

THE POLITICS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

15th November 2013

At the risk of appearing to be a conspiracy theorist, I feel it is important to point out some of the political machinations that have taken place in Australian, and elsewhere, over recent decades, that illustrate the enormous influence the fossil fuel industry has had on climate change policy.

Warnings of climate change, and its associated global warming, has been coming for decades from the world's scientific community, finally resulting in the first real evaluation of the magnitude of the problem at a scientific conference in Villach, Austria, in 1985.

In June 1988, some 300 scientists and policy-makers from 48 countries, met in Toronto, a meeting that became famous for its “Call for Action” to reduce CO₂ emissions by 2005 to 20% below those in 1988. Two years later Australia's Hawke Labour Government adopted this as an interim planning target.

At the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, 155 countries, including Australia, signed the UN Framework Convention on Climate, which nominated the year 2000 as the year signatories would reduce greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels: We all know what an abject failure that plan has been, with emissions steadily rising by an average of about 3% annually for the next 20 years.

So why, given the urgent need for action, has so little been done? Al Gore's campaign, which saw the publication of his book *“An inconvenient Truth”*, exposed the morally corrupt actions undertaken in America by a group he describes as: *“a well-funded cadre of special interests, including Exxon Mobil and a few other oil, coal and utilities companies.”*

He goes on to explain: *“These companies want to prevent any new policies that would interfere with their current business plans that rely on massive unrestrained dumping of global warming pollution into the Earth's atmosphere every hour of every day.”*



The industry used the same tactics, and even the same PR specialists employed by the tobacco lobby that managed to hide the damaging health effects of smoking for close to 50 years. Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter Ross Gelbspan discovered one of the internal memos prepared by this group to guide employees they hired to run their disinformation campaign, highlighting one of the group's stated objectives, which was to **“reposition global warming as a theory, rather than fact.”**

Gore goes on to accuse the White House not only of attempting to silence government scientists, who tried to warn of the impending danger posed by climate change, but also of being a prominent source of disinformation on the issue, citing: **“At the beginning of 2001, President Bush hired a lawyer/lobbyist named Phillip Cooney to be in charge of environmental policy in the White House. For the previous six years, Cooney had worked at the American Petroleum Institute and was the person principally in charge of the oil company's campaign to confuse the American people about the issue.**

Even though Cooney had no scientific training whatsoever, he was empowered by the president to edit and censor the official assessments of global warming from the EPA and other parts of the federal government. In 2005, a White House memo, authorised by Cooney was leaked to the New York Times by a hidden whistleblower inside the administration. Cooney had diligently edited out any mention of the dangers global warming poses to the American people. The newspaper's disclosure was embarrassing to the White House and Cooney resigned. The next day he went to work for Exxon Mobil.”

The New York Times

~~Warming will also cause reductions in mountain glaciers and advance the timing of the melt of mountain snow peaks in polar regions. In turn, runoff rates will change and flood potential will be altered in ways that are currently not well understood. There will be significant shifts in the seasonality of runoff that will have serious impacts on native populations that rely on fishing and hunting for their livelihood. These changes will be further complicated by shifts in precipitation regimes and a possible intensification and increased frequency of hydrologic events. Reducing the uncertainties in current understanding of the relationships between climate change and Arctic hydrology is critical.~~

straying from research strategy into speculative findings from here.

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Some of Cooney's editing, as published in "An Inconvenient Truth".

The Howard Federal Government reportedly attempted similar tactics here in Australia. In February 2006, the ABC's Four Corners program blew the whistle in a stunning exposé entitled “The Greenhouse Mafia”. Reporter Janine Cohen revealed what was described as a powerful insiders club that, **“have burrowed deep inside the federal bureaucracy in a successful bid to hijack greenhouse policy”**. She identified this 'club' as lobbyists and members associated with the Australian Industry Greenhouse Network, whose membership includes industries that are heavily fossil fuel dependent – coal, electricity, aluminium, petroleum, minerals, and cement.

