

Learning Curve: Australia and the International Climate Negotiations, a 25 Year Overview, Focusing on the Here and Now.

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What's up?

Another big international climate conference at which world leaders are going to “Save The World” from excess carbon dioxide.

Again?! How many is that now?

This is going to be the 21st annual “Conference of the Parties” to the United Nations Climate Change Convention. The first was in Berlin in 1995, chaired by a somewhat younger Angela Merkel. But there were a bunch of meetings before that, and there have been other meetings in between of course, and plenty of other forums in which the issue has been discussed.

Yeah yeah. This one's in Paris, right?

Yep, it's *deja vu* all over again. Way back in 1989 the G7 meeting was in Paris, and there were a series of heart-warming words about global warming, and pleasing Parisian promises of imminent action were made. *Plus ca change*, as my phrase book says.

Can you recap the last 30 years, “tres rapidment” as *my* phrasebook says. Oh, and as soon as you use a three or four letter acronym or some jargon, you know I'm gonna poke your eyes out with this pointy stick, right?

Aah, okay, that's peer review! So, briefly – since 1988 the world's nations have been paying attention to climate change. It had taken the scientists thirty years to get their attention. After some wrangling they made a deal in Rio in 1992. It said that the rich countries had started the mess and so should start with the reduction of emissions first. Poor countries were basically saying “we should be allowed to develop.”

Sounds like some nice words. Was this Rio deal strong? Weak? What? Did it have any targets?

Kind of weak. It had no targets or timetables, because the Americans said they wouldn't be flying down to Rio if there were. The Europeans blinked and the deal was signed.

So what next?

By 1995 the cracks were showing. Various business groupings had succeeded in weakening momentum for action. Everyone had other things on their plate. In 1997, at Kyoto, the rich countries 'agreed' to start, but at a much lower level of cutting emissions than the scientists were saying necessary to avoid mayhem. And after that meeting, well, the USA and Australia walked away, saying poor countries should be cutting their emissions too, despite what they had signed in Rio and Berlin.

And since then?

Oh, I could go on all day.

Please don't

Short version; The same arguments in different cities. Milan, Montreal, Bali, Copenhagen, Warsaw. Whose fault it is, who should start cutting when by how much, who should pay who for what. Mostly it's rich countries beating up on poor countries. It's like Groundhog Day, except a version in which Bill Murray never ever learns a damn thing. And as the damage from climate change increases, vulnerable countries are demanding money to help them adapt. So rich countries are giving them some.

That sounds generous.

Well, they mostly give less than they promise. And they mostly just take money out of the aid budget and re-label it climate adaptation. Which the poor countries tend to notice, not being stupid.

So there are trust issues?

Bwahahahahahahahahahahaha.

I'll take that as a yes. So, let's back up a bit. I am a leetle puzzled. I read somewhere that Australia had become the world's biggest exporter of coal in 1984, and that coal exports even then were pretty damn serious as a foreign-currency earner/balance of payments and all that.

That's about right, though it's never been a huge employer or percentage of GDP.

Yeah, shut up you greenie hippy, I'm asking the questions here. And my next one is why did it even agree to sign up to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in the first place?
Middle power politics.

Gee, thanks, that helps so much.

As Dave Cox (1997) says:

"When states lack the power and resources to unilaterally influence international relations, multilateralism permits a 'seat at the table' where it is hoped some influence can be exerted."

So if you're not a big big beast or a complete irrelevance, your best bet is to hook up with other middle countries and together you'll be able to get most of what you each want?

Bravo! And to quote a former Australian Foreign Minister, Gareth Evans, writing in 1990 on the subject of rising sea levels and potential environmental refugees who would want to come to Australia, then Australia would need to *"promote universal adherence to [international environment] conventions already negotiated and... develop new framework conventions on the protection of the atmosphere and the environment."* (cited in Cox, 1997).

And we did that?

You've been asleep for twenty years? We strong-armed an increase in our emissions at Kyoto, and forced them to let us include land-clearing. We then refused to ratify Kyoto because it wasn't in our quote national interest unquote. Then, when Kyoto finally came into play in 2005, we tried with the Americans to get a spoiler organisation off the ground. After the Rudd-Gillard thing, Abbott then didn't even send a minister to the 2013 negotiations. It's been really classy.

