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using the law to protect the natural and built environment

## Speech at Rally to Respect World Heritage, 14 June 2014

Thank you, Vica.

Jamie has spoken very eloquently about the values of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, and the other speakers will also discuss the numerous cultural and natural heritage values of the area. My role today is really to remind people that the World Heritage Convention is law.

It is in the hazy realm of international law, with its focus on negotiation and diplomacy. But when Australia signed and ratified the World Heritage Convention in the early 70s, we took on legal obligations.

We agreed to identify and nominate areas of international significance.

We agreed to protect the values of properties included in the World Heritage List.

And, where areas within the listed property are degraded (which the Convention clearly allows for), we agreed to take action to restore those areas.

What I really want to stress is that the 191 countries who have signed the World Heritage Convention did so recognising that properties are listed because they have Outstanding Universal Value. That is, outstanding value to the whole international community.

The signatories also recognise that they have responsibilities as custodians of these internationally significant places. And that this responsibility trumps domestic politics.

For these reasons, it is extremely uncommon for a property to be removed from the World Heritage List. Removal is generally viewed as punishment for poor practices.

There are only a handful of examples of countries who have asked to have property removed from the List, and even fewer examples where the request has been successful.

The most recent example was a request made by the Tanzanian government to remove an area of the Selous Game Reserve to allow for mining. In a hotly contested decision, the World Heritage Committee agreed, but only on the grounds of the exceptional economic circumstances of the developing country, and only on the condition that additional forest be added to compensate for the areas removed. This was a rare and exceptional circumstance, and is not something Australia should aspire to repeat.

Indeed, countries generally fight tooth and nail to have properties in their country added to, and retained on, the World Heritage List.

In the hazy world of international law it is critical that developed nations like Australia, nations that pride themselves on good governance, show leadership and set high standards for compliance.

We urge the Federal and State government to respect the assessment process. To respect the decision of the World Heritage Committee. And to take seriously our obligation to protect and to restore areas of Outstanding Universal Value within our care.