

# Turning up the heat on climate change denial

By Prof. Brendan Mackey

The call by Tony Blair for a global deal in his 'Breaking The Climate Deadlock' initiative is boldish and somewhat beautiful. By demanding a global deal he raises the bar and brings more pressure to bear on international negotiations over the next two years in the lead up to the 2009 Copenhagen climate conference (the next milestone in our collective journey to solve the mother of all environmental problems). But, when it comes to the general public, Blair's rallying cry has fallen on deaf ears. To be fair, Brits are not so much deaf as distracted and busy amidst the clutter of everyday life; work, shopping, TV, football and coping with the pain and joy of parenthood. Like most nationalities, Brits are in climate change denial. The reality is we will not see substantial progress in climate change policy from governments of any persuasion in the absence of overwhelming public recognition of the seriousness and urgency of the global warming problem. Will we just have to wait for a mega environmental catastrophe to occur before climate change denial is overcome? Recent events in Australia suggest otherwise and point to the sequence of events that can overturn public opinion and cause politicians to spontaneously respond with breathtaking policy back-flips.

For nearly 11 years, the John Howard government ruled Australia with a neo-conservative fist. His government took a hard line during the Kyoto Protocol negotiations and forced through the so-called 'Australian clause' which gave Australia a very good deal indeed – an 8% increase in emissions from the 1990 baseline which in practice could be met through reducing tree clearing in its extensive outback. Howard then steadfastly refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol claiming it was not in the national interest. The Howard government was re-elected a further three times, and during each campaign Howard remained firm in his climate change denial. The Howard government's position on climate change was heavily influenced by a loose knit coalition of those with vested interests in the production and supply of cheap electricity from coal fired power stations. Coal miners and aluminum producers found common ground within the church of climate change denial. Australia's economy

continued to boom, largely fueled by export of raw materials, including coal exports to Japan; Australia is the world's largest net exporter of coal. The growing concern amongst the Australian public about climate change was buffered by this fossil-fuel fed economic prosperity. But forces were at work that would soon unravel Howard's tidy climate change containment game.



Aubrey Meyer, Colin Challen MP and Prof. Brendan Mackey at a recent meeting London

In late 2006 Al Gore and his 'Inconvenient Truth' stormed across Australia, generating blanket media coverage and creating a tsunami of public concern that cut across social, economic and political boundaries. The pressure around climate change had been building for some time thanks to a well organized network of NGOs, and Gore's barnstorming tour created a space for people to start expressing their concerns. The Howard government was dismissive of Gore's inconvenient truth claiming he was an emotive scare mongering whose proposals were economically irresponsible. Whilst Howard probably carved himself a politically stalemate in this debate, public interest in climate accelerated to a new level of intensity. The following month the Stern report to the UK government was released, also to blanket media coverage, and pulled the rug on Howard's key argument – economic responsibility.

During this period, the populated areas of Australia experienced their worse drought in 100 years, and Brisbane and Perth their worst drought on record. No-one doubted that rapid climate change was altering rainfall patterns. On the world's driest inhabited continent, the entire Australian society was compelled

to take notice of the prospect that global warming threatens water supplies. The water issue gave the commercial media the hook they needed to drive the climate change problem into the living rooms of their viewers and readers. Morning talk shows included regular climate change segments, while broadsheets and tabloids alike pumped out special features.

By the time of the 2007 Federal election, it was clear that offering policies based on climate change denial was the path to political oblivion. So, in one of the great back-flips in Australian political history, the Howard Government overnight became true believers, and opened their coffers to fund new climate change policies and programmes. The Rudd Labor opposition campaigned strongly on climate change, promising to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and a 60% cut in emissions by 2050. On taking government, Rudd immediately signed the instrument of ratification for the Kyoto Protocol and attended the Bali climate change conference to world acclaim.

Are there any lessons for the UK in the Australian experience? Can Blair 'do a Gore' and break the climate deadlock in his own country? And if not Blair, Gore or Stein, then who can stir the Brits to action? Will the local environmental trigger that catalyses a popular response be worsening floods and coastal storms? What will make fair minded Brits rally forth (even virtually) in collective horror at what is happening to their climate, their planet, their future? Perhaps nothing will, and the famous British reserve and stoicism will operate as some kind of cultural mal-adaptation that inhibits the necessary public, collective response. I hope not because the world needs a UK government prepared to show leadership, and she in turn needs an engaged and ecologically activated citizenship to support unashamedly bold and beautiful policies. Maybe to overcome their traditional cultural reserve, the British public needs to know there is a solution and that all hope is not lost. If so, the best global deal in town is called 'Contraction & Convergence'; a global deal which is the real deal. Here is an idea the UK could get behind and take to the world.

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