

5. Australians persuaded to doubt what they knew

It wasn't raining when Noah built the ark, but at least he listened.

Anonymous, In *The greenhouse effect, science and policy in the Northern Territory*, Moffat 1992

What happened in the 1990s? Most dramatically, the fossil fuel and allied industries got into gear. The momentum to support and expand the existing fossil fuel economy was boosted by neo-liberal think tanks and insistent sceptics, in sympathy with free market economic ideology. They mounted a potent and high-level lobbying campaign aimed at federal politicians. Coal, oil, natural gas and other extractive industries, along with other multinational corporations, such as the energy-intensive aluminium smelting industry, got organised and exerted considerable influence on government, particularly after 1995 (Hamilton 2001; Pearse 2007).

This was made easier by a revolving door of policymakers and economic advisers switching in and out of senior government and business group positions. They formed a like-minded elite network directing Australia's response to the science after 1992. A picture emerges of how the focus on growth and resource extraction industries—long-standing drivers of Australian politics and the economy—undid the early good public understanding.

But in 1990 this was still not apparent. Indeed, 1990 was a highpoint for environmental politics in Australia, with federal Labor looking forward to an election supported by environmental votes, the release of the first Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on climate change, and federal 'interim planning targets' for controlling CO₂ emissions put in place, based on the global Toronto target of 1988.

The recognition that global warming/climate change science required a policy response coincided with the Labor government under Bob Hawke sponsoring roundtable policymaking under the banner of ecologically sustainable development (ESD) in 1990. This unusual effort in democratic decision-making brought environmental, business, government, and labour leaders to the same table. The task was to determine more sustainable economic strategies and include environmental costs in the analysis. A joint taskforce was then asked to recommend how to curb greenhouse gas emissions from the energy sector.

Overall, there is good evidence that there was a window of time—following the Franklin Dam fight in 1983 and peaking in 1990–1991—during which

environmental issues were brought into the policy mainstream. It was an attempt to close the national argument between economic and environmental priorities. Unfortunately it was about to end. Former science minister Barry Jones said in a 1992 World Meteorological Day address:

Green issues were extremely important in the 1980s and contributed to the Hawke government's electoral success in 1983, 1987, and 1990 ... [but]

In 1991 with economic recession, the political priorities seemed to change. Jobs, jobs, jobs, became the priority and in some quarters there was a cynical reaction suggesting that environmental issues were luxuries which characterised affluent times ... This is a criminally short-sighted view.

There is much uncertainty 25 years later on whether the Hawke federal Labor government was genuine in its concerns about environmental issues, including the greenhouse effect, or merely catering to an electorate with significant numbers of green voters flexing political muscle. Whether this matters, or is actually a chicken-and-egg debate, the public stance of the prime minister and key government ministers underscores the role of leadership when it comes to controversial public interest issues like climate change.

(Such issues are controversial in the opinion of those sectors that deem themselves to be economic losers when policy responses seem to favour the general public interest. That these sectors fight back by attacking the science behind the policy was also apparent in the decade-long struggle over the hole in the ozone layer that preceded the greenhouse battle. Similar forces surrounded tobacco in that public health policy battle).

Underscoring the leadership role, one senior political journalist wrote in *The Sydney Morning Herald* in September 1988 about federal politics at the time:

The greatest problem facing Australia today is not its external debt. It is clearly and undoubtedly the environmental threat posed by the Greenhouse Effect. This is not the view of some loony fringe greenie or Australian Democrat; it is the view of Senator Graham Richardson, Labor's right-wing hard man and colleague of the Treasurer, Paul Keating. (Secombe 1988: 17)

Mike Secombe wrote that Graham Richardson (then environment minister) understood the big picture is not just the immediate economy, as Paul Keating, his colleague and soon to be prime minister, believed. The big picture might demand considerable change and upheaval in the Australian status quo. He wrote that amongst the steady stream of information crossing the environment

minister's desk was the cost of environmental damage including ozone and greenhouse-induced climate change—an annual estimate at that time of \$5 billion for the United States alone.

Nevertheless, Secombe was another observer who in 1988 thought the Hawke ministry as a whole did not comprehend the magnitude of the problem and was not seriously looking for answers—an assessment seconded in recent interviews with John Kerin and Barry Jones, who were in the ministry at the time, and also by Bob Chynoweth, the federal member who acted as liaison between atmospheric scientists and the politicians during this period.

Kerin witnessed the effect of leadership changes. He was minister for primary industries and energy under Hawke in the mid-1980s to 1991, and minister for trade and overseas development under Keating between 1991 and 1993. He co-signed with environment minister Ros Kelly the media release that heralded Australia's emission reduction planning targets in October 1990 (Commonwealth 1990).

In response to a question about early leadership on the issue of climate change, Kerin recalled: 'I grew to have enormous respect for Hawke and felt his awareness of environmental matters was real and deep.' In Kerin's view, Keating, as the next prime minister, relied more heavily than Hawke on the advice of economic rationalist economists in Treasury. Surveying the ministry as a whole Kerin says, 'I didn't think we understood at all the implications of climate change'.

In July 1989 Hawke issued his call to action on climate change in the environmental statement *Our country, our future* (dubbed 'the world's greatest environment statement' by the media). As we've already seen, Australian governments, state and federal, were working towards a national emission reduction strategy.

Led by the prime minister's office, the federal government set up the National Greenhouse Advisory Committee in April 1989 as part of the National Climate Change Program. The committee, chaired by biologist Henry Nix from The Australian National University, was comprised mainly of researchers whose mandate was to fund further scientific enquiry.

A prime ministerial working group under the ecologically sustainable development banner was established at this time with government, community, environmental, union, and business representatives briefed to outline achievable domestic emission reduction strategies, primarily in the energy sector.

Meanwhile, the Australian and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Council (ANZECC) supported state environment ministries and monitored and recorded state-based emission-reduction strategies as they were developed, documenting the extensive revisions to status quo energy consumption as well as native vegetation protection and tree planting being considered.

Who was advising the leaders?

Despite setting up such formal structures, the practice by senior politicians of relying on minders, advisers, and old friends rather than on expert groups or departmental advice was well advanced by the late 1980s, as Nix observed in an interview. This would have an effect on greenhouse policy. Much of the advice may have been on how to stay in office through the next election cycle, but the question of 'who' is within the advising network became an important factor and one often unseen to outsiders.

In Hawke's case, the advice of the chief scientist at the time—Ralph Slatyer, an old acquaintance of the prime minister—was influential, and Slatyer reportedly took a keen interest in climate change. The scientist influence on British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was said to be similar. In Australia, strong advice to act on certain environmental issues coming from a highly influential political operator, such as Richardson as environment minister, was also clearly significant.

A contrasting example, leading to a different outcome comes from the lead-up to the Kyoto Protocol international meeting in 1997. One of the most influential voices on climate change policy in the federal government of John Howard at the time was a man described as Howard's 'former flatmate' (Hamilton 2001). Warwick Parer, then minister for resources and energy, was a long-time veteran of the coal industry who was an open greenhouse sceptic and a tireless booster of coal as the cornerstone of Australia's prosperity. He was also alleged to be the minister responsible for abolishing the federal government's alternative energy research corporation in 1998. A year later he resigned from Parliament, charged with conflict of interest due to his coal holdings (Hamilton 2001).

Influence also came from the bureaucracy. Trade officials who crafted negotiation documents and strategies for international discussion were also 'true believers' in the market ideology that came to dominate the 1990s, according to policy scholar and author Clive Hamilton. Market-focused ideology dismantled ESD policy, disbanded the working group briefed to rein in emissions and find efficiencies, and later brought a 'virulently anti-European' perspective to climate policy. From this perspective, Australia's role as a resource quarry was indistinguishable from the national interest (Hamilton 2001, 2007).

