

Environmental Snags in Australia: The Approval Process for Adani, India's Mining Giant

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Much hot air is coming out from the public relations unit of Adani, and the language used is that of a hostage taker seeking to earn a rich and ill-deserved ransom. With the date for the Australian federal election looming, the Indian mining giant received a boost in its flagging fortunes. And flagging they had been: banks reluctant to supply credit; scientists concerned about environment credentials; activists worried that Australia was inviting the creation of a dinosaur. But the Morrison government needed some distracting good news and announced with speedy excitement that the company had met various scientific requirements on the protection of local waterways. There are seats to be retained in Queensland, and timing is everything.

The speed of it has all the markings of electoral expediency. The environment minister, Melissa Price, continues to remain an invisible member of the Morrison government, but she briefly manifested in making the announcement. Bullying and hectoring have also been part of the process, and Senator James McGrath was growling for her resignation if the seal of approval was refused. Other members of the coalition, including National MPs Barnaby Joyce and Matt Canavan, have been breathing heavily down the minister's neck favouring Adani's cause.

The effect of such pressure does much to take away the appearance of volition on Price's part. Jo-Anne Bragg, CEO of the Environmental Defenders Office in Queensland, [smells](#) a legal case testing the nature of minister's discretion. "Such a political threat puts a cloud over Minister Price's possible decisions on Adani."

Scientists have different opinions and these have, in turn, been given an unduly rosy twist.

CSIRO and Geoscience Australia have been painted as satisfied assessors of Adani's project, but they remain sceptical of Adani's water management plan. The [media release](#) from CSIRO notes that

"Adani's responses should satisfy the recommendations to update the groundwater models, and to address the modelling-related issues and concerns raised in the CSIRO-GA advice."

But it also "noted that there are still components of the advice provided to the department that will need to be addressed through the approval of the research plan, which includes confirming the source aquifer of the Doongmabulla Springs."

Ample doubt can be found in the scientific community towards Adani's water plans. For one thing, there is confusion over which of the two underground aquifers feeds into the

ecosystem. The Groundwater Dependent Ecosystem Management does little to address the source of the springs. The [risk](#) of getting this wrong would result in draining the aquifer feeding the Doongmabulla Springs itself, thereby resulting in its complete loss.

Queensland Environment Minister Leeanne Enoch was [alert](#) enough to be concerned by the qualifications inherent in the CSIRO-GA assessment, which she received a mere 30 minutes before the announcement by the federal government. Lingering “uncertainties” included “source aquifers of the Doongmabulla Springs Complex, which has always been a requirement for state approval.” Further “stringent conditions of approval from the Commonwealth” as outlined by Price herself, needed to be met before coal production could commence.

The Morrison government’s encouragement of Adani has also submerged other environmental snags the company has faced. The fate of the Black-Throated Finch, a critical feature of the approvals process, has somehow disappeared in the enthused announcements. Adani [claims](#) to have a management plan for the finch stretching over two decades, one that will include a conservation area at Moray Downs West as part of the pastoral lease it owns. The company [boasts](#) that, at more than 33,000 hectares in size, “the conservation area will be bigger than Moreton Island and one of the largest privately managed conservation areas in Queensland.”

Adani is also attempting to exert some pull over the Queensland government, which it only supplied with its latest version of the Groundwater Dependent Ecosystem Management Plan the same day Canberra had given its sketchy approval.

“Queensland decisions,” Enoch assured, “will be made by the environmental regulator, free from political interference.”

Adani can at least rest assured that it has a special water license from the Queensland government valid till 2077, giving the company [unlimited access](#) to the Great Artesian Basin, should the management plans be approved.

Despite all of this, Lucas Dow, Adani Mining Australia chief executive, [proved impatient](#).

“The Queensland government has continued to shift the goal posts when it comes to finalising the outstanding environmental management plans for the mine and is standing in the way of thousands of jobs for Queenslanders.”

When faced with regulatory barriers, Dow’s formula is simple: conjure up rich fictions – that old imaginary notion of thousands of jobs – and threaten elected officials with old fashioned corporate thuggery for not giving in to a mining giant used to greasing palms, despoiling environments and corrupting officials. “It’s time the Queensland government gave us a fair go and stopped shifting the goal posts so we can get on with delivering these jobs.” Spoken like a true stalwart of plunder.

The Adani chapter in Australian environmental and political history will prove to be one of the darkest, even if the approval process is not finalised in the company’s favour. This sordid episode has revealed the country’s political classes to be divided, cowardly and impressionable. They have become de facto hirelings of a foreign, often brutal foreign

corporation [indifferent](#) to disclosure requirements in foreign jurisdictions, labour conditions and local ecology. The affair has revealed a hostility to Australia's environment, and sympathy for a short term, myopic vision that promises to conclude prematurely, given the move away from coal in the near future. Far from being a beacon of environmental preservation and renewable energy, Australia promises to be the earth's barren tip.

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