But I don't remember us getting bombed or trade-sanctioned. Australia got away with it!

Maybe, maybe not. A top diplomat co-wrote a very good piece "Australia and climate change negotiations at the table, or on the menu?" (Bamsey and Rowley, 2015) earlier this year. On page seven there's this:

"When, in June 2002, the Howard Government announced that Australia would not be ratifying the Kyoto Protocol most other governments were unhappy with the news, and some appeared to be deeply offended. In subtle ways some of that group may have paid back Australia for the perceived offence on other issues, often well beyond the sustainable development domain. These instances are difficult to evidence because most often linkages were not formally made (unsurprisingly, given the nature of diplomacy). But the authors are aware of occasions on which otherwise friendly governments inexplicably declined to agree to Australian requests. Sometimes no feedback at all was provided, sometimes an eyebrow was raised, and sometimes elliptical references to the Kyoto Protocol were made informally."

I'm sure we can live with raised eyebrows. And anyway, Australia met its Kyoto obligations, which is more than you can say of the USA or Canada.

As you will be told by the business press and lukewarmists repeatedly. What they mysteriously never have space, time or inclination to tell you is that Australia had wangled an increase in emissions and a "land use" get-out clause, and that it was, in the words of Clive Hamilton (2015) "a three inch putt rather than a hole in one."

So moving on Tony Abbott wasn't the world's biggest worrier about climate change. What did that mean for Australia's negotiating position?

Oh, I could go on all day.

Please don't

He was a thug who couldn't represent Australia's interests properly, even those of the fossil fuel lobby.. At the first UNFCCC negotiations with him in charge, the December 2013 ones, he didn't even send a minister. They were all too busy on climate action at home.

What action was that?

Abolishing the piss-weak climate tax that the Labor lot had gotten onto the statute books. As for the December 2014 UNFCCC discussions, held in Lima, Peru, well, let's quote Climate Action Network -

"This year's Fossil of the Year Award, goes to Australia From the get-go Australia signalled they were not coming here to make progress towards a comprehensive international climate agreement. ... when they sent a climate sceptic Trade Minister Andrew Robb along to "chaperone" Foreign Minister Julie Bishop into a negotiating dead-end.... Shape up Australia, you are making Canada look good!"

Look, there's plenty of other vandalism, in CHOGM, in OECD.... Aaaargh. Holy cow, you maniac, you just poked me with that stick. Holy crap, I'm bleeding.

I said no acronyms. So, Uncle History*, that was sooooo fascinating, but what are the issues on the table in Paris, that Australia might be particularly involved in?

Well, there will be some thorny issues for the Aussies. Their reduction target – I was going to say INDC but you have a stick in your hand, is on the low side, and there is no way on God's no-longer-very-green earth that the 'Direct Action' scheme currently in place is plausible. Malcolm Turnbull said this back in December 2009, after Tony Abbott had knifed him. "Abbott's climate policy is bullshit" (Turnbull, 2009)

Malcolm is going to Paris with that self same policy. The deal he made to become prime minister instead of Tony seems to include "no change on gay marriage and no change on climate."

The major issues are the size of the cuts and who is going to pay for it all to happen (See Bateman and Packham, 2015.) Australia will be keen to avoid too much close scrutiny of its actual emissions, and of its coal exports.

And when does all this happen? Who does what when?

The conference runs from 30 November – 11 December (Don't be surprised if it runs over, they often do). Malcolm Turnbull will be there for the opening day, but the French want to avoid the Copenhagen debacle, so the photo-op is at the start not the end. Then the environment minister Greg Hunt will be there, and Foreign Minister Julie Bishop for the second week.

There's an interesting website called Reneweconomy. One of their writers, Sophie Vorrath noted that Labor's shadow environment minister was accusing Turnbull's government of being all "smooth words and warm handshakes" but with "no change what so ever in the substance."

