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Thousands of Australians demand the Senate defers Tuesday's vote on new Aboriginal legislation

Australians are taking the unprecedented step of urgently petitioning the Senate to defer its vote on a Bill that will see Aboriginal people pressured into giving up their land for the next century.

Under the guise of promoting economic development, the legislation could see Indigenous people lease back their land for 99 years in exchange for securing basic services – such as housing and schools.

Nationally thousands have joined with Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) and Australia's leading independent campaign organisation, GetUp to demand that Senators undertake the proper consultation and due diligence such fundamental legislation so clearly requires before they vote.

ANTaR National Director, Gary Highland said the changes to the Land Rights Act were introduced against the explicit wishes of Indigenous people in the Northern Territory – and are set to be approved with only three hours of debate in the House and a one day Senate Inquiry.

“The Government is once again using its control of the Senate to ram through changes to an Act that has been supported by all sides of politics for more than 30 years. The amendments haven't even been discussed with those traditional owners who would be most affected by them,” Mr Highland said.

GetUp Executive Director, Brett Solomon said thousands of people signed the online letter of demand within hours of it being launched on Friday – and more are asked to personally phone their senators on Monday to request a delay on the vote.

“These seismic policy changes are just too important to rush through. A scant one-day parliamentary inquiry should not be permitted to rubber stamp a policy that will leave four generations without land or leadership. Even Government senators expressed their 'alarm and concern' at this totally inadequate debate,”

“The economic case for these changes has not been made. The social consequences are untested. In these circumstances, the Senate must delay its vote,” Mr Solomon said.

The legislation would weaken the independence and effectiveness of Aboriginal Land Councils and wipe out a number of current land claims that have been recommended for granting by the Aboriginal Land Commissioner.

The ANTaR/Get Up campaign is at www.getup.org.au/campaign/StoptheLandGrab

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Five Reasons to oppose the Government's Land Rights changes:

1. *Traditional owners could lose control over their land*

Aboriginal people could be pressured into signing over their land to the Government for 99 years in return for basic services that their communities desperately need. This has the potential to lock generations of Aboriginal people out of effective control over their land.

2. *Rental payments will come from the Aboriginal Benefits Account*

Rent for leasing land would not be paid by the Government, but from mining royalty equivalents via the Aboriginal Benefits Account (ABA). The ABA was established for the benefit of Indigenous people, funded from mining activities on their land. It was never intended to be a subsidy for government. The amendments would in effect result in a situation where the savings of the landlord are used to pay the rent of the tenant.

3. *The independence and effective management of Land Councils would be weakened*

The Minister would have greater powers to override Land Council decisions, reduce funding to Land Councils and enable smaller Land Councils to be set up - even when a significant proportion of traditional owners may be opposed to this happening. These changes would reduce the independence of Land Councils and make them more susceptible to the risk of future political interference.

4. *Indigenous people do not support these changes.*

Much of the content of the Bill was put to Parliament without any indication that it is supported by traditional owners or Aboriginal communities more broadly in the Northern Territory.

Traditional owners, the Northern and Central Land Councils, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and ANTaR are all opposed to the changes. Indigenous people have not been given the opportunity to discuss these changes with the Government. The Senate Committee inquiry on the legislation was only allowed one day of hearings.

5. *Current land claims would be wiped out.*

A number of current land claims that have been recommended for granting by the Aboriginal Land Commissioner would be automatically wiped out. Aboriginal people would be denied the opportunity to have these claims assessed in a fair and objective way.