Ms Cohen reported on videoed interviews with Network insiders claiming, “*the most extraordinary admissions were related to the access they claimed they enjoyed from within government departments – to confidential documents, particularly Cabinet submissions*”. According to 4 Corners, these admissions went as far as to claim: “*... they'd helped write Cabinet submissions and ministerial briefings, and costings relating to greenhouse policy while being invited into the Department of Treasury and the Department of Industry.*”

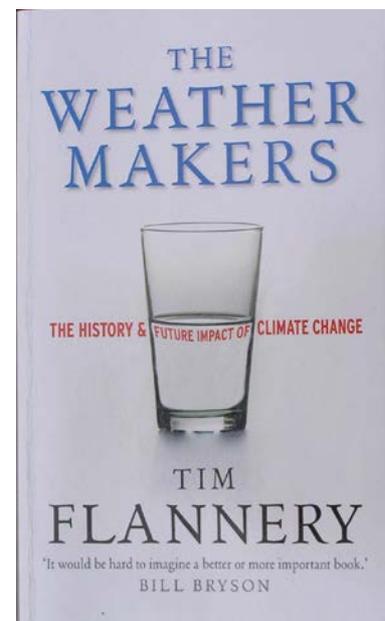
When the then Federal Environment Minister, Senator Ian Campbell, was repeatedly asked if he would be concerned to learn these industry insiders had helped write Cabinet submissions, he failed to answer. Asked if it was possible that he was being undermined by these industry players, Senator Campbell again failed to answer the question, instead claiming: “*I'm writing policy with the aim of trying to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and have a world-leading policy that will help to save the planet from dangerous climate change. I make no apology for any consultation I have with industry, be it from the coal industry, or from the renewables industry.*”

Janine Cohen also interviewed former CSIRO Climate Director, Dr Graeme Pearman, who claimed he was censored at least half a dozen times in his last year with the CSIRO, and was told not to say anything that indicated he disagreed with the Government over climate change issues. In response to Ms Cohen's question: “*Were you restricted from talking publicly about emission reductions in general?*” Dr Pearman responded: “*Yes, I was*”, going on to say: “*And again, I think it is an organisation ... its a CSIRO that is very afraid that there may be consequences for their bottom line if they, in fact, are seen as interfering in government policy.*”

That final comment is significant today when, after six years of advising the Labor Government on Climate Change, the in-coming Abbott Government, within just weeks of taking office, announced it would be cutting more than 400 CSIRO jobs.

Over the years the Howard Government officially claimed to accept the science of climate change, despite various Ministers openly ridiculing the concept, but always found ways to do nothing, with Howard repeatedly expressing the view that “*we should not be panicked into any action that threatens our economy*”.

On 12th December 1997, after five years of negotiations, the Kyoto Protocol settled on a set of measures to reduce CO₂ emissions by 5.2%, and with all countries signed up it remained only to be ratified to become effective. However, as Tim Flannery pointed out, “*.. the momentum of climate change is now so great that Kyoto's target of reducing CO₂ emissions by 5.2% is little more than irrelevant.*”



That 5.2% was only an average, and a pitiful reduction when compared with the originally proposed 1988 target of 20% reduction of emissions by 2005. Under the Protocol, all countries were set suitable targets. The European States were asked to reduce their emissions by 8% below 1990 levels. However, some countries negotiated an increase in emission levels. Norway achieved a 1% rise; the US 3%; while Australia, the highest per-capita emitter of greenhouse gases in the industrialised world, negotiated an incredible 8% **increase** over 1990 levels.

So euphoric were the members of the Howard Government over this result, that Senator Robert Hill, who led Australia's negotiating team, received a standing ovation on his return to Australia.

The Howard government's argument for an increase in emissions was based on the fact that Australia relies on coal for 90% of its electricity production. Tim Flannery pointed out that:

“Concerns about climate change have been voiced in Australia for over thirty years, and the nation's increased dependence on coal and consequent high cost of shifting to a less carbon-intensive economy were, it now seems, poor economic

decisions”, and questioned: “Should any country be rewarded for that?”



More frequent, larger and more destructive Tornadoes are forecast as a result of climate change. That is already occurring all around the world.

According to research undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) at that time, if Australia adopted the European 8% reduction target, it would result in a drop of between one quarter and one half of a percent per annum in Australia's gross national expenditure, and described this as a substantial economic burden, which the country could not afford.

