

10. Dicing with the climate: how many more throws?

While the industries they represent don't always see eye to eye, there are three things they all agree on: greenhouse emission constraints must be stopped; if they can't be stopped they must be delayed for as long as possible; and if they can't be delayed they should be written so as to exempt us from paying.

Guy Pearse, writing about the industry lobbyists who succeeded in getting a changed climate change narrative from the mid-1990s on (*High and Dry*, 2007)

The Abbott government remains steadfast in its plans to remove the carbon tax—now at \$24.15 a tonne—which has helped to make black coal-fired plants, in particular, more expensive.

Peter Hannam, 'Wind energy at record levels', *Canberra Times*, 6 May 2014

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The 'biggest names' on the free market Institute of Public Affairs (IPA) contributor list include a majority who have appeared in the pages of this book. The list is sceptic geologists Bob Carter and Ian Plimer, retired meteorologist William Kininmonth, US sceptic scientists Patrick Michaels and Richard Lindzen, UK sceptic and John Howard informant Nigel Lawson, Canadian-born libertarian writer Mark Steyn, former IPA environmental editor Jennifer Marohasy, News Limited columnist Andrew Bolt, and Liberal Party stalwart John Roskam.

Also contributing to the volume is IPA's deregulation expert and climate change sceptic Alan Moran, who has revolved through the Industry Commission, provided intellectual ammunition to deregulate and privatise Victoria's public assets in the early 1990s and then worked as that state's energy chief, helping to undo efficiency programs. This is a good indication that the same voices and influence from the 1990s are continuing the same battle against climate change public knowledge and effective response, now with a sympathetic federal government again on side, more radical than before.

Before the 2013 federal election, the IPA published its wishlist for an incoming government under Tony Abbott that would make 'Australia richer and more free'. Amongst the top 12 wishes were 'repeal the carbon tax and don't replace it; abolish the Department of Climate Change; abolish the Clean Energy Fund' (Roskam, Berg & Paterson). Amongst the first actions of the Abbott government were to move to do just that.

Meanwhile a climate report in early 2014 that hardly raised a blip in the national conversation was the news that the West Antarctic ice sheet had started to melt without possibility of reversal, promising to raise sea levels within a century by 1.2 metres (possibly, as the *New York Times* reported, '10 feet or more' in coming centuries) (Rignot et al. 2014). At that time a separate team from the University of Washington led by Ian Joughin published corroborating evidence in *Science*.

Putting it in the historical perspective of early scientific warnings of risk, the *New York Times* reported:

The new finding appears to be the fulfillment of a prediction made in 1978 by an eminent glaciologist, John H. Mercer of the Ohio State University. He outlined the vulnerable nature of the West Antarctic ice sheet and warned that the rapid human-driven release of greenhouse gases posed 'a threat of disaster'. He was assailed at the time, but in recent years, scientists have been watching with growing concern as events have unfolded in much the way Dr. Mercer predicted. (He died in 1987.) (Gillis & Chang 2014)

Meanwhile, weather events in early 2014 saw catastrophic flooding in the Balkans, off the scale of previous recorded flooding, which led to the displacement of people on a scale previously seen only in the recent Balkan civil war, and, again, reports of terrifying bushfires in the western United States following a long drought.

In Australia, however, this and other recent extreme weather events have not deterred the new national government, elected in September 2013, from attempting to undo the modest record of the previous government to lower greenhouse gas emissions and thereby do something as a nation to lower the risk of even more extreme and unpredictable weather.

It is said that, in war, the worst acts often occur at the end, when the tide is about to turn and conflict ceases. Is this possibly an analogy for the present Australian governments' (including some state governments) cascade of destructive, backward steps on climate change response?

While a manufactured budget 'crisis' has held the country in thrall, the real looming crisis of bad weather and economic costs related to climate change is

scarcely on the radar. The government narrative (echoed by the same media voices particularly in the Murdoch outlets that supported this version of reality in the last two decades) signals ‘no worries’—extreme weather events are a mere inconvenience that always happens in Australia. Longer term or overseas weather disasters are not part of the government narrative.

The backroom influence is the same as it was from the later 1990s to 2007; that is, the Howard era, with government policy allied to the advice of the extractive industry-funded and sceptical IPA and other free market think tanks. The country is being steered backward to a policy baseline from the past decades with the same influences of economics, beliefs and values, many of the same players, and the same rhetorical strategies that reset the national narrative in the 1990s.

