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Dear the Hon D'Ambrosio the Hon Kilkenny

I am writing to express my deep concern about the Victorian Government's announcement that third parties will no longer be able to appeal planning decisions around renewable energy projects to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT).

Knowing there are accessible and affordable appeal avenues available is particularly important to communities across my electorate of Indi, such as Dederang and Meadow Creek, where large renewable energy projects are currently proposed.

This is because it is the experience of many Indi communities that renewable energy project proponents do not always undertake adequate community engagement, and offer community benefit, for these projects. These concerns have been exacerbated by the Victorian Government's recent announcement to restrict third party appeals to VCAT.

### **Battery energy storage systems projects proposed in Dederang**

As you may be aware, in October 2023 the Dederang community were made aware of a proposed 400 megawatt battery energy storage system (BESS) project by MINT Renewables.

Then earlier this month, the community were told about another company, Trina Solar's plans to build an additional 500 megawatt BESS in Dederang.

In relation to the Trina Solar proposed BESS project, I understand Dederang community members were first made aware of the proposal via a published website (<https://kiewavalleybess.com.au/#news>), without any prior consultation.

While MINT Renewables has held community information sessions and written to neighbours, Trina Solar has undertaken no such consultation. This lack of communication from renewable energy companies almost immediately puts communities offside from the outset, due to concerns about fire risk, insurance premiums and biosecurity risk that such projects may pose.

It is vital that if renewable energy projects proceed through the state planning processes, these concerns are adequately heard and addressed.

### **Proposed changes to VCAT**

On 14 March 2024, the Victorian Government announced that from 1 April, they will remove the planning panel process and third-party appeals at VCAT for renewable energy projects. I understand that third parties impacted by renewable energy projects will retain rights to be consulted.

- Dr Helen Haines MP

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However, with individuals living in communities such as Dederang and Meadow Creek increasingly concerned about how renewable energy projects will impact them, and with companies such as Trina Solar failing to adequately consult with such communities early on, I am worried that further restrictions on individuals' abilities to have a voice will cause further distress and division in my electorate.

**The need for adequate community engagement with and benefit from renewable energy projects**

I am concerned that under the current system, there are not enough safeguards to ensure concerns in our communities are heard and acted upon by developers.

In response to growing community anxieties and in some cases opposition to renewable energy projects in Indi, last year I worked with Senator David Pocock on Terms of Reference for a review commissioned by Commonwealth Minister for Climate Change and Energy Chris Bowen into community engagement and benefit sharing around renewable energy infrastructure projects (**the Review**). I also made a submission to the Review.

I **attach** via email to this letter my submission to the Review and the final report, written by former Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner Professor Andrew Dyer. The Commonwealth Government has accepted in principle all of the Review's recommendations.

Indeed, the Review made recommendations relating to improving community engagement that appear completely contrary to the Victorian Government's decision to wind back VCAT appeal rights.

I understand that the final report was discussed at the recent Energy and Climate Change Ministerial Council on 1 March 2024, attended by Minister D'Ambrosio.

Please advise how the Victorian Government will act to implement the recommendations of the Review, in order to ensure community engagement and benefit is delivered for the communities in Indi impacted by renewable energy projects.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely



Dr Helen Haines MP  
Independent Federal Member for Indi

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