

Australia PM rebuffs Booker Prize winner criticism

October 16 2014



Author Richard Flanagan said he was "ashamed to be Australian" after winning the 2014 Man Booker Prize, October 14, 2014

Prime Minister Tony Abbott on Thursday brushed off criticism about Australia's environmental policies by newly crowned Booker Prize winner Richard Flanagan, saying the country had "a very, very strong" record.

Flanagan, an Australian, hit out at the government on Tuesday after

being awarded the prize in London for his book "The Narrow Road to the Deep North", inspired by his father's experience as a prisoner of war.

He told the BBC he was "ashamed to be Australian" after Abbott declared that "coal is good for humanity" when opening a new mine in Queensland state this week.

"Australia has the most extraordinary environment and I don't understand why our government seems committed to destroying what we have that's unique in the world," said the author, a long-time campaigner for the preservation of old growth forest in his native Tasmania.

Abbott said he had not read Flanagan's book but "it must be pretty good or it wouldn't have won", while defending his government's [environmental policies](#).

"I am confident that we are a country which has a very, very strong environmental record," he told reporters when asked about the criticism.

"We are taking strong and effective action against [climate change](#). We are taking strong and effective action on practical environmentalism.

"We are deploying the green army to restore degraded bush, to clean up polluted waterways, to assist volunteers and councils and farmers in land care projects.

"We are investing massively in the health of the Great Barrier Reef. We have an environmental record which is absolutely second to none," he added.

Since coming to power last year Abbott, who once said climate change science was "absolute crap", has abolished a carbon tax on [greenhouse gas emissions](#).

The government also recently tried to have UNESCO revoke World Heritage status for parts of the Tasmanian wilderness to allow more access to loggers, a move that was rejected.

Abbott made his coal remarks while opening a new BHP Billiton mine, just days after China's shock decision to impose a tariff on coal imports.

"It's very important that we sustain our faith in coal," Abbott said.

"Coal is vital for the future energy needs of the world. Energy is critical if the world is to continue to grow and prosper. So let's have no demonisation of coal."

Australia is among the world's worst per capita polluters due to its reliance on coal-fired power and mining exports.

Flanagan's book tells the story of Dorrigo Evans, a surgeon imprisoned in a Japanese work camp on the Thailand-Burma railway.

He is the third Australian to win the Booker Prize.

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Citation: Australia PM rebuffs Booker Prize winner criticism (2014, October 16) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-10-australia-pm-rebuffs-booker-prize.html>

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