



26 May 2015

Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
environment.reps@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission to House of Representatives Standing Committee (Committee) on the Environment Inquiry into the Register of Environmental Organisations May 2015

Arab Council Australia is a secular organisation working to bring about social justice, and to improve the lives of the most vulnerable people in the community. We work with a diverse range of communities and across sectors; we have been a strong and leading voice in the community services sector for nearly 40 years and play a pivotal role in capacity and community building, as well as in advocating on issues of relevance to the community. We promote solutions through consultations, research, education, and partnerships; we are steadfast in working inclusively across diversity and in forging strong collaborative practices with community, government and businesses. Our organisation also provides a broad range of welfare services, social support, and cultural activities to the community. Arab Council Australia is a non-profit community organisation and has charitable status.

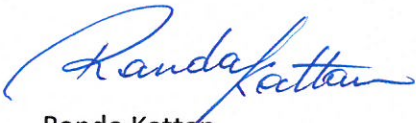
In making this submission, we would like to raise the following points:

- The loss of tax-deductibility for environmental organisations would be crippling not only for NGOs but also for democracy. This loss would mean the end of many organisations advocating pro-environmental views and sends a negative message to the wider society that devalues advocacy per se and places it under threat.
- The importance of advocacy voices contrary to more widely publicised views cannot be stressed enough: it is through this difference of opinions that our democracy is formed. This is made possible through a concept enshrined in the constitution, that of freedom of speech. Indeed, the government has recently sought to increase people's freedom of speech and to allow for the expression of one's ideals to be further cemented in the fabric of Australian society. Removing the tax deductible status would be the first step in a process leading to a complete lack of advocacy.

- Environmental groups currently utilising their right to advocate for their beliefs are exemplary of the Australian attitude, and any active move to create an imbalance in advocacy is therefore an attempt to change fundamentals of Australian society and a silencing of opinion.
- As an organisation that provides direct services to vulnerable people in the community, we see advocacy to be an extension and essential part of our services. Direct services and advocacy are part of the whole and are closely tied together. We submit that removing the capability of organisations to advocate on behalf of their constituencies diminishes the provision of essential services to those who need it most and would set a worrying precedent.

Arab Council Australia stands with others in supporting the tax gift deductible status of environmental organisations, current and future. We support environmental organisations as they fulfil their role to advocate on behalf of Australia's natural environment.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Randa Kattan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Randa" being more prominent than the last name "Kattan".

Randa Kattan
Chief Executive Officer