Hedging turns into retreat

The October 1990 national interim emission reduction target aimed to stabilise greenhouse gas emissions at 1988 levels by 2000, but an oft-quoted caveat was

introduced at the same time. This stated there should be no adverse effects on the Australian economy—upon trade competitiveness in particular—in the absence of similar actions by other countries.

The hedging language signalled that, even at this early date, industry lobbyists, free market economists, and trade bureaucrats were winning with an argument that the fossil fuel economy must stay as it is (being Australia's 'natural advantage') and that Australia should take no action until other countries did. This moment has been flagged as the start of back-peddalling in the commitment to action. Backpedalling strengthened during the 1990s into a full retreat, supported by the often-manufactured confusion and scepticism that marked the later 1990s.

The newspaper record sheds light on the early and conflicting understanding within the Hawke ministry of Australia's reliance on coal exports and domestic fossil fuel intensive energy generation, noting all the themes that came to dominate Australia's position in the 1990s. Ignorance, ideological beliefs, and scepticism in government ranks—affecting policy and communication—built during the Keating and Howard governments: unopposed by the strong environmental leadership on this issue that had been exhibited by Hawke and Richardson. Dramatic consequences for the climate change storyline followed.

The effect of leadership changes interplayed early on with a stalled bureaucracy. The federal Department of Primary Industries and Energy had been asked to rapidly modify national energy consumption and production as a response to the 1990 national emission reduction targets. (While the Commonwealth directs energy policy on vehicle fuel efficiency and appliance labelling, it also can lead by example. It can prod state and territory energy supply and demand balance towards efficiency or renewable energy—including offering incentives and setting up major communication campaigns to frame the issue. In the late 1980s, regulation was also still an option).

A critical 1992–1993 report by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) into Primary Industries and Energy's response gave yet another confirmation of the early understanding that greenhouse gas emissions are largely due to human burning of fossil fuels and, in Australia's case, often inefficient use. Australia has a poor record of energy saving, said this report in unequivocal language.

'Market research and technical studies indicate there is a significant untapped potential to save money and resources and stem carbon dioxide emissions. We are amongst the world's largest greenhouse gas emitters on a per capita basis. Our cars are amongst the world's most inefficient in terms of fuel consumption' (ANAO 1993: xi). The audit report also described Australia as lagging behind other countries in industrial plant efficiency, in building construction and in public awareness of the need to save on energy.

It also spelled out the federal government's intentions in 1990 to take rapid response action, particularly to champion efficiencies. In response to this urgent brief, however, the audit office found that most of the federal government's response agenda to the 1990 emission reduction target remained in limbo:

The Department did not fully respond in the manner expected ... Right up to the announcement in October 1990 it had not fully anticipated the greater priority to be given to the subject ... Staff meant to be available for putting the programs into place were heavily engaged on other tasks such as coal research grants, policy development and advising ... this was the case right until the time of our audit, more than two years after the announcement. (ANAO 1993: xi)

Kerin, who relinquished the portfolio early in 1991, recalls saying to the junior minister for resources:

There have got to be hundreds of ways of attacking this issue so, for God's sake, do something about local government and design and buildings and power saving ... But I don't think he got anywhere because a lot of this area was in state hands and you know how hard it is to get this Federation to work.

An article from that time in *The Sydney Morning Herald* noted that the Department of Primary Industries and Energy advised Prime Minister Hawke that it would take 30–40 years to make industry more efficient, as old plant had to be replaced. It highlights the emerging framework, which would rule for the next 20 years, that no mandatory changes would be required of large industrial firms, or that pollution costs could be imposed.

Almost a third of our CO₂ emissions come from just 60 large firms—capital-intensive, using equipment with a long economic life, and export-oriented. The costs of re-equipping would hinder export competitiveness. The alternative of exempting those industries would leave a disproportionate share of the reductions to fall on other sectors. (Seccombe 1990b: 15)

Another Seccombe 1990 report, appearing on page one of the *Herald*, is worth quoting at some length as evidence of the influence of federal Treasury economists and again showing the context of what was known:

The Federal Treasury is determined to block moves by the Government to make industry cut down on greenhouse effect gases.

On Monday, when Cabinet meets to consider targets for the reduction of greenhouse gases, the Treasury is set to attempt to delay the matter for up to a year by demanding a new inquiry into the problem.

Government sources believe the suggested inquiry will be a cost-benefit analysis by the Industry Commission of the likely effects of curbs on industry.

Such a move would stymie a submission by the Minister for the Environment, Mrs Kelly, for the immediate imposition of a target reduction of emissions by 20 per cent by 2005.

The Treasury would not confirm that its preferred course was referral to the Industry Commission, but said it believed that no conclusive reports on the value of targets had been done, and more investigation was needed. *A promise of quick action on establishing greenhouse emission reductions was a key plank of the environment policy which played a major part in the Government's election win this year.*¹ [my italics, highlighting the repeat patterns of public knowledge and election promises.]

The Treasury view also ignores the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which says drastic cuts in emissions of about 60 per cent are needed for the problem to be stabilised. (Secombe 1990a: 1)

Despite that warning, 24 years later it seems there remains plenty of industry opposition to forcing efficiencies and lowering emissions. A top priority of resource-industry supported think tanks and a likewise supported and like-minded conservative federal government after 2013 has been to drop the previous government's carbon price/tax leading into an emissions trading scheme as well as an attempt to backpedal on renewable energy programs.

In 2013 the issue was again successfully framed in cost terms: as imposing an unfair tax or costs both on industry and on the hip pocket of the mainstream, disregarding that the risk-management objective for everyone is emission reduction.

In contrast, going back 20 years, strong intentions to respond to climate change with a suite of measures were recorded well into 1992, culminating with Australia's participation at the UN 'Conference on Environment and Development' (also known as the Rio Earth Summit) and the simultaneous establishment of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The Australian delegation, including Kerin, was headed by then environment minister Kelly, who was already fighting the departmental and bureaucratic turf battles at home.

1 In 1990 and 2007 promises of action on climate change were credited with helping swing a federal election—only for the promised action to eventually evaporate. In both cases the electorate was credited with being aware and eager for action.

State and territory action plans were well underway by 1991. The titles are unambiguous. For example, in 1990 the ACT Government released a document *Developing an ACT strategy to respond to the greenhouse effect*. The Northern Territory was working on a plan, and every state was refining one. The answers the states were devising involved regulation and incentives for efficient energy use in the residential, commercial, and industrial sectors, as well as boosting areas like public transport. States promised to gear up for renewable energy programs. Victoria and Western Australia instituted ‘major’ energy demand management programs to lower energy consumption (ANZECC 1991).

Most of these programs were destined to die on the altar of deregulation, competition policy, and free market ideology in favour of purely ‘supply’ options (meaning opting for more consumption), in succeeding years. At the same time there was a major narrative shift from risk management to cost management.

Reframing to favour ‘business as usual’, themes that still play

The late 1980s science information didn’t ‘dissipate’—it was blasted away.

Engineer and energy consultant Deni Greene

In 1990, energy analyst Deni Greene was commissioned to prepare a number of analyses for the Hawke and then the Keating government’s Department of Environment and the ESD working groups. The brief was to identify opportunities to curb energy demand, estimate related dollar savings, and explore job-creating new industries for energy production (Greene 1990a, 1990b). Her reports offered evidence that energy efficiency and conservation alone could meet Australia’s interim emission reduction target and that it was a ‘win-win’ way to save money *and* the environment.

