

Media release

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Aussies in the dark about risky TPP trade deal

Most Australians aren't aware of a trade deal which could risk environmental laws, increase the cost of medicines and enable corporations to sue Australian governments, according to a new survey by The Australia Institute.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is currently under negotiation and establishes a free trade area including Australia, the United States of America, Brunei Darussalam, Chile, New Zealand, Singapore, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Peru and Vietnam.

The federal government has indicated that it is open to including investor-state dispute settlement provisions (ISDS) in the deal. These would allow foreign companies to sue Australian governments in some circumstances.

“For example, some state governments have conducted environmental reviews of coal seam gas mining and introduced regulations. But will state or federal governments be able to further regulate CSG or protect our environment from other damaging activities if they are likely to end up in a long and costly case in an international investment tribunal?” Executive Director of The Australia Institute Dr Richard Denniss said.

“The Philip Morris tobacco company is currently using ISDS in an obscure Hong Kong Australia Investment Agreement to sue the Australian government over our plain packaging legislation. This is an attempt to override legislation passed with bipartisan support by our Parliament, and after the tobacco companies lost their claim for compensation in the Australian High Court. ISDS is an attack on our democracy and sovereignty. If it is included in the TPP we will face more cases like this,” Dr Patricia Ranald, Convenor of the Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network said.

The survey found that only 11 per cent of respondents said they ‘definitely know’ about the TPP.

It also found:

- Only 12 per cent are aware of the ISDS provisions likely to be included in the deal and nearly 85 per cent of them think the ISDS is a bad idea.
- 87 per cent think free trade agreements should be made public before they are signed by the government.
- 67 per cent do not trust the federal government's promise that free trade agreements won't increase the cost of medicine.
- 76 per cent would not support Australia being prevented from mandating labelling of genetically modified foods.
- 52 per cent think free trade agreements are bad for jobs in Australia.
- Only 29 per cent think free trade agreements improve labour rights and environmental standards around the world.

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“Given that this free trade agreement has such potential to negatively impact on Australia’s capacity to legislate in the public interest it is disturbing to see how few Australians are even aware of the negotiations going on behind closed doors,” Dr Denniss said.

“The fact that the federal government is refusing to table the agreement in parliament before it is signed should be a huge red flag for all Australians. The secretive nature of these negotiations is extremely concerning; especially when so much is at stake.”

The TPP also presents a threat to Australia’s Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) with America’s pharmaceutical industry association flagging modifying programs for subsidising medicines as one of its key objectives.

“The fact that nearly 70 per cent of Australians don’t trust the government’s promise not to let free trade agreements impact on pharmaceutical prices shows just how worried people would be if they were given full access to proposals and draft texts and understood the potential ramifications of this agreement,” said Dr Denniss.

Full survey results are available at www.tai.org.au or on request.

Note for editors:

- The Australia Institute conducted an online survey in November 2013. Respondents were sourced from a reputable independent online panel who earn reward points to participate. Results were post weighted (n = 1404) by age and gender based on the profile of the adult Australian population. Small variations in sample size can occur from rounding errors as a result of the weighting process.