The same influences are being deployed at a time that public opinion, some media analysis and policy responses have slowly moved away from the hegemony of thinking established in the Howard years. A post-carbon energy alternative has grown in possibility and acceptance since 2007. While a detailed accounting of the political economy and communication history post 2001 is not within the scope of this book, it can be said that the drivers that established the 1990s national story on climate change and banished the earlier good public knowledge have remained through the course of the 2000s so far, and there is now an attempt to re-establish total dominance.

One observer and economist in a good position to know this, and who has spoken out publicly, is Bernie Fraser, governor of the Reserve Bank of Australia from 1989 to 1996. More recently he has served as the chair of the Climate Change Authority, which was slated for dismantling by the Abbott government. The authority, which includes business leaders, was tasked with providing independent advice on Australia’s carbon price, emission reduction targets and other response initiatives.

Fraser told public audiences in 2014 that it is a ‘safe bet’ the Australian Government will not change its minimum emission reduction target from five to 15 per cent, as recommended by the authority and has characterised as a ‘barren’ toolkit the new policies to pay industries not to emit carbon pollution. Confirming the familiar territory underpinning these policies including attacks on the windfarm sector, he told a regional newspaper that:

[The federal government’s position] is being buttressed by their big business supporters—the Minerals Council, the conventional energy generators—who want to see things go on the way they are and take

advantage of all the coal that they have in the ground and make a profit on it The mining companies generally are strong supporters of the government ideologically. They are on the same wavelength.

[Asked about the public mood that this strong pushback is encountering, Fraser said:]

We meet quite a lot of business people who are concerned about the implications of global warming. And there is quite a growing renewable industry, as in solar. There was in wind too but it has hit a brick wall for the time being [due to government attempts to roll back the renewable energy target for production]. There's continuing investment in energy efficiency improvements. There are actually substantial numbers of people out there who want to do things differently. (Goldie 2014)

It remains to be seen whether current political events constitute a 'last stand' of sorts for the broader fossil fuel economy as it dices with climate change.

Policy drivers remain the same

What is clear since the 1980s is that decisive leadership, positive or negative, including beliefs, style and institutional arrangements have largely dictated whether meaningful action regarding climate change is on the national radar for Western democracies dominated by the values and economics outlined in this book. The importance of leadership was evident again from the enthusiasm initially generated in 2007 by incoming Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and his pledge to do something big about climate change response. He memorably called climate change 'the biggest moral challenge of our time', and the public grew hopeful.

When his signature response of an emissions trading scheme fell apart, it caused much public disillusionment. This failure, too, can be viewed in light of the influence of resource extraction and energy intensive industries that retained the upper hand for the status quo in the 2000s. The trading scheme was watered down to please industry to the point that it lost support from environmental-minded members of parliament, notably the Greens, and therefore lost the parliamentary vote. This was an important element leading to Rudd's famous overthrow as party leader in view of growing party fears of electoral defeat.

The minority Labor government under Julia Gillard that then took the reins went into coalition with the Greens and two independents to retain office, and together they crafted a suite of renewable energy response measures, offering seed finance and supporting innovation and research. A price (tax) on carbon

seguing to an emissions trading scheme was the main market mechanism of this response approach. Among other initiatives, a groundbreaking federally funded 'solar cities' pilot program of public-private enterprise showed that major and rapid change was possible in urban environments.

Within four years these initiatives were starting to bear fruit, boosted also by the global market for renewable energy that was bringing down costs of solar and wind systems around the world. Australia by 2014 had one of the world's best uptakes of domestic solar panels. Since 2010, wind energy had also become a large component of bringing down demand for traditional coal-fired energy.

According to an April 2014 news report, wind energy's share of Australia's main electricity market jumped to record levels helping to curb demand for coal-fired electricity and thereby lowering emissions. Wind had increased market share to '4.6% [while] black coal fired plants ... continued to operate well short of capacity. Greenhouse gas emissions from the National Electricity Market for the month were 5.8 million tonnes lower than a year earlier, down 3.5 per cent.' (Hannam 2014).

Despite such tangible evidence of progress towards a post-carbon energy market, poor communication by Gillard's government almost never linked the renewable initiatives or the price on carbon pollution to the larger goal of combating the risk of climate change to everyone in society. Instead the public narrative stayed firmly with the hip-pocket 'cost' story that was so well-entrenched by this time.

This left Gillard and her government vulnerable to a singularly nasty in execution but successful fear campaign mounted by the opposition (now the government) around the theme of 'tax' and broken promises. The fear of a new tax was not diminished by the Gillard government's cash payments to citizens, which were supposed to offset the flow-through impacts of the 'pollution tax' on business. The defeat of that Labor-Green alliance in 2013 by the radical conservative Abbott government was at least partly due to the public's acceptance of the cost arguments of the anti-carbon tax campaign.