Dr Flannery reports that, despite a number of studies showing that Australia could meet the emissions reduction target at no net cost whatever, the half a percent drop: *“was touted as shocking by the then Minister for Minerals and Energy, Senator Warwick Parer, who proclaimed in Parliament that this would cost an Australian family of four about \$7,600 per annum.”* However, some time later, documents obtained under Freedom of Information, revealed the ABARE study had been funded to the tune of \$400,000 by the Australian Aluminium Council, Rio Tinto, Mobil and other similar organisations.

One of the arguments used to obtain the generous emissions increase, was that land-clearing in Australia had declined since the 1990 baseline year, and by protecting forests, Australia was storing CO₂. Sixteen years on, and many would argue strongly that land-clearing has not decreased, but has in fact increased significantly. Illegal clearing and pre-emptive clearing for development is rife, and clearing allowances for bushfire protection zones and fencing is frequently abused. Infrastructure providers still fail to combine works to common easements. Mines, roads, dams, power lines, sporting facilities and more, are being constructed at a scale unmatched in the history of European settlement, all with minimal consideration of the natural environment.

As mentioned earlier, Prime Minister Howard frequently acknowledged the reality of climate change, but it was only in late 2013, when he addressed a climate sceptics forum, that he admitted he had always had a “gut feeling” that the science was wrong. This explains a lot, and why several leading members of the ALP shadow ministry, including the current Prime Minister, were on record expressing the view that climate change is a massive hoax, a beat-up by Greens and left wing extremists, determined to bring down the economy.

What is surprising is that scientists began warning the world about climate change more than 40 years ago, detailing what they believed would happen – global temperature rises, melting glaciers and ice caps, sea level rise and coastal erosion, more powerful and more frequent extreme weather events, more catastrophic bush fires, longer droughts and heat waves, and more floods. All these have occurred as predicted, and yet many still believe it just isn't happening or, as it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore, flatly refuse to accept the overwhelming scientific opinion that human burning of fossil fuels is a major contributing factor.



Catastrophic bushfires saw 200 homes destroyed in the Blue Mountains in October 2013. It was the hottest Spring on record, and never before had such an event happened this early in the year.

In Australia, 2013 began with extreme heat and weather-related records tumbled. In January alone Hobart recorded 41.8 degrees C, its hottest day ever; Australia saw the average maximum temperature across the nation above 39 degrees for 7 days, beating the previous record of 4 days. The hottest ever temperature, 49.6 degrees Celsius, was recorded at Moonba; Alice Springs achieved a new heat wave record with 15 consecutive days above 40 degrees Celsius. Sydney recorded its hottest ever temperature, a little over 46 degrees, and Bega and Merimbula also experienced record temperatures, just 3 of the **123** weather records broken during the month. Ex cyclone Oswald caused a record amount of water to flow over Gladstone's Awonga dam; followed by record flood levels at Bundeberg, exceeding the record levels set just 2 years earlier, and a record flood on the Clarence River in NSW.

Across the world in 2013, Jakarta suffered the worst flooding ever; a monster blizzard in Maine, USA, broke all time records for snow fall; Melbourne saw an Autumn record of 16 consecutive days above 30 degrees, and New Zealand's north island experienced 36 days without any rain, the longest dry spell ever recorded. In Australia, record heat waves were recorded for March, Hobart – 7 consecutive days above 27 Degrees. Melbourne – 8 consecutive days above 32 Degrees, and Adelaide – 9 consecutive days above 32 Degrees. Argentina experienced record rain and flooding, killing 59 people while 350,000 people suffered property losses; Sydney equaled its record for the longest May spell of weather above 25 degrees, and an all time record 30 consecutive days without measurable rain. San Antonio recorded the second-highest daily rainfall in the city's history; some parts of Victoria saw the most ever rain in a single June day; rain records were broken in Germany, the Czech Republic and Switzerland, causing all time record flooding. India experienced its earliest monsoon occurrence on record, bringing rains four and a half times heavier than usual, and California's Death Valley broke its heat record with a scorching 54°.



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Tornado Alley in the USA saw some of the most destructive twisters ever recorded.

And that was just for the first six months of 2013. The second half to date has seen New South Wales, Melbourne and many other Victorian centres record their hottest July day on record, and Perth record its hottest ever August day. Shanghai set its record high temperature of 40.6°, and 1st August marked the city's 28th day above 35°



Record numbers of catastrophic bushfires were a feature across the globe in 2013, from Australia, to the USA, where a team of 21 fire-fighters were killed, to Portugal and Russia.

