

## Past the Threshold for Dangerous Warming

One of the major headlines in the first week of the election campaign was Kevin Rudd's announcement Labor would sell off additional Commonwealth land, much of it in outer metropolitan areas, to help ease the housing crisis. The Howard Government has a similar plan. While there is a need for affordable housing, these policies will prompt further urban sprawl and, in doing so, undermine measures to address climate change.

Earlier this month, Australian of the Year, Professor Tim Flannery, warned that a soon to be released report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change will show the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases has crossed the threshold for dangerous climate change. Understandably, the news promoted renewed calls for governments to implement measures to reduce emissions.

Alarming, the situation is more serious than suggested by Professor Flannery. His statements were made on the basis that the new report will show the concentration of greenhouse gases reached 455 parts per million (ppm) in 2005, some 25 ppm above previous estimates. The significance of this figure is that some people have suggested it is necessary to stabilise the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases at 450 ppm to ensure the global average surface temperature does not increase by more than 2°C above pre-industrial levels. Warming of 2°C is viewed by many as the threshold for dangerous climate change.

Yet the weight of scientific evidence suggests keeping temperature increases below the 2°C threshold will require the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases to be stabilised at levels below 400 ppm, not 450 ppm. Put more simply, we crossed the threshold for dangerous climate change some time ago.

Worse still, there is very little (if any) chance of stabilising the atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases at levels below 500 ppm. There is too much momentum in the global economy and current carbon-dependent activities, and not enough political support for change both domestically and abroad, to achieve these targets.

This does not mean it is pointless to reduce emissions. On the contrary, the need for emission abatement is greater because of the heightened risk of serious harm. But mitigation alone is not sufficient – governments must also start the process of adaptation to the inevitable warming of the climate.

When evaluated in this context, policies promoting continued urban sprawl look decidedly undesirable.

The pressures to release additional land for housing are obvious. House prices and rents have increased dramatically over the past 10 years, leaving many people struggling to find affordable accommodation. A lack of supply is one reason for the situation, prompting governments to look to farms and bushland in outer metropolitan areas to satisfy demand.

In Canberra, the developments around Gungahlin and Tuggeranong are the most obvious examples. Large outer metropolitan developments have been seen in other capital cities, the estates near Campbelltown in Sydney being the ones many Canberrans would be most familiar with.

From a greenhouse perspective, these developments are problematic. They are far from centres of employment, but generally are not linked by public transport that is frequent and reliable. The result is car-dependent suburbs where the residents travel long distances on a daily basis.

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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