Some observers at the time suspected that the resource and energy industry associations complained about these publications to their contacts in government. Greene told me that the environment department subsequently drew back on commissioning her work. This episode may be early evidence of the unusual nature of the late 1980’s mainstreaming of environmental messages, and that a more traditional public narrative was about to return. This would be framed by politicians, bureaucrats and the media as the need to defend existing industries and markets while downplaying or ignoring the ‘win-win’ of emission reduction with new energy industries and related job creation.

The traditional narrative pitted environmental action *against* the economy and jobs, an ‘either-or’ argument. The classic example was the long-running native

forest dispute. The realisation that preventing greenhouse gas pollution might incur costs was used strategically in the 1990s to help frighten and manipulate the public into uncertainty about the science and about the need to respond urgently.

A closer look at how this happened shows that by 1992 the associations of extractive industries began to stir, led by coal and oil and multinational processors particularly aluminium (lured to be reliant on 'cheap' coal-fired electricity), which stood to lose from any change in existing energy production. Backed by free market economists, they were seeing the implications for their 'business as usual' operations and their fightback began (Pearse 2007), starting with challenges to the scientific risk assessments.

Through industry documents and political allies, the public discussion was turned to a focus on costs and jobs, and also free market and 'choice' ideology. The evidence indicates that this counter argument gathered steam in response to Australia's interim emission reduction target and the recommendations for global action of the 1992 UNFCCC.

How it was framed for the public can be seen from documents produced by CRA on two occasions. (Unpack the acronym CRA and a familiar entity emerges—Riotinto, incorporating Anglo-Australian mining giant Conzinc Riotinto of Australia, CRA). A 1989 CRA report on Australia's proposal to lower emissions by 20 per cent established some now familiar themes: it was alleged that there would be little global effect and it would damage Australia's economy; holding down demand (through efficiency measures) would be costly and lead to unwelcome lifestyle changes; battling climate change is just fear of change; and, warming trends may benefit some agriculture (Dixon & McLennan 1989).

A 1992 CRA report in the *Mining Review* warned of severe economic consequences if Australia implemented the UNFCCC commitments to lower emissions. The article rests on the 'us and them' scenario (Carruthers 1992). A frame that would become familiar was anti-UN and anti-European rhetoric claiming foreign forces were trying to tell Australia what do, and were damaging Australia's national interest. The United Nations and Europe were seen as the main drivers for binding emission targets.

This report is an early example of the soon commonplace strategy of quoting Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) statistics that were then amplified by the media and seldom questioned. Thus in this article, ABARE is quoted as putting a likely carbon tax at \$160–200 per tonne, which would damage export industries and occasion massive job losses

(Carruthers 1992). (In 2014, the actual carbon tax was around \$24 per tonne.) ABARE's director Brian Fisher emerged during the 1990s as a reliable sceptic voice in regard to economics and the cost of response activities.

In fact, the public relations work of CRA in this 1992 report established the contrarian themes that came to dominate the decade. It featured:

- scepticism—it is not the fault of humans
- loaded images—'who is behind the greenhouse panic?'
- market ideology—those who push the greenhouse science do not believe, as do the rest of us, that everyone should have options and be able to make choices
- 'us and them'—much of the 20th century has been a struggle over two fundamental positions: freedom and choice on one side, Marxism, fascism, and religious fundamentalism on the other side—'such people have now discovered environmentalism'
- suspicion of scientists' motives—they are just after grant funding
- contention that the media is being manipulated by 'the totalitarians and less-than-scrupulous scientists'
- belief that acting to conserve biodiversity is against development interests
- the argument that acting on climate change would have little global effect, but large costs, for Australia.

Shift from risk to cost management and delay response

Politicians stopped talking about the need for urgent risk management of climate change and started talking about cost, uncertainty and that there was no need for immediate action. This framing started emerging alongside the economic downturn that came to dominate public discussion by 1991. The Australian Government's response, by then under Prime Minister Keating, is described in an October 1991 business report in *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Noting the Australian penchant for delay via reports and commissions, journalist Paul Cleary wrote that the most recent attempt to delay serious action was by referral of the problem to the Industry Commission. 'The former Treasurer, Paul Keating ... was one of the prime movers in deferring a final decision on the now-famous Toronto target, a 20 per cent cut in emissions from 1988 levels' (Cleary 1991).²

2 Cleary, however, was impressed that the Industry Commission had developed something called the World Economic Degradation General Equilibrium (WEDGE) model specifically to crunch the costs of responding to climate change with 270,698 variables and 245,831 equations (Cleary 1991)—an interesting example of how economic number crunching can be accepted uncritically in media analysis.

Analyst Deni Greene saw Australian industry by the early 1990s as a cohesive voice fighting the science and potential response messages. She said that a lot of companies could have benefited economically from efficiency measures, but did not speak out. She concluded that this silence was based on a business 'kinship' response, and the possibility that businesses 'bought' the cost argument uncritically. Industries that stood to lose from climate change, like tourism and insurance, were equally silent or acquiescent to the resource sector.

Like other contemporary observers, Greene also saw the leadership of Paul Keating as weak or disinterested as far as energy policy and climate change were concerned. Like many of those interviewed about this period, she saw him as focused on economic matters, starting with response to the 1991 recession (the famous recession 'we had to have'), and also with economic rationalist reforms. Keating himself has told other interviewers that he has acted as a defender of the natural environment and threatened ecosystems and landscapes in Australia, some of which indeed received federal protection during his tenure as treasurer and then prime minister.

Us versus them becomes new normal

The long-running native forest dispute—involving government-subsidised rural industries extracting natural resources supported by both major political parties, versus some members of the public—helped forge a blanket negative stance from rural and extractive industries (and the politicians who represented them) against environmentalists and environmental groups (Mercer 1991; Pearse 2007; Ajani 2007). Environmental campaigners were labelled extremists who were against the necessary balance between the economy and the environment. They were therefore cast as special interests that did not have jobs and the national interest at heart.

As the 1990s proceeded and industry groups joined forces to combat climate change action, this framing of environmental concerns as being against jobs and the national interest became the new dominant narrative, or more accurately, an old narrative renewed. This world view became the new normal as politicians and the media decided the climate change story was primarily political and economic.

This view gained more currency as green organisations took over from scientists in media quotes pointing out the risks of climate change and opposing Australian Government policy on the subject by the mid-1990s. It was then a short step to painting them as a 'special interest'. Evidence for this change towards adversarial

politics can be seen in media reports from the time and is particularly evident in business reporting, as in *The Australian Financial Review*, which became more industry partisan compared to just five years earlier.

An analysis of 30 articles in the *Financial Review* between 1995 and 1996 showed how the reporting shifted towards support for the concerns of existing industries. The following example that introduces an article is one of many from the later 1990s showing how Australia had changed its story and where it was headed: 'Australia's push for international greenhouse policy to focus on economic issues, rather than narrow technological or environmental targets, is likely to receive a warm hearing at a major conference on climate change in Geneva' (Callick 1996b).

At that time, the *Financial Review's* later role as an uncritical advocate for the resource industry was still only partial. In the mid-1990s reporter Michael Stutchbury (more recently the editor of this publication) continued to dissect the economic debate in a revealing manner. For example, he reported that Australia's argument on the international stage for exceptional treatment when it came to emission reduction was because it wants to continue trading unabated in fossil fuels. On the other side of that debate were emerging economies arguing that those who had already polluted the globe should bear responsibility and clean up first (Stutchbury 1995).

Carbon tax already a scare campaign in 1995

Greenhouse topics dominating the business press in 1995–1996 were the spectre of carbon taxes and industry's opposition to them, and Australia's opposition to global mandatory emission reduction targets. This was made clear at the March 1995 Berlin conference of the parties to the UNFCCC, which preceded the Kyoto meeting two years later. Australia signed the UNFCCC in 1992.

