

Politicians Wouldn't Dare Lead in Australia's Climate of Fear

With all the sound and fury about climate change over the past few weeks, it would be easy to believe it was going to be a decisive factor in the upcoming federal election. But the details of the policies on offer tell a different story. Both the majority parties want to be seen as greenhouse friendly, but decisive action on climate change is not a priority.

The Coalition's most notable climate policy announcement of the election season, made just prior to the start of the campaign proper, was its pledge to create a 15 per cent clean energy target for 2020. Although the launch of the program grabbed headlines, the fine print shows it will only increase the proportion of electricity supplied by low-emission sources by around 3 per cent.

The Coalition's other election season climate offerings have contained even less substance. Pledges of more money for research, overseas projects, minor climate adaptation initiatives and the piecemeal release of details of the proposed national emissions trading scheme.

All of these measures constitute progress, but hardly on the scale necessary to prevent dangerous climate change.

Worse still, a number of other policy announcements from the Coalition will fuel further increases in Australia's emissions and obstruct adaptation to what is now inevitable warming. One of the most obvious examples is the continuation and expansion of agricultural subsidies. Farmers won't adapt to the changing climate while governments continue to prop up unsustainable practices.

Until recently, Labor's policies were much the same. Its claims to climate superiority were based primarily on two issues: ratification of the Kyoto Protocol and a long-term emission reduction target.

Unlike the Coalition, the ALP has promised to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. This is an important symbolic measure, but irrespective of who wins the election, Australia won't be able to continue to sit outside the international regime after the end of the Protocol's first commitment period (2008 – 2012). As a result, this difference should be relatively short lived.

The other notable differentiator was the ALP's target of reducing Australia's emissions by 60 per cent on 2000 levels by 2050. The Coalition has refused to commit to targets until after the election.

At this point, any target looks better than no target. But the ALP's pledge is likely to be too low. Anything less than 80 per cent below by 2050 will require a significant reliance on imported emission permits or abandoning the objective of minimising the risks associated with global warming.

On this basis, for most voters it is likely to have been the Coalition's history on greenhouse that really separated the parties. Credibility is the issue. It is hard to take the Coalition seriously when it has flip-flopped about on greenhouse issues, initially accepting the need for action in the late 1990s, then denying the existence of climate change, before trying to recast itself as 'climate realists' in the wake of the Stern Report and Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*.

While history used to be the main differentiator, this changed when Labor announced its plan for a clean

energy target of 20 per cent by 2020, which would result in a 10 per cent increase in the proportion of electricity supplied by renewable energy.

Labor has been happy to mirror the Coalition in many (if not most) policy areas, but its clean energy target is a real point of difference.

Yet even with Labor's pledge on clean energy, the main game of greenhouse policy will not feature in this election because the major parties have made it clear they won't release details of the proposed emissions trading scheme or short and medium term targets for emission abatement.

Long-term aspirational goals for 2050 are too distant to provide a basis for current political accountability. Short and medium term targets are needed to guide action that needs to be started now.

The nuts and bolts of the emissions trading scheme are also crucial. What emitters and gases will be included and when? How will emission breaches be controlled? Answers to these detailed questions are necessary to judge the efficiency and effectiveness of the scheme. Unfortunately, voters won't be provided with the details of the scheme until 2008, possibly later.

The absence of information makes judging the greenhouse credentials of the major parties difficult. This is deliberate. Neither party wants to show voters too much its hand on climate policy for fear it will be used against them.

In the case of Labor, the anxiety relates to the potential of being labelled too radical for proposing short and medium targets that may be more ambitious than those of the Coalition. On the other side, the fear probably has to do with being accused of being climate laggards for having targets that are too lax.

The result is a phoney war where the major parties dance around the issues of greatest importance.

The temptation is to blame the politicians for the resulting delay in action. Yet their strategy reflects the current political climate. For most Australians, climate change is a peripheral issue – important but not urgent.

If decisive action is going to be taken to address climate change, there is going to have to be a shift in public opinion. Either that or a leader must emerge with the courage to lead the electorate to where the science suggests they should go.

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[Published in the Canberra Times, Monday, 5 November 2007]