Lessons from the climate change culture wars

The history of the last 20 years of Australia's response to global warming and climate change is a tale of power, profit and eventual unwillingness to accept social and economic change, falling back on a suite of traditional beliefs and values signalled to the public through the strategic application of the English language.

With the loss of political leadership willing to respond rapidly and effectively to the inherent risks of climate change, as was present in the late 1980s and early 1990s, this history shows the triumph of those who want no change from 'business as usual' and who frame everything in terms of cost rather than risk management and ethical response.

It is also a lesson about the dominance of communication in setting a society's sense of what is 'real' and that this reality can be reframed within a few years by politicians and media working in tandem. In the course of this history, Australia also changed from having a social democratic political approach up to the early 1990s with an 'accord' between capital and labour and a more inclusive approach to decision-making.

In regard to climate change response, for a few years, this inclusive approach included scientists and environmental organisations as mainstream partners, and was implemented in a politically bipartisan manner for the public interest. The public was presented with a science story that would affect everyone without manipulated 'balance'. Regulation of markets for the public interest was still not a banned concept. Under those circumstances a social consensus on action was easier to reach.

A major change that affected both communication and the political landscape in the 1990s was the final cementing of free market 'economic rationalist' ideology as the way to look at the world, as the new reality. Citizens were now stand-alone consumers in a relationship with 'the market'.

In the absence of committed leadership and then with negative leadership, public interest communication about global warming and climate change now had to persuade each individual to look beyond a manufactured debate and a mounting campaign of uncertainty about the science and the need to lower emissions. The result which favoured the status quo energy economy was a fog of public confusion and disinterest.

Neo-classical economic ideology took over the long-standing growth and progress myths that inform industrial cultures. In Australia and elsewhere it also allied with other free enterprise values in post-colonial societies that placed the economy *versus* the environment, and assumed the need and right to exploit natural resources (like coal). It also tapped into other traditional beliefs about human exceptionalism from the natural environment as well as a modern belief in technology fixing everything eventually.

The triumph of belief over evidence in an increasingly fragmented information environment has been one significant outcome in Australia of these influences that were nailed down in the 1990s, along with the advent of new information avenues, particularly the internet.

The outcome has been that the possibility of citizen demand for real and effective response action was successfully neutralised for the past two decades. Similar leadership changes, economic theories, beliefs and values also persuaded other English-speaking democracies—United Kingdom, United States, Canada—to go slow on climate action to various extents. Responses from other nations have varied as international negotiations show, but it can safely be said that leadership, economic models and beliefs and values also dictate their responses. The net outcome domestically and internationally is that we have lost 25 years of potential response action.

Instead, emissions are still mushrooming globally and scientific warnings are increasing about escalating, even runaway, climate change impacts while the window of opportunity is rapidly closing to stabilise greenhouse gases at a level bearable by human civilisations.

What we heard before being persuaded not to

What can we take away from this story of a nation that buried its once good public understanding of global warming and related climate change response measures?

Firstly, it points to public communication and message-framing as key, because the scientific message about anthropogenic climate change, unembellished by political translation and reinterpretation, has remained consistent since the 1980s.

The message since the 1990 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report told us that, from the time of the Industrial Revolution, the enhanced greenhouse effect, global warming and climate change have been building. This is thanks to human activity—primarily emissions from burning fossil fuels, but also emissions from agriculture and deforestation.

If not mitigated by drastic cuts in greenhouse gas emissions from industrial activities and by slowing the rate of vegetation clearance (a sink for greenhouse gases), more extreme weather patterns bringing drought, fire, flood, severe storms and sea-level rise will become catastrophic for human populations and other species. The analogy has repeatedly been drawn that humans are loading the dice for more extreme events.

The late 1980s and early 1990s was a period when environment and economics were reconciled, or at least a focus on ‘ecologically sustainable development’ attempted a holistic approach, to ultimately fail as economic interests were once again pitted against the environment and those that defended it.

Every climate change response we know of now was known 25–30 years ago, starting with energy efficiency, which if applied across both domestic and industrial sectors, at one time was considered adequate to cut emissions significantly. This was in accordance with the 1990 Australian greenhouse gas emission reduction target of stabilising emissions at 1988 levels by 2000 and reducing them by 20 per cent from that level by 2005. Every state had a plan. Renewable energy, transport, urban planning, retaining vegetation were all extensively suggested as options and related research was funded.