A 1996 *Financial Review* article, after the federal government had changed to the conservative parties under Prime Minister John Howard, illustrates the dominant political climate and narrative and also the revolving door of familiar players: thus is worth looking at in more detail. Under the headline 'Business lines up to fight controls', the report said:

Business has warned the Howard Government to reject international proposals for a raft of new taxes to combat greenhouse gas emissions.

The president of the Business Council of Australia, Mr Ian Salmon, has this week written to the Prime Minister, Mr John Howard, and other ministers calling for a tough stand against accepting legally binding, uniform targets for greenhouse emissions.

The executive director of the Minerals Council of Australia, Mr David Buckingham, wrote to the Minister for Resources, Senator Warwick Parer, registering 'strong concern' that a briefing last Thursday was 'the first attempt by the Government to engage industry with the detail of the proposed Australian approach to this critically important treaty negotiation'.

Mr Howard last night assured the Minerals Council of Australia that industry and non-government organisations would be given proper involvement in international lawmaking on the greenhouse issues ... 'It will insist that Australia's economic and trade interests are safeguarded and its specific national circumstances are taken into account in implementing the convention.'

[Mr Salmon of the Business Council] said research by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics indicated that a harsh approach to industrialised countries like Australia 'would have little environmental impact given the unconstrained growth in developing country emissions, especially those of China, India and Indonesia in our region.'

Mr Buckingham said: 'Any outcome from the climate change treaty process that results in a 'ramping up' of existing targets and timetables would be fundamentally contrary to Australia's economic and trade interests.' (Callick 1996a)

In framing terms, scare rhetoric—when speaking of a price on carbon pollution—and wielding that negative word 'tax', was well entrenched by the mid-1990s and continued into the 2000s: reaching a crescendo of accusation as a political weapon wielded by the conservative Opposition against the Labor government under Julia Gillard after 2010. Other themes that were well developed, judging by those mid-1990s articles in *The Australian Financial Review*, told the public: if Australia institutes targets and a timetable to combat carbon pollution, it would scare investment away; Australia would lose its competitive advantage; Outsiders, Europe and (at that time) the United States were doing this type of damage to the country from motives of trade competitiveness and internal politics (in the case of the United States); jobs were at stake.

As we see from the preceding excerpt, the Business Council of Australia and the Minerals Council were prominent in setting these narrative themes.

Spokespeople were part of the Australian Industry Greenhouse Network (AIGN): a revolving door of former bureaucrats and industry lobbyists who influenced John Howard's thinking on climate change action (Pearse 2007).³

During the same period *The Sydney Morning Herald* remained more diverse in emphasis. But several environmental journalists who worked on the *Herald's* parent company Fairfax's metropolitan papers after the mid-1990s said that science and environment stories always ranked lower than economics or politics if it came to an editorial choice. This was also true in the United States (Gelbspan 2004). Environment had reverted to low status compared with the traditional arenas of competitive politics, economics and sports.

Newspaper reports from this time mostly quoted green groups as spokespeople for climate change action in the political reports. After 1996 they were usually quoted in opposition to the government line at international gatherings, where it was argued that Australia was exceptional and should not need to extensively cut emissions. This painted green groups as being opposed to jobs and the national interest: another story about 'us and them'—that is, mainstream versus selfish special interests.

It has been argued that environmental groups have been equally intent on maintaining an adversarial role apart from the mainstream, and on advocating narrow legislative and technological solutions (rather than, for instance, focusing on the opportunities for alternative job creation), thereby ensuring a narrow frame of influence within society (Shellenberger & Nordhaus 2005).

Media amplifies the new narrative, opinion gains ground

During the second half of the 1990s, government-level communication about climate change became more technical and 'boring' to a lay audience, moving away from the earlier mainstream discussion of risks to every household posed by greenhouse gas emissions and climate change. The change from the direct and accessible to the narrow and technical can be traced through the content of the federal government's *Climate Change* newsletter, which was published between 1992 and 2000 by the Department of Primary Industries and the Bureau of Rural Resources.

3 Guy Pearse in his 2007 book *High and Dry* documents how in Australia there has been revolving door amongst former senior bureaucrats who then head industry lobby organisations like the Minerals Council of Australia and other arms of the fossil fuel lobby. He quotes one source who says of the former industry, energy or Prime Minister and Cabinet staffers: 'We all write the same way, we all think the same way, we all worked for the same set of ministers' (Pearse 2007: 230). In the 2000s many still revolve in executive positions including in higher education.

The national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)—which in the early 1990s had led the way with comprehensive science coverage of greenhouse gas emission risks and response strategies—became increasingly dominated by a conservative board of directors appointed by the Howard government (Dempster 2005). The ABC then largely restricted itself to amplifying the political story spun by the federal government (or the opposition), reporting issues framed through the echo chamber of the parliamentary press gallery.

Australia's only national newspaper, News Limited's *The Australian*, took a largely sceptical stance during the 1990s and has continued that stance to the present day. News Limited tabloids in every major city took a similar line and have only become shriller in the 2000s. Media analysts have linked this to the strong market fundamentalist editorial stance held by management, where action on climate change was seen as a threat and an unwelcome cost to doing business (McKnight 2005a).

Climate change coverage at the editorially more neutral *Sydney Morning Herald* also changed by the second half of the 1990s. A sceptical 'balance' was introduced when discussing the science, often deploying armchair sceptics who countered news reports of a scientific development. This trend also reflected a 10-fold increase from 1988–1989 to 2001 in opinion pieces by non-staff writers on the subject, along with a shift away from always using scientists and experts as the primary source of information.

In the concentrated Australian media market (with one major player, News Limited, running a sceptical line and the business press becoming partisan) these changes had significant influence on the dominant narrative. It increasingly made a discussion about climate change appear to revolve around opinion and belief rather than evidence.

Connections to free market think tanks also played an important role, with think tank members often writing opinion pieces for News Limited papers (Manne 2011; McKnight 2005a). The think tanks also had close links with the minerals industry, not least through funding.

A better understanding of the influence of the resurgent beliefs and ideologies promoted by these sectors through political leaders and media is fundamental to understanding what happened to climate change knowledge in Australia in the 1990s and since. I look at these beliefs and ideologies in greater detail in the following chapters as well as the media influence. The most influential framing of the climate change narrative was not done by either politicians or media stories alone, but occurred when there was agreement between political and media narratives and across different media platforms as media outlets echoed each other.

By 1996–1997 political and economic reporters and editors in the parliamentary press gallery were dutifully scribing the story established by the business and political elite: dealing with climate change was all about a political struggle to get the world to accept that Australia was exceptional—because it traded heavily (with often inefficient technology) and offered coal-fired electricity to energy-intensive multinational companies and to Australian consumers. There was of course also the conflicting matter of being the world’s largest coal exporter. Any change from this status quo was not acceptable.

Those who did not agree—the environmental groups, other countries including vulnerable Pacific Islands, Europeans, or the United Nations itself—were framed as the opposition to Australia’s growing prosperity enjoyed by the mainstream, particularly Australia’s aspirational voters and ‘battlers’. In 1997, the prime minister put it this way: ‘We are not prepared to see Australian jobs sacrificed and efficient Australian industries, particularly the resources sector, robbed of their hard-earned competitive advantage’ (Howard 1997). The speech in fact canvassed Kyoto response activities that the government proposed to take to the upcoming Kyoto negotiations, but the public heard metaphorical messages of theft and ‘it’s unfair’.

