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Tax policy Resources companies and lobby groups are lobbying a parliamentary inquiry to strip political climate groups of their charity status. But resources companies can deduct the money they pay to their industry groups from tax.

Speech isn't free in Australia. It isn't even cheap. Corporate Australia spends billions telling the public, and our politicians, what they need from us. But the mining companies, who spend more on self-promotion than any other industry, are now trying to silence their critics in the "cached-up" environment movement.

Ironically, the big mining companies are arguing the environment movement should confine itself to "on the ground" activities such as cleaning abandoned mine sites, rather than calling for tougher regulations to prevent miners walking away from messes they have left us. BHP and Rio Tinto's peak bodies don't think environment groups should talk about carbon taxes, mining subsidies or Eddie Obeid "planning decisions" either. Funny that.

While the determination of Australia's largest companies to silence their critics is chilling, luckily their implementation to date has been comic. The Queensland Resource Council (QRC) kick off their submission to a House of Representatives inquiry into environmental charities by making the fanciful claim that the miners are "worth" (sic) one in every five jobs in Queensland. Leaving the poor grammar aside, the Australian Bureau of Statistics tells us mining and energy account for less than 3 per cent of employment in Queensland. Some spin doctors just can't resist taking the eggbeater to official statistics.

The QRC go on to drop the bombshell that Lock the Gate, an environment group focused on helping farmers keep the coal seam gas and coal industries off their land, were five days late submitting their annual information statement to the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission. Given that the Australian Securities and Investments Commission had to pursue Gina Rinehart's companies through the courts

for failing to lodge company documents, it must only be a matter of time before QRC expels her Hancock Coal from its midst.

HYPOCRISY IN ACTION

The NSW Minerals Council takes a different tack, focusing instead on the cost to the federal budget of tax deductibility of donations to environmental charities. This from the peak body of the industry avoiding billions in corporate tax via the "Singapore Sling".

Just last week the CEO of BHP warned the Parliament about wasting taxpayers' money inquiring into the causes of the collapsing iron ore price, a collapse Joe Hockey says is costing billions. Yet this week we have the NSW Minerals Council, BHP's peak body, telling us the Parliament should be concerned with the cost of tax deductibility for environment groups. According to the Department of Environment, the cost of providing tax deductibility to environmental charities accounts for 3.7 per cent of the cost of all charitable donations, a whopping 0.003 per cent of GDP.

The fundamental problem with the mining industry's attack on environment groups is the underlying hypocrisy of their position. The QRC and NSW Minerals Council argue that environment groups should only work on "on the ground" environmental issues. But the main task of the mining peak bodies is not to assist "on the ground" mining but to lobby for watered-down tax and planning laws.

Needless to say, BHP and Rio Tinto's membership fees to their various lobby groups and peak bodies are tax deductible, but those same peak bodies are arguing that contributions to environment groups should not be.

PAY FOR PR

The Minerals Council of Australia spent more than \$120 million over the past five years fighting for subsidies, fighting the mining tax and lobbying for mine approvals in communities that don't want them. And then there is the spending by state lobby groups such as the QRC and the in-house public relations teams of the mining companies.

The mining industry must believe that lobbying and PR pay big dividends or they couldn't justify spending so much of their shareholders' money on it. No wonder they want to financially cripple and legally silence those who want to promote a balanced public debate.

Democracy requires dissent, and industries that are confident in their arguments shouldn't need to silence their critics. BHP and Rio Tinto talk of being good corporate citizens, but the peak bodies their tax deductible membership fees fund are trying to silence real Australian citizens.

BHP CEO Andrew Mackenzie called the Senate inquiry into iron ore prices a "ridiculous waste of taxpayers' money". Unless he similarly condemns the House of Representatives inquiry into the role of environmental charities, and distances himself from the views of his peak body, we will know how just how interested in genuine debate the Big Australian really is.

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