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## THE POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN AUSTRALIA



### Introduction

There has been international media attention on the loss of power by the Australian Opposition Leader (Malcolm Turnbull) over his policy on climate change. He seems to be the main leader in the western world to be sacked by “climate change deniers”. He has become a climate change martyr.

The incident has also been an interesting example of how quickly opinion can shift from supporting the idea of there being human-induced climate to denying that, if there is any change, it is not being caused by humans.

This note begins with the November 2007 election as the benchmark to show how much change has occurred in two years. It then examines the controversy surrounding the Rudd Labor Government’s proposed carbon pollution reduction scheme (CPRS). This note is particularly concerned with the way that public opinion has moved (or been moved).



### Benchmark: November 2007 Federal Election

The November 24 2007 election of Kevin Rudd’s Australian Labor Party was a great surprise to most people. Those who were hoping for a Labor victory could not believe the extent of the victory. Even the Prime Minister, John Howard, lost his seat. The opinion polls had been predicting a Labor victory throughout the year but most people did not believe them. Somehow it was assumed that conservative politician John Howard (Australia’s most skilled politician) would find a way of (again) snatching victory out of the jaws of defeat.

The major cause of defeat was the Government’s harsh industrial relations policy.

The environment provided a second battlefield. Howard himself was ambivalent on the environment. He could see the electoral benefits of being seen to be protecting it. But he was primarily motivated by economics and believed that most Australians preferred to put jobs ahead of the environment.

It was always therefore a low priority for him. He decided to follow the lead of the US in not ratifying the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. His final Minister for the Environment was millionaire lawyer/ businessperson Malcolm Turnbull who was eager to make his mark in politics. Turnbull failed to change Howard's mind on this subject and Howard was painted into a corner.

Rudd's Labor party did a fine job of scaring voters with dire predictions on the extent of human-induced climate and the potential damage to Australia. He was able to exploit media reports of natural disasters, such as droughts and the decay of the giant Great Barrier Reef (reputedly the only living object on Earth visible from the Moon with the naked eye).

The first action of the new Rudd Labor Government was to ratify the Kyoto Protocol – the first time that the first act of an Australian Government was to ratify a treaty. Australia was well represented at the December 2007 Bali UN conference to negotiate the next treaty to follow the Kyoto Protocol.

The new Leader of the Opposition (former Defence Minister Brendan Nelson) dumped the Howard policies on industrial relations. He also supported the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol and so it seemed that climate change had been neutralized as an Australian political issue.

### ✓ **The Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme Process (CPRS)**

The Rudd Government has wanted to take to the December 2009 Copenhagen Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change its own legislation. The main driver of the Government's plan is the CPRS. This is an Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) which will use a cap and trade mechanism.

Under the proposed CPRS the Government will set an annual limit (cap) on the total amount of carbon pollution that can be emitted under the scheme within Australia. The cap will be gradually lowered, thereby reducing the level of carbon pollution.

Companies or other groups within Australia that need to emit carbon to do business will need to purchase permits (or may be issued with permits) that represent the right to emit a specific amount of carbon pollution. The total amount of permits issued overall cannot exceed the government-set cap. Businesses can trade permits among themselves if they find they have more than they need – or if they don't have enough - ensuring that abatement (reducing emissions) occurs at least cost. The CPRS would affect about 75 per cent of Australia's total emissions and will directly affect around 1,000 entities.

It was necessary for the Government to get this legislation through Parliament. It does not have a majority in the upper house (Senate) and so it was necessary to do a deal with one or more of the other parties.

The Greens did not approve of the legislation because they argued it did not go far enough and so they would not do any deal with the Government. They therefore marginalized themselves very early on in the process.

The Government therefore had to work with the main conservative Liberal-National Opposition. This is where its problems really began.

### ✓ **Climate Change and “Wedge Politics”**

John Howard quit politics the moment he lost the November 2007 election. The conservative side of politics fell into disarray.