Bureaucracy power plays and trade wins

Institutional factors also helped the reframed story take over the public discussion. Since leadership had a significant influence on what happened in the 1990s, it follows that leadership style also influenced the way the response was tackled. While Hawke’s style as prime minister was consensual, bringing all sectors to the table, RMIT alternative energy expert Alan Pears witnessed the policy transitions from the early 1990s on, and said in an interview about the next Labor prime minister:

Keating’s style was bureaucratic. Climate policy became fractured between 37 committees of bureaucrats ... by 1994 a number of the threads started to coalesce that killed off ecologically sustainable development work while industry leaders and most of government thought ‘supply side’ i.e. more energy development [rather than conservation] equals growth and development.

The Sydney Morning Herald reported on how this was shaping up in the early Keating years:

So far the opponents of the [emission reduction] targets have employed the favourite trick of the bureaucrat—delay—to bog the whole process down in a myriad of inter-departmental committees, studies

and consultancies. The three ministers with central responsibility to implement the changes to reach the target—Kerin (now Crean), Beazley and Button—were asked by Cabinet last October to report back by the end of last year on ‘recommended implementation measures’. Nine months later and there is little sign of them rushing back to Cabinet. (Burton 1991: 32)

The federal energy bureaucracy’s internal priorities were elsewhere as we learned from the 1993 auditor general report (ANAO 1993). Interdepartmental battles did not help either. Like other insider participants interviewed about the 1990s, Kerin observed that the native forest debate poisoned relations between the Department of Environment and the stronger Department of Primary Industries and Energy that he led until 1991, and recalled the frustration he felt working with green groups, some of whom he still accuses of having lied about forestry issues.

Trade and Treasury were also involved in these battles over the forests. Along with the influence of market ideology and industry lobbying campaigns, the resulting antipathy from finance and resource industry bureaucrats to environmental action significantly bogged down the early climate change action plans by the mid-1990s under the Keating federal government.

Sue Salmon, from a green non-government organisation background, was an adviser to environment minister John Faulkner (1994–1995). She also experienced an internal fight between the primary industries and mineral extraction portfolios and the environment portfolio, and agreed that forests remained a major focus for the environment movement during those years. Climate change was considered a difficult issue to communicate in an ongoing fashion compared to forests.

By then the head of the federal Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade oversaw climate change action proposals. Salmon said in an interview it became all about ‘the traditional conservative view: we have hundreds of years of coal to trade ... It was very “us and them” and there was a perceived loss of power and face and control by the industry groups to accept the environmental perspective’. She also recalled that the IPCC was not viewed as an important avenue for information within government.

Other contemporary observers, such as Henry Nix, similarly perceived the environment portfolio to be weak. During the time he was chairing the Greenhouse Advisory Committee, Nix said the environment portfolio was generally at the losing end of this argument. ‘Even on the best days economic arguments always prevailed. It was possible to modify but not change much about it,’ he told me. This was consistent with the low status afforded environment in the mass media.

Phillip Toyne was at the coalface and agreed that climate change lost out in the policy debate. He had been drafted from the leadership of the Australian Conservation Foundation to deputy secretary of the federal environment department in 1994. He said in an interview that looking at some ice core research in Antarctica ‘woke him up’, but that generally neither environmental groups nor government had climate change at the top of the agenda in the 1990s. Environmental and scientific submissions might prevail to a certain degree, but only for a short while. In his view there was ‘a major disconnect between what scientists knew and their ability to influence policy [and this was due to] internal CSIRO traditions that did not promote a lot of communication with policymakers’.

During Toyne’s tenure (continued for two years under the Howard government) he found the government’s scientific advisers to be ‘invisible’, certainly not wielding any direct influence. Toyne agreed that during the Hawke/Richardson leadership on environment matters in federal government, the environment generally and climate change in particular had been treated as ‘mainstream’; that is, of concern to all citizens. But by the mid-1990s, with the industry lobbyists in full swing, the federal government was treating climate change knowledge as a ‘special interest’ and a not very welcome one.

In these ways, political leadership style—along with leadership intent—and bureaucratic beliefs and values played key roles in framing how to think about climate change at the national level from the Hawke through the Howard governments.

From the mid-1990s, industry lobbyists increasingly flexed their muscle under the umbrella group the Australian Industry Greenhouse Network. Salmon said they were very effective talking about jobs and income creation, and Australia’s ‘national interest’, while the environment ministry still focused on degrees of certainty.

Underlying this winning economic story were values and beliefs that elite politicians, bureaucrats, and industry leaders tended to have in common, particularly about Australia’s role as a quarry to Asia and the transcendence of macro-economics in all policy formulation. Kerin recalled:

Keating and (later Howard government Treasurer) Peter Costello were suckers for dogma on macro-economics ... The herd instinct (became) ‘the market, the market, the market’. In my terms they never examined enough market structure, market power, market failure

One of the things that has always worried me about economics and science, (and I set up the bureau of rural sciences in my department, because all they were concerned about was trade and economics) is that

economists are always absolutely sure they are right. Even when they're subsequently proved wrong they just forget about that. Scientists are never absolutely sure they're right because they always know there's more discovery and we learn more and more.

A similar observation was made about the trajectory of the NSW Labor government under Bob Carr when Salmon worked there as an advisor. She noticed a similar weakening split within government ranks with Carr apparently understanding the science, but the Treasurer Michael Egan blocking and presenting arguments as a sceptic and economic rationalist.

From key reforms to policy sideline

In taking a closer look at the fate of the now historic ecologically sustainable development (ESD) process, it's clear how the same scientific and economic data can lead to widely divergent policy recommendations and public storylines. It also shows what can happen to good ideas or programs that lack the leadership to ensure they survive. ESD's eventual sidelining indicates the difficulties of partial change, let alone radical revision of modern industrialisation and the institutions it relies on.

ESD was then a global concept attempting to add environmental and social justice benchmarks to planning and development. It was put into practice by the Hawke Labor government's 1989 decision to involve governments, industry, environmental, and community representatives in working groups. They were to consider nine sectors of the economy, including resource and energy use and assess community wellbeing, intergenerational equity, global impact, protection of biodiversity, and ecological processes along with economic development (Harris 1997). The ESD experiment gave equal standing to the natural environment and its spokespeople.

A combined ESD working group was to recommend how to lower carbon emissions from the energy sector. In 1990–1991 its priority recommendation was to focus on efficient energy use, thereby also lowering costs: so-called demand management (Bulkeley 2000b; Diesendorf 2000). This could be done by advocating or regulating smarter ways to operate in residential, commercial, and transport sectors: substituting gas for electricity; using insulation; using efficient motors; and promoting better construction and planning as well as changes in the agricultural sector to create greenhouse sinks (more recently called bio-sequestration or carbon farming).

According to former science minister Barry Jones, '[This] approach begins with the assumption that something can be done, that the argument "this is the way

we have always done things around here, and it can't change" is unnecessarily pessimistic' (Jones 1992: 7). Compared to political debate today, the wide range of solutions canvassed were remarkable also for not being an either or proposition (a carbon price or direct action).

The 500 recommendations that emerged from this ESD assessment did not challenge the basic assumptions of modern industrialisation and growth. The degree of consensus, however, including from business and non-government groups, was surprising reported British geographer Harriet Bulkeley, who looked closely at this period in Australia. In the event, ESD still proved too radical a process to last. Australia's elite decision-making tradition emerged to drive the outcomes in the transition between Hawke and Keating. This was achieved by the federal government developing the initial discussion paper and terms of reference; by the numerical preponderance of bureaucrats in the working groups, and through the government's selection of the stakeholders from industry, environment, and community groups.

