

Foreword: the hidden history of Australia's early response to climate change

Sydney will suffer twice as many days of extreme heat, four times as many severe storms and far worse flooding from huge increases in torrential rain, according to the latest predictions of how NSW will fare under the greenhouse effect.

These words were published in technology writer Gavin Gilchrist's 1995 article for the *The Sydney Morning Herald* headlined 'Greenhouse effect will cause havoc in NSW', which detailed a report by Australia's national, publicly funded, science organisation the CSIRO. At that time global warming/climate change was still called 'the greenhouse effect'.

The article warned of the increased risk of extreme heat and, therefore, fire, severe thunderstorms and torrential rains as the likely impacts of climate change. These are what we are coming to grips with globally as severe and catastrophic weather events. The article was far from the first on this topic.

As early as 1980 *Playboy* magazine published an indepth article on the subject quoting Australian scientists. *Newsweek* did a cover piece in 1987.

Hundreds of Australian mainstream and business press articles from the end of the 1980s into the early to mid-1990s provide a compelling record of how journalists and editors told the public about the risks posed by the greenhouse effect on weather events, on public health, on biodiversity, on Pacific islands, on Australian coastal communities and on society in general, including the likely impacts on gardening and holidaying in the Maldives.

These articles, as well as government documents and popular books published around this time, all readily ascribed the cause of the greenhouse effect to burning fossil fuels in industrial societies. The documentary record provides an indisputable and fascinating rendition of where we have been, how we thought and talked, what we once believed about global warming and climate change, and how that was reframed into a different story—all within 10 years, leaving us with the 'debate' we still struggle with today. (What was written also has the advantage of circumventing the limitations or preferences of human memory, which were evident in tracking down this story of our recent past).

I started reviewing the public record following disturbing reports of political interference in the communication of climate change science to the public,

particularly in the United States. What was the situation in Australia, I wondered? Although I had been involved in the early 1990s in communicating some climate change-related energy efficiency strategies to the general public, by 2006 I was as clueless as the next person about what had happened to the climate change story. We had collectively lost the plot. I started to look at how and why.

We were ready to act in 1990 and called ‘best informed’ in the world

The evidence clearly shows that there has not been a one-way road of increasing scientific and public knowledge about global warming causes, climate effects and what societies can do. Indeed, the opposite has been the case in the two decades since the late 1980s.

Twenty-five years ago climate scientists spoke clearly and openly about global warming and the risks of climate change due to greenhouse gas emissions, particularly from burning fossil fuels. Leading politicians of both parties (yes, bipartisan), amplified by the media, repeated the messages of risk and vowed to act.

Following two major climate change conferences and community forums organised first by the CSIRO in 1987 and again, along with the federal Commission for the Future, in 1988, a study called the Australian public the best informed on the planet on this topic. This was also stated publicly at a United Nations’ Global 500 Award ceremony during that period.

In October 1990, the federal Labor government under Prime Minister Bob Hawke established an interim emission reduction target for the nation to lower greenhouse gas emissions 20 per cent below 1988 levels by 2005.

Every state and territory drew up a detailed response plan. Every strategy that is known today to lower emissions, from efficiency and renewable energy to a carbon tax or price and emissions trading scheme was known then. The original Landcare one million tree planting program was started partly with the greenhouse effect in mind.

As late as the mid-1990s, technology and environment writers were still sounding the alarm, unequivocally. In 1996 Bob Beale wrote for the *The Sydney Morning Herald* about Australia’s coal focus and its impact, asserting that it would take 420 million new trees to soak up the estimated 281 million tonnes of greenhouse gases related to the output of just one new Hunter Valley coalmine, according

to government calculations. In context, in 2004 Australia's total greenhouse gas emissions as a country were 564 million tonnes, a figure that also shows the difficulties inherent in policies such as 'direct action' through tree planting.

The story for public consumption changed dramatically

While some reporters continued the story of risk to society, the overall narrative was changing dramatically by the mid-1990s. Communication from Australian policymakers, amplified by the media, had turned the story into a confused and conflicted political debate that reflected a loss of will to act. The state-based response plans would soon wither as deregulation focused the energy sector on competitive sales and profits rather than managing demand for efficient use.

Where once there had been a clear narrative about risk to the whole society and a global responsibility to act, Australians were now told not to worry: the whole 'debate' was too uncertain and prompt action was not in Australia's national and market interests.

All through this time, however, the scientific advice provided to governments by the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) since 1990 has remained consistent and unambiguous about causes, substantial risk and the need to respond sooner rather than later in order to slow down accumulating greenhouse gas emissions and their effect on the Earth's weather.

The science stayed on message, but our social reality and understanding were dramatically reframed as uncertainty in the 1990s. How that happened and what most influenced the story we as a society came to tell ourselves—the shift in cultural values, a different economic world view, the media's role in cementing a new narrative for the public to believe and, not least, the underrated importance of 'how' things were framed or said—including by scientists themselves—are brought together in this book.

If we don't understand where we have been, how public understanding can be reframed and manipulated and, indeed, how that was the story in Australia and in other Western democracies in the 1990s, it will remain easy to confuse the public and hard to move forward—as contemporary climate change politics continue to illustrate vividly.

The timeframe covered in this book is 1987 to 2001—starting before the first IPCC report in 1990 and then tracking print media stories and other public documents around the time of subsequent IPCC assessments that were released in 1995 and 2001. Interviews with scientists, reporters and policymakers on

the scene at the time help to flesh out the details. The story is updated with examples from the 2000s and contemporary events, showing how the framing of communication to the public, manipulation of scientific findings and, most notably, the values and beliefs that defined much of the 1990s, continue to dominate (or attempt to dominate), national conversations on how to react to human-induced climate change.

One additional note is necessary. Recent research in the United States has shown that the terms 'global warming' and 'climate change' are often interpreted differently by different audiences. In this book I have largely used the term 'climate change' as shorthand for the enhanced greenhouse effect/global warming caused by human activities, leading to severe climate change.

This text taken from *Global Warming and Climate Change:
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