Portugal experiences record wildfires (215,000 hectares); Sydney registered its warmest winter on record; and Australia its warmest 12 month period. Record floods inundated Komsomolsk-on-Amur in Russia; Sydney recorded 31°, the hottest early Spring day in recorded history; and the world recorded the hottest ever decade. Colorado experienced an unprecedented 1 in 1000 year flood (of biblical proportions), the torrential rain shattering Boulder's September rainfall record;



Alice Springs and Sydney recorded their hottest ever September, and parts of NSW and Queensland recorded highest ever September day temperatures. Twin hurricanes brought record flooding in Mexico; China's Harbin city surpassed air pollution records set previously by Beijing; and the Philippines was decimated by Typhoon Haiyan the strongest storm ever to make landfall.



The Philippines in the wake of Typhoon Haiyan, the strongest storm ever to make landfall.

Which brings us to Australia's 'political climate changes' in recent years. In 2007, Kevin Rudd swept aside the Howard conservative government, partly on his statement that *“Climate change is the greatest moral challenge of our times”*, and a commitment to make it a priority for action. His subsequent backing away from that promise, and a multi million dollar anti-government advertising campaign by the mining industry over a proposed super profits tax, saw his popularity plummet to the point where a panicked Labor Party instigated his appalling political assassination, which saw him replaced as Prime Minister by Julia Gillard.

Gillard did manage to hold office at the subsequent election, thanks to a deal with the Greens, and led a minority government which had to appease their new partners by introducing a carbon tax. The fact that she had made a pre-election promise not to introduce such a tax, allowed the opposition to brand her as a liar and ultimately, after two years of disastrous polling, the climate change issue claimed another political scalp, with Kevin Rudd reinstated to the Labor leadership.

The then opposition also suffered. Malcolm Turnbull, Howard's replacement as leader, was also rolled when he decided to support Labor in setting up a carbon trading scheme, and was replaced by Tony Abbott.

However, despite being deeply unpopular with the electorate, and trailing both Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard in the polls as preferred PM for most of his 4 years as leader, Abbott was swept to power in October 2013, almost by default, in a public backlash against what was perceived to be a dis-functional and scandal-ridden Labor Party.

We have long known that the Prime Minister, a John Howard disciple, considers the science of climate change to be “crap”, and his determination not to allow any climate change 'distraction' was evident from the start, with his scrapping of the Climate Commission, a body set up to advise the government on the science and economics of carbon pricing. The new Environment Minister, Greg Hunt, announced that henceforth the Government would seek its climate information from the CSIRO and the Bureau of Meteorology. However, a month later the Government announced that almost 25% of the scientists, researchers and workers at the CSIRO, some 400 in all, would lose their jobs under the government's cost cutting program.

To further ensure that as little climate change science was absorbed by members of the government, a decision was made not to send the Environment Minister or any ministerial stand-in to the international climate change negotiations in Warsaw. Mind you that could have been simply to avoid the embarrassment of having to explain how their proposed "Direct Action" will cut greenhouse gas emissions.

On the home front, The Blue Mountains experienced catastrophic October bush fires, driven by extreme weather conditions, that saw more than 200 homes destroyed. With many in the community, including scientists, the Meteorological Department, and fire service chiefs linking the fires to global warming, and admitting they were a clear sign of what we can expect on a warming planet, the Government's climate change denial shifted into top gear.

Messrs Abbott and Hunt trotted out the claim, the latter quoting Wikipedia as his source of information, that bushfires are a fact of Australian life, and it was dangerous to link any one event to climate change. Any politician or public figure that dared to make that connection was immediately pilloried by the Government and right wing media for “attempting to make political mileage out of a calamity while people were still suffering from their loss”.

Actually, Wikipedia identifies some 40 catastrophic fire events over the past century, mostly occurring in December, with a couple in November. However, the fact that there has never been one in October, was completely ignored by the Abbott Camp.

And then Typhoon Haiyan struck. Measuring some 600km across, and with winds gusting to 379km/h, it was reportedly the strongest storm ever to make landfall. The accompanying 6m storm surge swallowed coastal towns, leaving utter devastation, with corpses hung on tree branches, buildings and side-walks. Thousands died and more than 4 million people were directly affected.