The important energy sector report with implications for greenhouse gas emissions was taken 'in house' in 1991 where interdepartmental and intergovernmental committees whittled down the recommendation list to form the basis of the National Greenhouse Response Strategy (NGRS) and the National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development (NSESD). 'The resulting draft NGRS bore few similarities with the conclusions of the working group, representing instead a "lowest common denominator" approach as to what governments and bureaucrats were prepared to accept' (Bulkeley 2000b: 42).

The cross-sector ESD experiment ended in discord and disarray. The national Institution of Engineers, not known for its radicalism, issued a press release in August 1992 condemning the process, saying: 'According to the Institution, bureaucratic arrogance in the National Greenhouse Steering Committee (NGSC) has produced a National Greenhouse Response Strategy (NGRS) which encourages procrastination on all actions—even on those measures which are well-proven as being cost effective' (Dack 1992).

The response themes that would come to characterise the 1990s and 2000s were evident in the national strategy that the Institution of Engineers criticised: delay, more research, voluntary action and rejection of demand management and mandatory efficiency measures—leading to the eventual burial of the national 20 per cent planning target for emission reduction.

Triumph of the economist world view and 'can't do' climate response

Then treasurer, soon to be prime minister, Paul Keating had asked for those ESD recommendations, along with a similar request to the Industry Commission for comparison. Both organisations were to look at the costs, benefits, and opportunities of the government's draft emission reduction target. The eventual triumph of the Industry Commission assumptions and world view would direct a decade of responses to the scientific information about climate change and provide plenty of ammunition for the new public narrative. While the ESD recommendations were whittled down and homogenised, the simultaneous Industry Commission analysis of costs and benefits came to dominate the responses suggested in the NGRS (Bulkeley 2000b).

In his 1992 World Meteorological Day address Barry Jones candidly compared and contrasted the 1991 ESD and Industry Commission reports on costs and benefits of greenhouse action. He showed that, in many ways, the two analyses reflected a 'can do' versus a 'can't do' view of effective response to climate change. The 'can't do' framing helps explain how Australia embarked on two decades of losing valuable time to act (Jones 1992).

As a premier research organisation for the Australian Government, the Industry Commission initiated its inquiry in January 1991 with public hearings and submissions from 'interested parties', which is a common Australian practice. The commission reported in November of that year (Industry Commission 1991). Given the 'business as usual' and growth assumptions it entered into its modelling, the commission found that there would be a heavy cost to Australian industry if emissions were corralled at 1988 levels by 2000 and reducing 20 per cent from there by 2005. This would require some changes from the status quo of Australia growing as a 'raw materials economy' and would affect existing industries like coal and oil.

In his address, Jones called the commission's approach 'rigid' and wedded to recurrent ideas of the nation's 'comparative advantage' (a neo-liberal market economic idea) as a quarry to developing countries, and a global base for energy-hungry industries like aluminium. It was noted in contemporary media reports that, despite its good intentions on climate change mitigation, the Hawke government was keen for this to happen, rationalising that the coal was 'low sulphur'.

A 1990 *Sydney Morning Herald* article pointed out that this view was not unanimous in the federal Cabinet: 'That argument [to entice industry to Australia with its coal-based electricity] has potential merit, except that, as (Environment

Minister) Mrs Kelly points out, Australia has the least energy-efficient industrial sector of any OECD nation—that is, it must burn more fossil fuel to achieve a given industrial output' (Secombe 1990b: 15).

An inefficient industrial sector in an export environment helps explain the cost assumptions for the Industry Commission, and its findings of cost and hardship supporting the 'can't do' theme. Australia during these years also made fundamental choices not to have a diversified economy, thereby limiting its response options (Pearse 2009).

The 'can't do' story also got an unexpected assist following the plain-English 1990 IPCC report. After this communication high point, many climate scientists started to take a more cautious and conventional public stance that stressed uncertainties, returning to more familiar communication territory in response to public attacks at the IPCC and domestically. Changes in scientists' own language became another important influence on the eventual climate of uncertainty besetting Australians that continues to the present.

The Industry Commission issues paper foreshadowed several other theme shifts as the 1990s progressed—eventually away from the idea that there is a global ethical responsibility and toward the frame that the global atmosphere is a commons, and no one nation can have significant impact unilaterally 'if in doing so this significantly damages their economies or international trade competitiveness' (Industry Commission 1991: 5).

Oft-repeated thereafter, was the threat that if Australia acts against major industry emitters, they will simply move offshore (Industry Commission 1991: 12). With these frames, still very current today, the Australian narrative came to illustrate Garrett Hardin's classic thesis of the 'tragedy of the commons'—where no group is willing to unilaterally look after the common interest, thinking that others will not.

Fixed idea: markets are perfectly efficient

The Industry Commission developed economic modelling that set a benchmark for other government advisers, particularly ABARE and its industry clients. The modelling of costs to the economy provided the political ammunition for not ratifying the Kyoto Protocol to set global emission reduction targets after 1997. Trumping the ESD recommendations to mandate increased efficiency and switch to alternative energy or fuel mixes, was a world view about the nature of markets: that they are inherently efficient.

With that idea, regulating economies for social outcomes, like mandating fuel efficiency, or even offering incentives for change was undesirable. This ideology is part of economic rationalism as practised in Australia, a major influence on response since the 1990s, which is examined in more detail in chapter 6.

In an analysis of what he calls ‘idealist economics’—that is, theory and policy divorced from on-ground evidence—political economist Evan Jones cited the work of the Industry Commission as a prime example of economic modelling and analysis using ‘a preconceived conceptual framework’ (Jones 2002). ABARE’s analyses in the 1990s looked similarly ‘idealist’. Political scientist Guy Pearse interviewed insiders and describes how assumptions favouring status quo industries and the likely cost of any change were seeded into the ABARE’s economic modelling of the mid- and late 1990s. Why this was done has been variously ascribed to strongly held beliefs or consultancy payments from industry, or likely both. ‘For ABARE, Australia’s big polluters are in fact clients. Many of them have paid vast sums for ABARE’s greenhouse policy research. The terms of these deals are commercial in confidence, not even revealed in parliament’ (Pearse 2007: 219).

Parliamentary records, however, do reveal the biggest names amongst Australian fossil fuel companies as clients who funded the ABARE model that underpinned Prime Minister Howard’s climate change response after 1996. These include the Australian Coal Association, Australian Aluminium Council, the Business Council of Australia, BHP, Rio Tinto, Exxon Mobil and other oil companies. Their involvement generated enough controversy to merit an auditor-general’s investigation in the late 1990s, which showed no environmental lobbyists were on hand to wield comparable influence (Pearse 2007).

Australia as a good global citizen

Despite this economic frontal attack brandishing cost assessments, Australian politicians were still keen to be seen as good global citizens through the early Keating years. In June 1992, Australia was a signatory to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) unveiled at the Rio Earth Summit. The UNFCCC came into force in 1994 and Australia became the eighth nation to ratify the convention, signalling its serious intent. The UNFCCC called for emission reduction of greenhouse gases to 1990 levels by 2000, and targets would be set in 1997 at the Kyoto meeting of the parties to the convention (the Kyoto Protocol). Signatories were also supposed to design effective response strategies—which Australian governments had been doing since the late 1980s.

Project Victoria, blueprint for undoing the best state emission reduction plan

All Australian states reported in October 1991 on what had been achieved since their mission statements in 1988 (ANZECC 1991). Victoria is the premier example of how far climate change response programs had progressed and what happened thereafter.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Victoria was leading with a comprehensive suite of intended actions including: mandatory insulation in new housing; permanent controls on tree-clearing; incorporating the costs of environmental damage by 'providing a 10 per cent cost advantage to energy conservation and renewable energy resource options'; and (soon to be disbanded by deregulation and privatisation) major demand-management programs through the State Electricity Commission of Victoria (SECV) and the Gas and Fuel Corporation of Victoria. All this would require 'a policy of energy conservation rather than increased sales' (ANZECC 1991: 38).

