

Climate evangelists reduce debate to a binary farce

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The response to former prime minister Tony Abbott's provocative London speech on climate change has exposed the superficial approach to this crucial issue in our national debate. While Australia's climate and energy policy will have clear and unavoidable impacts on our economy, it is arguable whether it will have any environmental effect. We produce only 1.3 per cent of the world's carbon emissions, so can have no discernible influence unless our actions are tied to sufficient efforts by other countries to eclipse larger and growing emissions from nations such as China and India. So far, under the Paris Agreement, this is not the case. Our reductions will be dwarfed by increases elsewhere. At the least this means we should be in no undue haste because our actions are not going to save the planet any time soon; we have time to get the policy right. Our most urgent imperative is to ensure our household and industrial consumers have access to reliable and affordable energy.

The climate debate is a complex collision of facts, forecasts, theories and proposals. On every aspect of this multi-layered puzzle there are myriad records, measurements and options. The variables are so vast that even the simplest question about recorded temperatures in one place on one day is open to conjecture because of debates about measurement practices, external factors and homogenisation efforts. Extrapolate this on to interpretation of the record over more than a century of readings and we build more complexity. Then we delve further to geological samples, ice cores or satellite data, and we add to the database and sum of human knowledge but invite infinitely more areas of contestability. And that is before we get to forecasts and computer modelling, or the estimates of carbon emissions, natural and anthropogenic, and inputs of other greenhouse gases and the role of volcanic activity, land clearing, ocean currents, solar cycles and orbital variations. This is such a fascinating and multifaceted area of human exploration that it is beyond banal to talk about the "science being settled", as if we have learned enough. Scientific consensus tells us human-generated greenhouse gas emissions have increased global warming and will continue to do so. As the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Fifth Assessment says: "It is extremely likely that more than half of the observed increase in global average surface temperature from 1951 to 2010 was caused by the anthropogenic increase in GHG concentrations and other anthropogenic forcings together." Yet the climate has stubbornly refused to behave according to predictions. We have only just begun to understand, let alone master and manage, the immense and intricate process at play.

As if this complicated research isn't challenging enough, it needs to be considered alongside an equally diverse range of possible responses. Politicians may spruik renewable energy to cut emissions and limit warming, but within this debate will be arguments about emissions trading, carbon taxes, clean energy targets, technology or simple regulation as a means to the end. Other experts argue this is futile and that only a rapid transition to nuclear power can cut emissions deep enough. Still others argue the forces unleashed already are so far beyond control that, rather than mitigation, adaptation is the only sensible path; that we should farm and populate areas rendered more favourable by warming and move away from areas placed under stress. The IPCC says some of what has been done cannot be undone and other factors will play a role: "Future climate will depend on committed warming caused by past anthropogenic emissions, as well as future anthropogenic emissions and natural climate variability."

Despite all this, Mr Abbott's blunt attempt to bring these issues into focus has been seized on by politicians and commentators as a chance to divide the world into believers and deniers — or those in favour of climate action and those against — as if there are only two choices

available rather than an endless array of prescriptions. It demonstrates a debilitating debate that has failed to mature even after dominating a decade of national affairs and playing a pivotal role (three times) in the overturning of party leaders and prime ministers. The volatility is sufficient once more to do the same again on either side.

Labor leader Bill Shorten said Mr Abbott lost “the plot” and his deputy, Tanya Plibersek, said the former prime minister was “loopy”. Former British Labour leader Ed Miliband attacked the speech as “idiocy” while the Greens labelled Mr Abbott a “dangerous fool”. Labor accused Malcolm Turnbull of caving in to his predecessor’s posturing by inching away from a clean energy target. ABC political commentator Paul Bongiorno gave us the unintentional pun of describing the former prime minister as a “weathervane” on climate and declaring he flew “in the face of contemporary science”. For Bongiorno and many at the ABC it is suspiciously simple and clear. “There is catastrophic global warming coming,” he preached on Radio National, “and we have got to do something about it.” Righto, then.