The story was framed as one of opportunity for new industry as well. Significantly, regulation of then state-owned energy markets to manage demand for efficient use was considered acceptable and was indeed underway—until it all went the other way with deregulation and competition policy.

Mass media reporting generally reflected the early good understanding and will to act, consistent with both the prominent role of scientists at the time and also the media formula of quoting what people in power say as the main news. Prime Minister Bob Hawke and his environment minister were on board, as were state governments.

As political leadership changed, however, and the political response to lowering emissions switched from ‘can do’ to ‘can’t do’, the media swung with it, using the same narrative and language as the politicians. In Western democracies like Australia, politicians and media together have set the agenda, which has become particularly noticeable with a growing loss of media diversity.

Let’s talk plainly about risk, and ethics

The public record, including extensive newspaper reports and government documents, shows that framing the public discussion of climate change around risk confronting all levels of society (whether the risk is economic or about health) was a key element of the early public knowledge and political will to act. A good comparison is the public’s understanding of insurance risk.

Other elements were a commitment to global good citizenship and care for future generations that, for a while, enjoyed bipartisan political support (an impossible political goal nowadays?). In the early days, atmospheric research scientists led the discussion and were quoted in the media using direct and certain language, as did the first 1990 IPCC report. Scientists also worked effectively with policymakers and community groups at a time when they were not constrained from talking about the implications of their research—later

characterised as talking about policy and not to be done. Scientific experts did not at first (as they did later) lead with uncertainties when talking to politicians or other lay audiences.

Cognitive linguistics explains that much of public communication is what people hear, not what is said to them, and that messages might have to be framed differently for different audiences. Thus scientific uncertainty translates to lay people as ‘scientists don’t agree’, or ‘don’t know’. This field of knowledge also explains how people can be manipulated by language that appeals to their core values like family and nation, or not liking taxes, so that they ‘hear’ what politicians want them to hear.

When it all changed to a different reality

From the mid-1990s, the political narrative moved away from a story about risk and global good citizenship along with domestic opportunity for new industries and cost saving through efficiency. The story became a drama of national self-interest, said to be threatened by outside forces like the United Nations—explaining some of the disdain for the UN-sponsored IPCC reports. The national interest was framed as being synonymous with the interests of industries that extract mineral resources and fossil fuels, notably coal.

In tandem, the business press no longer freely criticised Australian industries’ inefficiency as a major reason for Australia’s emissions. The early reporting saw environment, technology and even political reporters adding the science in context. Such context went missing by 2001 as political and economic reporters confined themselves to what politicians were saying.

What they were saying by this time was that human agency was uncertain and, anyway, Australia was exceptional as the world’s largest coal exporter, other mineral exporter and energy intensive hub for multinationals, such as the aluminium industry. The political frame had become that changing or regulating the energy economy to reduce our emissions was against the national interest and therefore against every family’s interest.

In the mainstream press, balancing climate change reporting with sceptical voices became standard by 2001, and opinion pieces on the subject went up 10-fold from a decade earlier, adding to the impression that the subject was debatable and a matter of opinion and belief.

Economic modelling became the lens for policy after 1992. The cost to mainstream Australia of a threat to status quo energy industries—without addressing a balancing benefit to society of emission or pollution reduction, trumped the

narrative of risk from green groups and scientists. These groups became framed as special interest and counter to the national interest. Any action had to be voluntary, cost-neutral and market-focused.

Australia was not alone as a Western democracy under the influence of neo-classical market economics experiencing a seismic shift away from an evidence-based, science-informed national stance on climate change that highlighted risks, responsibilities and new opportunities. The 1990s economic discourse was about how things *should be* in a globalised economy—soon repeated in media and policy documents as the way of the world.

Beliefs and values trump evidence

Unpacking what drove this shift in the 1990s we find politically powerful beliefs and values had reasserted themselves, along with lobbying from the resource, finance and agricultural sectors.

In Australia (as elsewhere and, it has been argued, particularly in ‘pioneer’ countries) there is a strong set of ‘no limits’ beliefs—including assumptions about progress, growth and the unquestioned benefit of developing natural resources (one belief is that they are limitless). These have become allied with beliefs in a saviour ‘techno-fix’ if there are environmental problems. Granted, science and technology have spurred these expectations since World War II in spectacular fashion.

People in Australia and other Western democracies are also subject to deeply held beliefs in human or Christian ‘exceptionalism’ from other species and the natural environment. That we are different and special appears self-evident to many people. Could we be immune to climate change? These values while always present, made a strong comeback in the 1990s in Australia under both major political parties, but particularly under the conservative parties after 1996.