The SECV figured that its programs—targeted at residential, commercial, and industrial consumers—could save 14 million tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions annually while reducing demand, thereby saving consumers money, up to the year 2005. (Meanwhile, nationally the Industry Commission modelling, and later ABARE's, would disregard the possibilities of demand management in favour of assuming incremental growth in demand and costs).

The Renewable Energy Authority of Victoria was taking even bolder steps to finally crack the builder and subdivision mentality, with programs including guidelines for solar-efficient subdivisions to be incorporated in the building code; house energy-efficiency ratings; labelling for solar hot water heaters, wind farms, and methane recovery at landfills (ANZECC 1991).

All this was to come to a dramatic halt with Project Victoria, which brought a Liberal government led by Jeff Kennett to power in 1992 with the help of a blueprint for a deregulated state and a market economic approach to administration drawn up by the neo-liberal think tanks the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) and the Tasman Institute (Cahill & Beder 2005). Kennett would lead these 'reforms' until 1999. Ideology was shifting the goalposts at both the state and federal levels. (Reform is a word that signals not just change but improvement. I use the quotation marks to emphasise how language is deployed and what we are likely to hear.)

Deregulation of state energy utilities following 1992 (aided by the Keating government's enthusiasm for national competition policy) helped undo both the intent and the capability for reducing Australia's emissions through energy-

demand management strategies. Victoria was not alone in planning energy sector efficiency management. But promoting commercial competition in the energy sector favoured increasing revenue through increasing demand, the opposite of demand management. The response from the other states varied. In some cases, some conservation programs did remain for the longer term. For example, New South Wales created its Sustainable Energy Development Authority (SEDA) that promoted green power electricity and energy efficiency into the 2000s (Diesendorf 2007).

Weak national response a bow to commercial interests

The 1992 national greenhouse response strategy (NGRS) has been called weak and ineffective by more than just the Institution of Engineers:

The failure of the NGRS derives from a failure of governments to show leadership, to reconcile conflicting policy objectives and to distinguish the public interest from narrow commercial interests. This has been compounded by a lack of knowledge of the energy market in parts of the bureaucracy, and a lack of informed public debate and scrutiny. (Wilkenfeld, Hamilton & Saddler 1995: 1)

Voluntary and ad hoc activity characterised the NGRS. The strategy established a framework that response should be left to individual action and be ‘no regrets’ (i.e., no entity should bear costs) which became firmly established in the public discussion and assumptions of the possible.

In that spirit, the showpiece of federal government action by 1994 became the Greenhouse Challenge Program, which was targeted at voluntary industry efficiency measures, and administered jointly by the departments of environment, energy and industry. It reflected the federal industry department’s decision not to compromise growth and development on behalf of greenhouse gas abatement goals, regardless of international commitments (Bulkeley 2000b: 47). The Greenhouse Challenge Program has been described as a model of how to tackle a pressing national problem in an ad hoc, voluntary fashion—rather like asking citizens to voluntarily tax themselves for the public good.

It reflected the ideas behind most climate change response activities by the federal government as the 1990s unfolded and beyond: that ‘the market’ knows best on all things. A carbon tax, considered an effective tool in a market economy, was nevertheless rejected as early as the mid-1990s as too costly to industry (Hamilton 2001).

By 1994–1995, it became clearer that Australia would be overshooting the UNFCCC aim of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2000 (let alone the earlier domestic interim target of 20 per cent below 1988 levels), and therefore Australia would not be meeting its international commitments or indeed implement much of the NGRS (Bulkeley 2000b: 47; Hamilton 2001).

By mid-1995, the federal government had formally aligned itself with the so-called JUSCANZ countries—standing for Japan, the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. At least one major environmental organisation blamed the United States, Canada, and Australia in particular for obstructing a whole raft of environmental measures that were agreed to at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, including moving ahead on reducing greenhouse gas emissions (Greenpeace 2002).

While Australian scientists remained involved at the IPCC level, and the scientific message remained similar, the 1995 IPCC report would be a cautious shadow of the 1990 report in communication terms. Reasons offered by various observers have been: behind-the-scenes politicking by oil and energy producers and their alliance with sceptic scientists and the need to build consensus amongst government officials from many countries for the policymakers' summary. IPCC summaries for politicians reflect expert analysis filtered through a consensus process with policy officials; members of scientific panels have noted that this led to a lowest-common-denominator approach that under-reports the risks.

Australian National Party politician John Stone approvingly noted in an opinion piece in *The Australian Financial Review* that the 1995 IPCC report was only '40 per cent as apocalyptic' as its 1990 counterpart. In doing so, he said he echoed the sentiment of US sceptic scientist Patrick Michaels. At this rate, Stone hoped the whole lot of 'poppycock' would disappear by the end of the decade (Stone 1996: 25).

The reframe from 1996 on

The dominant narrative was well on its way to changing from a 'science and risk to society' story to a political and economic story about costs and 'national interest' as the conservative Howard Coalition government took office in March 1996. Newspaper articles provide evidence of the strong economic focus that continued through 1996–2001 (and beyond). The following *Financial Review* article makes manifest the government's identification with resource industry interests, and the language is typical of the later 1990s in this publication. Headlined: 'Coalition backs industry on climate change' the 1996 story reports that:

Australian industry has applauded the Federal Cabinet's decision yesterday to oppose a targets and timetables approach to international climate change negotiations, made on the eve of World Environment Day today. The Howard Government's position effectively reaffirms that taken by the Keating government and its minister for the Environment, Senator John Faulkner. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr Alexander Downer, the Minister for the Environment, Senator Robert Hill, and the Minister for Resources and Energy, Senator Warwick Parer, said in a joint statement: 'Australia will insist that the outcome of current international negotiations on climate change safeguards Australia's particular economic and trade interests.'

Mr John Hannagan, chairman of the Australian Aluminium Council's major policy group, said industry welcomed this statement, 'reinforcing its no-regrets position as its negotiating stand at the forthcoming Geneva talks.' He said: 'This is consistent with the Government's commitment not to support mandatory policy measures which would damage Australia's trade and economic interests. We would also ask the Government for stronger efforts to involve developing countries in the process at the earliest possible opportunity.' (Callick 1996d: 2)

Pearse, in his 2007 book about the players who were blocking climate change action, put public relations consultant John Hannagan and his partner Noel Bushnell (H&B) in context:

Some of Australia's biggest polluters have paid H&B for much of the decade to attend international greenhouse negotiations, write media strategies and press releases, organise conferences undermining Kyoto along with the rationale for emission cuts. Most important of all, polluter money has funded H&B to door-knock the Prime Minister's office (Pearse 2007: 209).

While by this time few government or public documents (other than newspaper reports) are to be found discussing greenhouse science and risk management compared with five years earlier, and the government's *Climate Change* newsletter was now technical and jargon-laden, industry publications continued to sow doubt. The mounting shift in framing can be seen from a July 1996 document called *Greenhouse, not just an environmental issue* produced by the Australian Coal Association. The introduction reflects the 'uncertain' way of publicly communicating climate change that took hold during that period.

The coal industry document asserted that the Australian public was being told by the media and by environmental groups that fossil fuels are to blame for heating the planet, but a more balanced and objective debate is needed.

