

The Time for Radical Activism

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It seems a long time ago that our new Prime Minister, the man who would sweep away 11 years of Howard Government denialism, went to Bali and declared to the world:

Australia now stands ready to assume its responsibility ... Climate change is the defining challenge of our generation ... one of the greatest moral, economic and environmental challenges of our age.

He promised the cheering delegates that his Government is “prepared to take on the challenge, to do the hard work now and to deliver a sustainable future”.

At the time I noted that these were powerful words that would come back to haunt him if he failed to live up to his promise.

The early months of 2008 were ones of optimism. We knew that behind the scenes the mighty fossil fuel lobby was organising. They martialled their troops and rearmed themselves with arguments, fighting funds, lobbyists and dodgy economic studies.

They rebuilt their networks in government and the public service, insinuated themselves into the policy processes, schmoozed back-benchers and dined privately with ministers and their staff. They whispered about how important the old energy industries are to the economy, how Labor voters value their jobs, how they will take their business offshore and, always, the unspoken threat that they would unleash the most unrelenting campaign to punish the Government if it went too far.

But Kevin is strong, we thought. He had said tackling climate change is the defining challenge, the issue on which his Government will be judged.

In February, Professor Garnaut's interim report gave foundation to our hopes. Garnaut understood the science better than any adviser. He warned of a terrible future for Australia if we and the world don't get it right.

Frighteningly, he showed for the first time that the world's greenhouse gas emissions are growing even faster than the 'extreme' scenario mapped out by the IPCC. The truth is worse than the worst case, he said.

And, like the Stern report, he turned the economic argument against emission reductions on its head, showing that deep cuts would come at a very small cost and that over the long term the economic benefits of cutting emissions would exceed the costs. It was a slam dunk.

But then something happened. The Climate Minister Penny Wong seemed spooked. Garnaut was Labor's climate guru but now she said his report would be only one input into the Government's thinking.

Penny Wong had impressed us at Bali but now doubts crept in. When questioned about new and more worrying climate science she stonewalled and stuck to the party line. She sounded like a party apparatchik who doesn't really get climate change. The secret hope that maybe she was just being clever—making sure she said nothing that would forewarn the greenhouse mafia so she could strike deeply when the time came to act—began to look like wishful thinking.

Garnaut got the message and his inquiry veered onto a different course. Instead of sticking to the science and economics of greenhouse policy, he started to strategise politically. "No point in being irrelevant", he must have said to himself.

He had already told the Government that to avoid the worst of climate change it should aim to stabilise emissions at no more than 450 ppm CO₂-e. But he decided that cuts of that order would be too much for Mr Rudd to swallow; so he recommended to the Government that it should go to the world arguing for 550 ppm.

The scientists had said we must cut emissions by 25-40 per cent by 2020 to try to keep warming to 2°C, but Garnaut advised that 10 per cent is more feasible. He knew the difference between the two is huge. A 550 world dramatically increases the likelihood of catastrophes and runaway climate change, such as an irreversible melting of the Greenland

ice sheet resulting in sea-level rise of 7 metres. If that happened it would rule out any chance of returning the atmosphere to a safe level for thousands of years.

Garnaut also knew that the difference in economic cost of aiming for 550 *versus* 450 would be tiny. Under business-as-usual the economy will double in size by around 2040. Garnaut's report showed that if we set a target of 550 ppm economic growth will be slowed by a mere 0.1 per cent, which means we would have to wait until 2042, an extra two years, before our economy doubled in size.

If we aimed for 450, his model showed, then we would have to wait an additional six months. But he judged that an extra six months to become twice as rich is too long for Australians to wait.

Obsessed with the economy and frightened of the greenhouse mafia, the Government agreed. When it released its White Paper in December all of our fears were realised. It promised cuts of only 5 per cent, perhaps as much as 15 per cent if the rest of the world made strong commitments at Copenhagen. It did not even leave 25 per cent on the table.

Instead of raising the stakes at Copenhagen by announcing a bold target, it undermined international resolve by announcing a weak one. Instead of being a leader, Australia had become a laggard once again.

Then the Government announced an emissions trading system so full of loopholes and special concessions that it let the worst polluters off the hook. It did the unthinkable—it agreed to pay the worst polluters billions of dollars to keep on polluting. It was as if it announced a new tax on cigarettes but exempted all smokers from paying it.

In a way, we have to stand back in awe at the astonishing power of the fossil fuel lobby. They might be using their power to wreck the planet and destroy our future, but how brilliantly they do it. They got everything they could want, and in the process exposed Mr Rudd as a weak prime minister whose aspirations to world leadership proved to be no more than vanity.