Such underlying values were highly compatible with the neo-classical, economic rationalist ideology (Reaganomics or Thatcherism being other names for the same theory) that dominated Australian society by the mid-1990s. The mechanism for radical idea change was largely through communication in politics, media and institutions. Markets became accepted as entities that could rule society; individual enterprise was said to be superior to communal groupings or interests and the private sector as more effective than government in delivering services and deciding what is good for the nation.

With this world view, the public interest becomes indistinguishable from corporate interests (which were also granted individual rights) and citizens became consumers with individual rights, mainly to consume and vote in elections, but encouraged to lose a sense of communal interests and responsibility.

Public relations advice spelled out not only how to engage people's core values—about freedom, family, jobs, nation, growth, progress, but also how to mount a campaign focused on promoting uncertainty and the belief that 'scientists don't agree' to stop the public from demanding action on climate change—regardless of the consistent science message. And so it has happened.

Lobbyists from resource, energy-intensive and agricultural business sectors and market-oriented think tanks have had unparalleled access to government decision-makers in a revolving door of professional advisers. Great influence was also exerted by News Limited, with a virtual monopoly in Australian print media circulation. The Murdoch media shared the notion that accepting climate science is unwarranted and a threat to business and has spent the last 20 years conducting a 'culture war' on this issue. Through politics and media these reasserted beliefs and values had taken over the whole society by the early 2000s and have returned in force in 2014.

In the Fairfax press I looked at, while science and technology reporters continued to retell and update the original science story of risk, their voices were outnumbered by political/economic reporting and, to differing degrees, sceptical opinions that said the opposite. Columnists, think tank publications and talkback radio hosts lambasted climate scientists as being self-serving seekers of research grants.

The establishment of the internet from the early 1990s mainly had the effect, before the 2000s and the advent of social media, of enhancing the opinion versus fact juggling act. While it enhanced scientists' ability to correct misinformation and archive those facts for future reference, it also offered the same ability to sceptics who readily developed blogs with science names that allowed people to cement forever sceptical and outdated scientific arguments.

Audience fragmentation was one result that has made it harder to communicate science messages in an individualistic, market-driven culture. In terms of the analysis in this book, professional and conventional journalism practices have continued to hold sway over the dominant public narrative, regardless of the advent of digital media platforms. It remains to be seen to what extent digital and social media will boost and facilitate citizen demand for climate action.

The media's preference for adversarial drama (intensified by the entertainment needs of television and radio coverage) accepted the emerging public role of sceptic scientists, encouraged by conservative think tanks and corporations fearing loss.

Many public sceptics have been geologists, climatologists and meteorologists. Regardless of what the titles imply to the lay public, these disciplines are not synonymous with climate change specialist. Based on their training, however, many have been sincere in their doubt of model-driven climate science, stressing that past planetary experience is the key to future events and only on-ground measurement is relevant.

A US Congressional committee found that many public sceptics routinely played outside the system by not publishing for peer review, by abusing scientific conventions of courtesy and democracy and by mixing fact and opinion or policy recommendations in their statements. Media conventions of conflating all scientists to equal status of expertise ('scientists say') has aided the sceptics and further confused the discussion.

Muzzling government scientists from talking about consequences, under the banner of interfering in policy, has played a significant role since the later 1990s, along with the demise of much public interest research funding and indeed the notion of 'public interest' as a legitimate sector. The record reflects a research landscape dominated by successive corporate restructures at the CSIRO, with a mandate for industry-focused research and new internal guidelines discouraging scientists' from speaking publicly.

As the policy narrative has moved from a conviction that effective response was possible, and the science narrative has evolved from certain and direct language, a major US review of government climate science reports notes that use of the technical, obscure and difficult in scientific reports to the public and media has been a deliberate tactic by governments to generate delay, disinterest and inaction.

What Australia has experienced with the combined effect of these influences has been the successful manipulation of public reality to impose a climate of uncertainty about global warming and climate change risk. For the last two decades this has been matched by an absence of coordinated, effective policy response (with a similar dynamic apparent in other Western, English-speaking countries).

Those years are lost to effective action, while global greenhouse gas emissions continue to accumulate. Contemplating another 'hottest year on record', the science tells us that reversing (long term) the threat of more catastrophic weather outcomes becomes harder every year as a result of our recent history.

That same history, however, is also a roadmap of what people once heard and thought. Effective action on climate change will start when society decides that things can be handled differently, as they once were.

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