It also picked apart the 1995–1996 IPCC report to highlight any language signalling uncertainty about human activities affecting the climate, and included contradictory sceptic perspectives. The report highlighted Australia's 'competitive advantage', and called Kyoto target setting unfair. It asked whether, and to what extent, there is a human influence on the greenhouse effect so that action is necessary? In contrast, as the 1980s ended, media and government, and even industry, assumed that this had been thoroughly answered by science.

After 1996, climate change or the greenhouse effect would be commonly presented, in the media and in political rhetoric, as a 'debate' about both the science and about Australia's place in the world in terms of action. The government focus on uncertainty, along with an industry fixation to avoid a carbon tax, guaranteed that the on-ground action would be slim to none despite environment ministers 'rhetoric about 'leading the world' on this and that response initiative. Indeed, there is nothing in the documentary record of this period analogous to the federal and state 'to do' list of the late 1980s and early 1990s. While effective action was minimal, there was a 'vicious attack on the environment movement' during this period (McDonald 2005: 225).

Australia expands coal-fired plants and other sources of emissions

Further evidence on the extent to which both major political parties had by the mid-1990s rejected the early government response framework in favour of a narrative to strengthen the status quo and delay action, was provided in an extraordinary letter. This was sent by a political party, the Australian Democrats, to a climate summit meeting in Geneva in 1996 and reported by Gavin Gilchrist in *The Sydney Morning Herald*:

In the letter, the Democrats told Mr Chimutengwende [the meeting chairman] that while the Howard Government might claim Australia's greenhouse gas emissions would miss the target of halting their rise by only 3 per cent, in fact Australia's greenhouse emissions were rapidly increasing and almost all of the National Greenhouse Response Strategy remained unimplemented.

'The Government is actively encouraging more coal-fired thermal power stations; it does not have the commitment to stand up to the coal industry hence its contradictory attempt to assist marketing coal in the name of greenhouse gas reductions,' the letter says.

‘The Government actively encourages more car use by building more freeways and infrastructure to support it rather than improving public transport; it allows far more clearing of native vegetation than is being replaced by tree planting; it increases the number of forests clearfelled for woodchips and it does not adequately encourage development and implementation of renewable technologies.’ (Gilchrist 1996a: 2)

A study of how Australia’s dominant values on this issues changed during this period concluded that the shift was away from a stance that was global, ethical, risk averse and open to new energy industries. Australia’s refusal to ratify the Kyoto Protocol by the late 1990s was portrayed by politicians and the media as normal and logical behaviour to protect jobs and the national interest (McDonald 2005). The new narrative had succeeded by the second half of the 1990s, aided by a small band of familiar sceptics, to persuade the public that ‘scientists don’t agree’, that there is significant uncertainty about the science and action will hurt the economy and, therefore, every family.

‘The public interest’ drops off agenda

As the story about climate change shifted away from science to economics and costs one cannot overlook the effect of corporatisation and restructuring of government research. The CSIRO is a government science organisation subject to restrictions by the ‘employer’—the politicians who fund and thereby direct the research agenda and the organisational structure. In Australia the majority of atmospheric research has been conducted by this semi-independent public entity in partnership with universities and government departments—all of whom are subject to shifting rules about public communication.

A corporate restructure during the 1990s shifted the CSIRO away from public interest research to sponsored research, with a significant impact on the ability to communicate findings. Public interest research, particularly involving the natural environment, was sidelined as CSIRO research was rebadged to serve private enterprise and pay its way with company contracts. The mining and exploration lobby steadily gained influence with federal politicians and ‘coal became king’ in Australia (Pearse 2009).

The historical evidence suggests that, as the 1990s progressed, some funding levels remained for basic research of climatic processes, but not so for response strategies to reduce energy demand or emissions. Research on energy-efficiency measures and technological solutions that competed with coal went out of favour (Diesendorf 2000; Hamilton 2001). As importantly, public awareness initiatives slowed and eventually stopped after 1992, during the main Keating and Howard government years.

Science focus turned to wealth creation, muzzling inconvenient voices

A parallel outcome was the muffling or muzzling of some of the loudest voices from the scientific community on climate change. Graeme Pearman was one. From his vantage point as chief of the CSIRO Division of Atmospheric Research from 1992–2002 and acting CSIRO Institute director in 1996 he saw ‘enormous tension between the mining institute and the environment institute which was considered “too green”’. The CSIRO was balkanised. ‘The CSIRO Board also became industry dominated,’ said Pearman in an interview. ‘The paradigm was wealth creation and the role of science is to build wealth ... [this manifested as] denial or that it was politically incorrect to diverge from accountability towards this path.’

Through his role as a science communicator as well as administrator, Pearman learned that the business community had unspoken but adhered-to rules of how it regarded the schism between development and environment or green issues. Even within the scientific community, climate change had become characterised as a special interest green issue and he became characterised as a ‘greenie’ by the mid-1990s—a far cry from the early scientific mainstreaming of climate science through his efforts and that of other CSIRO scientists in the 1980s and early 1990s. This state of affairs was not helped by the fact that ‘people in boardrooms and cabinets don’t understand “science speak” on uncertainty’, he told me.

By April 2000 Australia had a dedicated sceptical voice on behalf of business with the inaugural meeting of the Lavoisier Group, co-led by the highly influential and active Hugh Morgan and Ray Evans of the Minerals Council of Australia. It was reported at the time that the Lavoisier Group was a spin-off of members from the Australian Business Council who wanted to take a step backwards to dispute the very existence of an anthropogenic greenhouse effect (Taylor 2000).

They were joined by engineers, academics, free market consultant Alan Oxley, and retired government officials—some with considerable clout, such as retired Labor minister Peter Walsh, as well as Brian Tucker, the former head of the CSIRO Division of Atmospheric Research before Pearman—all or most of whom set about contacting politicians (Lavoisier Group 2000).

The express aim of the Lavoisier Group think tank was to debunk, sow uncertainty and otherwise counter the science and policy responses of climate change in the lead-up to possible Kyoto ratification in 2005. In 2004 the group published a sceptic book penned by former Bureau of Meteorology staffer

William Kininmonth that raised desired media attention and debate. Publication of sceptical books at critical policy junctures has been a favoured tactic by critics. In the event, Kyoto was not ratified by Australia at that time.

Internationally, on the other hand, by 2000 the sceptic fossil fuel industry network called the Global Climate Coalition, which had attempted to overwhelm IPCC and political negotiations during the 1990s, was reported to be falling into disunity. A better understanding was emerging amongst key global energy corporations like Shell and Texaco, and car companies like Ford and others, that they should consider the risks and opportunities posed by climate change, not just act as blockers (Windram 2000).

Decline of public attention by mid–1990s

The Australian documentary evidence does not reflect the public reaction to climate change information during the mid-to-late 1990s, as it did with earlier polls. A US poll survey shows, however, that public interest can wane considerably as a story is reframed from a science to a negative political story, as it was during these years (Nisbet & Myers 2007). Some suggestive figures were released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2006, showing public concern for environmental issues in general had declined continuously since 1992 when 75 per cent of Australians expressed concern. By 2004 that figure had dropped to an average 57 per cent.

Since the apparent drop in public interest coincides with the reframed climate change story in the 1990s, this suggests that public awareness or interest about climate change, as well as on other environmental issues, were influenced by similar changed narratives pitting the economy against the environment. Based on the public record, it is unlikely that the loss of public interest came first and influenced politicians and the media to cloud the climate change discussion. The reverse appears to be true.

To better understand not only what happened during the 1990s and since, but also 'how' Australian society was persuaded to forget what it once knew about the mainstream risks and ethical issues attached to climate change, it helps to unpack further the forces that combined to deconstruct Australia's climate change knowledge.

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