Kevin Rudd had skilfully grabbed the political middle ground and the conservatives do not know how to respond.

No doubt Kevin Rudd really does believe that climate change is human induced. But the role of politicking cannot be overlooked.

This is currently his best “wedge issue”. A “wedge issue” is an issue on which one’s own party is united and the other side is not. It can therefore be used to further divide the other side.

Howard was equally brilliant in using “wedge issues to divide Labor and so it is ironic that now it is his own party that is a victim of the technique.

The more the Rudd Government has spoken about climate change, the more tensions have been generated within the Liberal Party and its minority partner the rural-based National Party. The proposed CPRS has brought the tensions to the top.

## ✓ The Liberal-National Coalition Opposition

After getting rid of one short-lived Leader (Brendan Nelson) in September 2008, the Liberal Party selected Malcolm Turnbull. He had been Howard's last Minister for the Environment and he had tried forlornly to get Howard to accept the Kyoto Protocol and so negate Labor's exploitation of the climate change issue .

Turnbull did not doubt that climate change was human induced. He then set about negotiating with the Government to tone down (as he saw it) some of the proposed CPRS legislation.

Turnbull was a brilliant lawyer and businessperson but abrasive courtroom and business skills don't necessarily work well in Australian politics. (There have been very few examples of successful businesspeople making a successful transition into politics).

Turnbull put himself into a corner by saying that he would only lead a party that was as equally concerned as himself on combating human-induced climate change. It is therefore necessary to note that in all the international media coverage of the Turnbull sacking, his personal abrasive leadership characteristics were as important as the substantive debate over climate change.

In effect he challenged his critics within the Opposition to challenge his leadership.

On December 3 2009 Malcolm Turnbull lost a challenge to his leadership. He was replaced by Tony Abbott, a professional politician and "climate change sceptic" if not "climate change denier". Abbott has appointed a shadow cabinet noted for its inclusion of opponents of CPRS.

The Turnbull experiment is over. The Liberal Party is opposed to the CPRS.

The CPRS legislation has therefore been blocked in the Senate and the Rudd Government had had to go to Copenhagen with no legislation and little immediate prospect of getting it.

The Australian Constitution enables the legislation to be tabled again in the Senate and if it is rejected again (around March 2010) then there will need to be fresh elections. On current showing, the Government is reluctant to risk this electoral confrontation.

## ✓ How did the Government Lose the Debate?

Australia is fairly unusual among developed western countries in that it is wracked by a fundamental debate on whether or not climate change (if it is occurring) is human-induced (rather than caused by, say, the sun or volcanic activity). Only the United States is in such a similar situation.

Here are a few observations based on my media experience of the debate.

### 1. Information is Not Enough

Humans are motivated in their hearts and not their heads. The Labor Party was brilliant at exploiting fears of the risks of climate change in the 2007 election – making it a wedge issue within the Liberal Party - and then got lost in technical information once it won government.

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<sup>1</sup> Ironically Howard had been a supporter of the Kyoto Protocol at the beginning. But then the Australian energy lobby changed his mind. The details are in a book by a disillusioned member of the Liberal Party who saw this happening from the inside: Guy Pearse [High and Dry: John Howard, Climate Change and the Selling of Australia's Future](#), Melbourne: Penguin, 2007

Ironically, John Howard would have probably handled this problem a lot better! He would know the value of hitting the media airwaves and “talking up the issue” in all the media and not just the elitist radio stations.

Information is not enough . Dull speeches by insipid ministers – no matter how well-meaning – did not attract much interest (and Australian voters soon got bored with Al Gore’s movie An Inconvenient Truth).

Politicians are often more effective as campaigners out of office - than ministers in office.

Much the same could be said about scientists. Apparently most Australian scientists do believe that climate change is largely human-induced. But they have failed to communicate their views to the general public. Instead, the currently biggest selling Australian book on this subject is written by a scientist who is a “climate change denier” .