I am sure that, like me, many of you are asking yourself how we could have allowed ourselves to be seduced into believing that a Rudd Government would face up to the reality of climate change and do what is needed. We were suckered; we wanted to believe the Rudd Government would be different because we know how vital it is to the future.

Denialism

The greenhouse mafia is not the only factor in the Government's back-tracking. In making its political calculations the Government judged that the electoral damage from its capitulation would not be too bad, especially when set against the alternative, a Coalition infested with denialists.

But the climate sceptics who inhabit the internet and dominate the editorial offices and opinion pages of *The Australian* newspaper are responsible for only the most obvious form of denial – repudiation of climate science.

There are more insidious and dangerous forms of denial that activists must come to terms with. These are the 'passive' forms practiced by the public and our political leaders.

First, there is the casual scepticism of ordinary people who allow themselves to be duped by hardline denialists into believing that the scientists can't make up their minds, or that the scientists must be exaggerating. Our Prime Minister is adept at the latter.

When Mr Rudd says his task is to 'balance' the claims of industry and the sceptics against those of the scientists and environmentalists he is saying that the scientists are political actors, that the facts of climate science are up for negotiation. Echoing the post-modern approach to truth, Mr Rudd seems to believe that the science is not objective but relative and contestable.

Then there is interpretive denial, which reframes the facts so that they mean something different and less threatening: 'environmentalists always exaggerate', 'the climate has always changed', and 'a bit of warming would be good for us'.

And there is moral disengagement, whereby we disavow our responsibility for the problem or the solution: 'China is to blame' and 'humans have solved these sorts of problems in the past'.

Or we prefer to hold contradictory views rather than face the truth. So governments talk tough about cutting emissions but blithely approve airport expansions and build new freeways, as if they had nothing to do with climate change. The public expresses concern

about global warming and supports emissions trading, yet at the same time complains about rising petrol prices.

Then there is 'stick-it-up-the-greenies' denialism like that practised by Top Gear host Jeremy Clarkson, an adolescent refusal to hear anything that might spoil the fun.

These forms of denial are the enemies of action. For the public they are psychologically comforting because opening oneself what the scientists are actually saying demands a distressing transformation of our unspoken assumptions about the future.

So I think the Government was right in its calculation that caving in to the fossil fuel lobby will not do too much electoral damage. Australians are in denial. To be sure, most are vaguely worried about climate change, but only as long as a drought or a heat-wave lasts.

In such circumstances it is easy for a government to refuse to do what the science demands. It is only those of us who expect a government to lead that find this an appalling betrayal of the responsibilities of office.

Political strategies

So what are we to do?

It is clear that the normal processes of the democratic system have failed to produce a response with anything like the urgency and seriousness the science demands.

Environmentalists have been campaigning for 15 years or so, undoubtedly with some success. But progress is dangerously slow and we risk losing all of the gains.

With the exception of Greenpeace, the mainstream environment movement has been drawn into the process of insider negotiations, trying to match wits, access and economic modelling studies with the fossil fuel lobby.

Seduced into believing they have influence in government, in truth they have been comprehensively done over. Fossil fuel delegations get an hour of quality time with the minister, while the environment groups get 15 minutes with a bored staffer.

The political system has failed us. In a democracy, the government should protect the interests of the people. Yet at a time of gravest threat to our future the government is in the

thrall of a powerful group of energy companies. It is apparent to even the most dim-witted observer that these corporations are, as Thoreau wrote, “more interested in commerce than humanity” and are run by executives who are, to put it most charitably, misguided and self-interested.

There is an unholy alliance between government and industry to defer and delay action, to deny the true implications of global warming, and to hoodwink the public into sharing their view that protecting the old energy industries must come first. Except for the Greens, the main political parties have been captured by fossil fuel lobbyists and climate sceptics. To expect leadership from them is a delusion.

The only hope lies in a campaign of radical activism aimed at confronting the powerful in government and industry with their failure at every turn. They must not be allowed to get away with their evasions and distortions.

A campaign of radical activism must confront the public with their complacency, because until the public demands it far-reaching action simply will not happen.

So our only hope rests with the people gathered here today. It’s down to you. Only people of conscience, committed citizens who have faced up to what the climate science is telling us, can turn the situation around.

In prosecuting a vigorous popular campaign, you need to be determined, loud, persistent and savvy. But, above all, you must be brave.

We have barely a few years to shift course in Australia, and contribute to a similar shift elsewhere in the world. It is no exaggeration to say that what you do in the next few years will have a profound influence on the future of the Earth.