"Julie Bishop has confirmed that there is nothing new on the table for this vital Paris meeting, no strengthening of the emissions target, no additional contributions to the Green Climate Fund, just the same Tony Abbott plan.

Vorrath points out that the shadow minister doesn't mention coal, and Australia's coal exports...

Look, you seem to be pulling some sort of "we're doomed, we're doomed" thing. It can't be as bad as all that. Our lords and masters are smart and responsible people, who would never kick the can down the road in the manner you imply Do you have any more credible sources that have a perspective on Paris?

You mean like the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), a public policy research institute that has been around since the late 80s?

Yeah, they'll do. What do THEY have to say about the prospects for Paris?

Well, they publish detailed and respected daily reports of all the climate negotiations, and have done so for ever, basically. And they do summaries of each set of talks, in multiple languages. And after the last set of negotiations, in Bonn, in October, they did a summary that – in part – reads like this.

"Almost no time at ADP 2-11 was spent addressing the decision text necessary to flesh out the hoped-for concise agreement. The Paris package is meant to constitute of both agreement and decision text. Some had hoped for a virtuous cycle in which the details on the "how" would be captured in decision text, thus allowing the agreement only to focus on the "what," with parties able to make compromises within the agreement text, once assurances on how issues were being dealt with in the decision text were elaborated. Instead, at ADP 2-11 a vicious cycle continued to inhibit progress, as parties were loath to remove anything

from the agreement without knowing what would be in the decision text, but also found it difficult to work on decisions without knowing what would be in the agreement.

Don't get me wrong, there will probably be SOME sort of basic 'agreement'. Piss-weak, no enforcement, nothing serious though. It will be an agreement to keep on meeting. What matters- what has mattered for decades – is what people in rich countries do in their own towns and cities. Are they preparing to challenge corporate spin, to force politicians and bureaucrats to make real promises, and then keeping involved so the promises can't be rolled over, ignored or weakened? Or are they exhausted, post-summit protests?

But what you're saying really doesn't sit within the mainstream, does it?

You're quite right. As my friend, Professor Chris Wright of the University of Sydney just observed

“the mainstream media here in Oz are still in the 'CC is a hoax/not happening' mode (Murdoch press) or 'there's hope, the world is changing' mode (Fairfax/Guardian). No one is willing to look into the abyss and contemplate the end of the party! For an example of the 'there's hope' line this latest one from ABC identifies the usual suspects (Jeffrey Sachs/CSIRO etc) they even cite CCS!: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-11-20/stekette-paris-climate-summit-there%27s-grounds-for-optimism/6956944>”

Sigh. Anything else I need to know?

Yeah, the species has almost certainly left it too late to do anything about climate change. Yes, there'll be some wind farms, but pretty soon we will panic and reach for the geo-engineering. You'd be well advised to take one or both of the following courses of action: 1) stockpile shotgun ammo and baked beans in a sick survivalist psychodrama 2) as per Banks et al. (1995) *“dance and drink and screw, because there's nothing else to do.”*

Timeline

1985 A scientific meeting in Villach, Austria with many experts, some of who'd been working on climate since the 1950s, realises it that once you properly factor the non-carbon dioxide gases, climate is a problem for the here and now. They start knocking hard on the Big Boys' doors, and because they have Ozone-Hole credibility, they're sort of listened to.

1988 A conference on “The Changing Atmosphere”, held in Toronto just after the G7 summit, is the first climate conference at which heads of state (Canada and Norway) appear. Australian scientists attend.

1990 Australia agrees to a domestic reduction target of 20% below 1990 levels by 2005.

1992 Australia signs the “UNFCCC” treaty, and ratifies it. Its domestic “National Greenhouse Response Strategy” is made up of only voluntary actions.

1995 Australia resists emissions cuts for developed nations (especially itself) and, in contradiction of the CBDR agreement it made just three years earlier, wants developing nations to agree to emissions reductions targets. At the end of the year it releases a report based on economic modelling paid for by the fossil fuel industry that 'proves' it would be unfairly penalised by agreeing to cuts.

