have played a critical role in achieving many social advances that we now take for granted,” Hugh de Kretser, executive director of the Human Rights Law Center, said in a statement.

AD

Get exclusive analysis on the most important global story of the day, in your inbox



Morrison, an evangelical Christian and a vocal supporter of President Trump, finds himself aligned with the U.S. leader on support for the coal industry. Australia is one of the largest coal producers on earth, with the industry supplying roughly 50,000 jobs but disproportionately responsible for greenhouse gas emissions.

During his speech, Morrison said his government was looking at “serious mechanisms that can successfully outlaw these indulgent and selfish practices that threaten the livelihoods of fellow Australians.” He argued that the “right to protest does not mean there is an unlimited license to disrupt people’s lives and disrespect your fellow Australians.”

Businesses linked to climate change were being refused banking, insurance and consulting services, Morrison said, due to the demands of activists. “I think some of our largest corporations should listen to and engage to their quiet shareholders, not just the noisy ones,” he said.

AD

The Australian prime minister's remarks took aim at secondary boycotts, in particular the boycotts that target firms that work with the Adani company in opening a controversial new mine in Queensland. In an interview with 3AW radio on Friday, Morrison said that secondary boycotts were "targeting decent small businesses who are providing services to the mining industry."

"They're being black-banned, and they're being harassed," Morrison said. "And this is not something that any Australian should have to put up with."

Morrison told 3AW that he was considering whether secondary boycotts for environmental reasons could be made illegal. Australia, like the United States, already has laws that ban secondary boycotts run by labor unions. "It's not okay for environmental . . . well, they're not environmental, they're activist groups. That's what they are," Morrison said.

AD

Over the past year, there has been a surge in environmental demonstrations all around the world, including the "Extinction Rebellion" protests. Last month, millions of people in all corners of the globe took part in a youth-led protest movement to demand that governments do more to combat climate change. Just last week, there were violent clashes outside a coal conference in Melbourne.

Boycotts of businesses are one of many tactics used in the environmental movement. Prominent figures such as South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu are among those who have urged consumers to stop giving money to companies that contribute to climate change.

But Morrison's surprise victory in Australia's general election in May shows support for anti-activist policies, too. The incumbent prime minister, dogged by controversy and poor polling numbers, managed to cling to power, in part by portraying himself as a pro-business, center-right ally of Australia's coal industry.

AD

Opposition leader Bill Shorten, tapped as the likely winner in the election, had proposed that Australia move away from exploiting its large coal reserves and instead take steps to generate half of its electricity from solar, wind and other renewable sources by 2030. The move appeared to backfire electorally — especially in Queensland, where voters swung to the government in large numbers.

“I hear a lot about progressivism at the moment,” Morrison said in his speech. The word sounds lovely and “gives you a warm glow,” he added.

“I will tell you what it means,” the prime minister continued. “Those who claim the title want to tell you where to live, what job you can have, what you can say and what you can think — and tax you more for the privilege of all of those instructions that are directed to you.”

AD