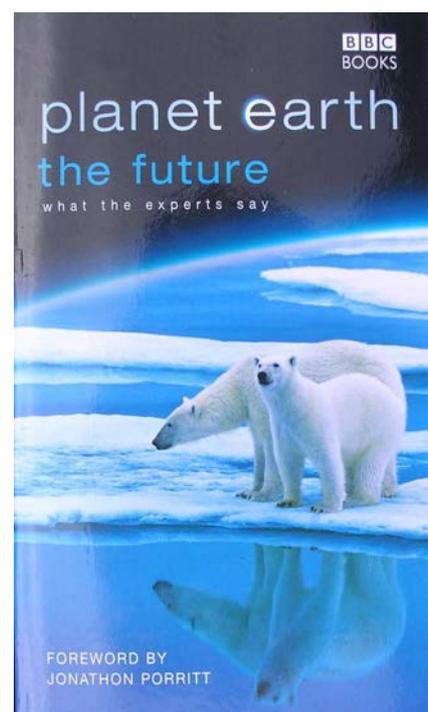
Images of the fury and misery that Typhoon Haiyan inflicted on millions in the Philippines.

It was at the very time that millions of Philippines residents were without food, drinkable water or shelter; attempting to bury thousands of their relatives in mass graves, that Australia took the decision to place a ministerial boycott on the international climate change negotiations in Warsaw, and followed that at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Colombo, by refusing to sign on to an initiative to finance climate change initiatives.

As time progresses, with little more than procrastination coming from our elected representatives, we remind readers that politicians too are a renewable resource. There is now world-wide acknowledgement that climate change is here, will get worse, and has to be addressed immediately if mankind itself is to survive.

The following are a few thought-provoking comments from “Planet Earth, the Future. (What the experts say)”, published by BBC Books.

James P. Leape – Director General of WWF International, comments on the looming extinction crisis, saying: *“We are now at the point where we have lost half the world's forests, half the world's wetlands, half the world's grasslands. We are systematically eradicating many of the habitats that make up the world's ecosystems, and that cannot be a good thing for the animals that live there, or for the people that depend on them.”*



Ahmed Djoghlaif – United Nations Assistant Secretary General and Secretary of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity, states: *“We have just finalised a study conducted by 1300 experts from 95 countries, and the results are really terrifying. Never have human beings destroyed the beauty that is life on earth, as we have done for the last 50 years. So, yes, we are in a crisis moment.”*

Tony Juniper – Executive Director of Friends of the Earth and Vice-Chair of Friends of the Earth International, says: *“We now face an extinction episode on this planet comparable to that which marked the end of the dinosaurs about 65 million years ago. It's largely driven by habitat change, by the release of pollution into the environment, by global warming, and by exploitation of species directly, as well as the introduction of animals into lands where they are not native.”*

Professor E.O. Wilson, one of the world's most distinguished biologists and thinkers, Honorary Curator in Entomology at Harvard University; expands on the extinction scenario, likening it to five previous catastrophic extinction episodes, explaining: *“It took 10 million years roughly for each of these losses to be recovered by evolution. Ten million years. And that's something to bear in mind, as we allow extinction to proceed at such horrendous levels in this present century. If we allow this to go on, and do not try to slow it or halt it, then we will likely have lost as many as half of the species of plants and animals by the end of this century.”*

Richard Mabey, one of Britain's foremost writers, and leading commentator on nature and our relationship with it, sums up the situation thus: *“I think one has to take a relativistic answer that, yes, there is a crisis, but we are the endangered species.”*

In 2013, the International Monetary Fund, joined the World Bank, the International Energy Agency, and the United Nations in calling for immediate action, with this statement from Madame Marie Lagarde, CEO of the International Monetary Fund: *“Climate Change is by far the greatest economic challenge of the twenty first century. The science is sobering. The global temperature in 2012 was one of the hottest since records began in 1880, and we should make no mistake; without concerted actions the next generations will be roasted, toasted, fried and grilled, and it's on us to avoid that”.*

So if readers feel our politicians are more concerned with their short-term re-election prospects than with initiating prompt action to avert this crisis, we again remind you that they are a renewable resource. But then again, solving this crisis is not just the responsibility of governments and politicians, we must all take responsibility for our everyday actions.

John Edwards
Clarence Environment Centre

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