1997 Australia extracts an emissions increase as its Kyoto target, and a special clause for 'reducing' its land-clearing (which it was doing anyway). The following year, Australia signs the Kyoto protocol. Big fossil business begins to lobby against ratification...

2001 New President George W. Bush announces that the US will not ratify Kyoto.

2002 Australian Prime Minister John Howard announces, on World Environment Day, that Australia will not ratify the Kyoto Protocol because it is not in the national interest (as defined by him)

2005 The Kyoto Protocol finally comes into force, once Russia ratifies. The USA and Australia cook up the “Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate”. The Australian Environment Minister accidentally admits it is an 'alternative' to Kyoto. It dies on the vine when US Congress cuts off its money.

2007 New Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (symbolically) ratifies the Kyoto Protocol and gets a two minute ovation at the Bali Climate Meeting. A two-year timetable is set of the ...

2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference, with sky-high hopes (if not expectations) and, in the final analysis, rock-bottom results. Rudd's climate dreams, already rocked by the second defeat of his "Continue Polluting Regardless Scheme" (subs, please check this) evaporate.

2011 At the Durban meeting of the UNFCCC they all agree to keep talking and at the end of 2015 make an agreement to start doing something by 2020. #senseofurgency

2013 Australia doesn't even send a minister to the Warsaw Climate Conference.

2014 In October Australia hosts the G20 in Brisbane. Among many other embarrassments, Abbott's efforts to keep climate off the agenda end in farce when Obama and the Chinese simply ignore him.

Glossary

Common but Differentiated Responsibilities - A term loose enough in meaning that the people at Rio could agree it. A Rorschach inkblot it lets developing countries think "The rich guys have promised to make deep cuts before we have to do anything" and the developed countries say "well, it's been twenty years, so the poor are going to have to stay poor."

CHOGM Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. Remnant of British Empire. Meets every two years, so that Australia can act like a dismissive thug.

CPRS Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme. Went tits up repeatedly, took Rudd's credibility with it.

Kyoto Protocol – 1997 agreement that rich countries would cut their emissions by various small amounts that were much less than the scientists said was necessary. After the USA walked away, Australia did too, despite having wangled an increase as its reduction target. The deal came into force in 2005, with Russian ratification, but is now essentially a zombie process. See "Veil of Kyoto"

Middle Power – not a superpower, not a minnow. In combination with other middle powers, can bend things in their own interests, a bit.

OECD – Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development. Rich countries club, now with 34 members, set up in 1961. A sometimes useful talking shop and rule-maker.

Uncle History One of my nieces calls me this. True story.

Veil of Kyoto - Term of two English academics who argued in 2010 that

"'Kyoto' has created a veil over the climate issue in Australia in a number of ways. Firstly, its symbolic power has distracted attention from actual environmental outcomes while its accounting rules obscure the real level of carbon emissions and structural trends at the nation-state level. Secondly, a public policy tendency to commit to far off emission targets as a compromise to implementing legislation in the short term has also emerged on the back of Kyoto-style targets. Thirdly, Kyoto's international flexibility mechanisms can lead to the diversion of mitigation investment away from the nation-state implementing carbon legislation. A final concern of the Kyoto approach is how it has shifted focus away from Australia as the world's largest coal exporter towards China, its primary customer. While we recognise the crucial role aspirational targets and timetables play in capturing the imagination and coordinating action across nations, our central theme is that 'Kyoto' has overshadowed the implementation of other policies in Australia."

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Disclaimers

Marc Hudson, besides trying to extract himself from editing “Manchester Climate Monthly,” is a second year PhD candidate at the Sustainable Consumption Institute, studying how come and *how* coal is still in the game almost thirty years after climate scientists and some 'issue entrepreneur' activists, bureaucrats and politicians managed to wake everyone up to the threat of anthropogenic global warming. The views, snark and glibness contained herein are entirely his own, and in no way represent the official position of the SCI, the University of Manchester or anyone else, obv.

Future “Learning Curve” briefings will appear on – (Australian) divestment, peak bodies & umbrella groups, carbon capture and storage, local coal conflicts, denialism, the coal industry's recent trajectory.

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