This is the simplistic, partisan and binary inanity to which this crucial debate has descended. All the while our households and industries confront escalating energy prices and reduced security of supply while our economic competitiveness suffers and we export energy around the world. At the same time we subsidise renewable electricity and ponder how to lure investment in back-up or baseload generation, global carbon emissions still rise, oblivious to our costly gestures. Mr Abbott has injected some sorely needed frankness into this debate. He is mocked for talking about climate change “doing good”, yet even the IPCC talks about the “risks and benefits” of global warming, noting we are most likely to experience any upside before a looming downside. By ignoring the manifest complexities in the diagnosis and the treatment, the critics are not, as they claim, adhering to the science but rather eschewing it.

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Cutting emissions raises costs and lowers security

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By dint of deliberate policy action the politicians have conspired to create an energy pricing and supply crisis in our energy-rich nation and now have come up with a novel solution. They call it demand management. Rather than offer what we have come to expect in the First World — being supplied with power when we need it at an affordable price — the government is encouraging us to limit our consumption.

It is so keen to cut demand that it will spend taxpayers’ money on pilot schemes through the private and public power companies of Victoria, South Australia and NSW to offer financial incentives for households to curb their electricity use. People will be paid not to use power — to switch it off — at times of peak demand such as on hot summer days when most airconditioners run. Smart devices might turn coolers down or off to win rebates on power bills in the same way some energy-intensive factories receive payments to shut down during peak periods.

This is what we have become: one of the largest exporters of energy (through coal, liquefied natural gas and uranium) is so hellbent on boosting and subsidising renewable energy to cut carbon emissions that we now have grave concerns about the rising cost of power and possible shortages, and will pay people not to use electricity. It may be time for the *Yes, Prime Minister* scriptwriters to come out of retirement. Or perhaps Samuel Taylor Coleridge could be

reworked into the Rime of the Ancient Coalminer with power, power, everywhere but not a switch to flick.

Malcolm Turnbull and Energy Minister Josh Frydenberg have been mulling over energy policy for most of the year, particularly since Chief Scientist Alan Finkel handed down his report in June. Yet still we wait for official word on whether the government will adopt Dr Finkel's key recommendation of a clean energy target — something former prime minister Tony Abbott has railed against and the government has been crab-walking away from. “There has been too much sloganising, too much politics, too much ideology and, frankly, too much idiocy, and we're not going to make the same mistakes that were made in the past,” Mr Turnbull said yesterday. Yet the major errors, such as the carbon tax and renewable energy target, have been government interventions and the only proposed solutions are more interventions. As a nation, through actions of federal and state governments, we have inflicted economic self-harm, eliminating our natural economic advantage of cheap and plentiful energy.

Two of the nation's leading non-political economic reformers, Fred Hilmer and Gary Banks, told our economics correspondent Adam Creighton yesterday that it might be time to wind back the nation's emissions reductions target under the Paris Agreement, or at least make it subservient to the priorities of cost and reliability. “Not only are we choosing to transition to low emissions at a high cost, which is the RET or RET Mark II, we're doing it over a compressed timeframe,” Professor Banks said.

The Prime Minister, on the other hand, remains committed to the target (which was agreed under Mr Abbott) and insists we can have our cake and eat it. “You've got to make sure that you keep the lights on, people can afford to keep them on, and you meet your emissions reduction obligations,” he said. However, it seems clear that this trifecta — aimed at solving the energy “trilemma”, as Mr Turnbull refers to it — cannot be achieved. Meeting the emissions targets is undermining the cost and security objectives.

Still, we wait, as Mr Turnbull keeps “working through this very complex area very carefully” to finalise a policy. His leadership nemesis Mr Abbott is stepping into the policy vacuum and Labor leader Bill Shorten is promising to go even further and faster down the perilous emissions reductions path.

In South Australia the Labor government is spending \$550 million trying to remediate its renewables-dependent network and the Liberal opposition has additional costly plans to do the same. This is our glimpse into an energy future where no one will need to be paid to power down their appliances because it will be too expensive to switch them on, or the electricity will be out anyway.