## 2. Fear Works

It is now the turn of “climate change deniers” to use fear as a weapon. They are arguing that any CPRS would wreck the Australian economy and besides it is all a waste of time because it is unnecessary.

One of their most effective techniques has been to reinvent the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) as the “Extra Tax Scheme”. Australia has had four decades of politicians promising reduced taxes and so any hint of a new tax would be political suicide.

## 3. Conspiracy Theorists

Many of the current climate change deniers have only recently started to address the issue; some may even have been willing earlier on to go along with the Kyoto process (such as Tony Abbott).

The long-term opponents of the human-induced climate change school have been around for several years. These “green hoaxers” have long argued that this is entirely a fictional problem to justify such drastic measures as the introduction of some form of “world government”. These extremists are delighted with Turnbull’s downfall and their new found political respectability.

## 4. Politics as a Sport

Politics is increasingly a matter of “who will win” rather than “who is right”. The media are far more interested in the intrigue of who is doing what to whom – rather than trying to understand the substantive issue.

Opinion polls show that people are concerned that they are “not getting enough information”. Some of this may reflect a suspicion that politicians are trying to pull the wool over their eyes.

But I think that more generally the mainstream media have done a poor job in explaining the details of the CPRS. The lack of substantive information has enabled opponents to fill the vacuum with alarmist claims on the potential loss of jobs and conspiracy theories.

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<sup>2</sup> An interesting new book on this subject is: Randy Olson [Don't be Such a Scientist: Talking Substance in an Age of Style](#), Washington DC: Island Press, 2009

<sup>3</sup> Ian Plimer [Heaven + Earth: Global Warming: The Missing Science](#), Ballan, Victoria: Connor Court, 2009

## 5. “Protecting the Environment Costs Jobs”

“If you are hungry and unemployed, eat a greenie”, was a New York bumper-sticker in an earlier wave of environmental concern. This shows the alleged tension between employment and protecting the environment. In the competition between the economy and environmental protection, environmental protection will always eventually lose out.

But need it lose out? The opponents of the Australian CPRS have been able to convince people that environmental protection will cause unemployment. The Government has failed to provide a convincing public case of how environmental protection can boost the economy.

This is not a new issue. It seems amazing that a country that receives so much sunlight should not, for example, be an international leader in solar energy. All Australian governments have failed to make the most of a “green economy”. The Rudd Government is also failing to reinvent the Australian economy.

### ✓ The Circuit Breaker

The Club of Rome has said that the 20th century will be known as the “century of the economy” because it was in that century humankind worked out how to achieve economic growth. The 21st century will be called the ‘century of the environment’ because environmental problems will be so big they will force themselves upon humankind.

The climate change issue will not therefore go away. No matter what happens with the Kyoto/ Copenhagen process, environmental problems will remain.

Australian public and political opinion is very volatile, with a short concentration span . A fresh round of natural disasters would force politicians once again to be more active on this subject. The disasters will be the circuit breaker. Politicians will again be scrambling to find some “solutions”.

The Australian climate change debate is not over.

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A good example of short-term memory loss is the introduction a decade ago of the Australian Goods and Services Tax (GST)/ Value Added Tax (VAT).

It has long been Australian Treasury policy to have one – it was necessary to get the politicians to understand this.

The introduction had been attempted in the early 1980s by the then Labor Government’s Treasurer Paul Keating and it had been defeated by public opinion within his own Labor Party.

The GST idea was revived in 1993 by a short-lived Leader of the Liberal Opposition (John Hewson). But he was soundly defeated in an “un-losable” election by the then Prime Minister Paul Keating who shamelessly argued against it! He (successfully) counted on Australians forgetting that he had previously advocated one.

When John Howard then became the new Leader of the Opposition he promised not to revive the GST proposal. He said it was a dead issue. But he then introduced it when he became Prime Minister after defeating Paul Keating in 1996 (and it became his most notable domestic policy change).