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Climate advocacy and the election

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In a recent essay, The Australia Institute's Clive Hamilton wrote that "Even three degrees [of global warming] is looking very hard to avoid" and that "If the scientists are right, the consequences of a three-degree increase in global temperature are almost too horrible to contemplate, but contemplate them we must" (1). Some may interpret this as saying that three degrees should be considered as a policy target, but Hamilton has made clear his support for the two-degree target, in accord with the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the United Nations and the European Union.

However, federal Labor in Australia, following Nicholas Stern, has unofficially adopted the three-degree target in a climate change policy devoid of specifics and a world away from what Australia would need to do if we are to pull our weight in a global effort to avoid climate calamity. How should climate activists respond?

Three degrees cannot be a target, but only a sign-post on the way to catastrophe. NASA's Goddard Institute of Space Studies head Prof. James Hansen explains: "there is a clear dichotomy between [Hansen's] Alternative Scenario, which keeps additional global warming under [an additional] one degree [above 2000 level of 0.7 degree above pre-industrial], and warmer scenarios. If warming is less than one degree, within or near the range of the warmest interglacial periods, we know that feedbacks such as release of methane hydrates from melting tundra or from the continental shelves are only moderate positive feedbacks. But if global warming becomes larger than that, all bets are off... We either keep the warming small or it is likely to be quite large" (2).

Many times Hansen has warned that two-to-three degrees would produce a planet without Arctic sea ice, a catastrophic sea level rise in the pipeline, and super-drought in the American west, southern Europe, the Middle East and parts of Africa: "Such a scenario threatens even greater calamity, because it could unleash positive feedbacks such as melting of frozen methane in the Arctic, as occurred 55 million years ago, when more than ninety per cent of species on Earth went extinct" (3).

Seemingly oblivious to such compelling science, policy-makers are fast adopting three degrees as the new target, the "relative" safety of the two-degree limit put aside. In his 2006 report to the British government, Stern declared keeping the rise to two degrees as "already nearly out of reach"

because it meant emissions "peaking in the next five years or so and dropping fast" (4), which he judged to be neither politically likely nor economically desirable. Three degrees was a more practical target, and Stern nominated the appropriate emissions reduction plan to be a limit on atmospheric greenhouse gas levels of 550ppm CO₂e, and 60 per cent reduction by 2050 (5). Following in his three-degree footsteps are Labor leader Kevin Rudd and economist Ross Garnaut, appointed by Rudd to do a Stern report for Australia, but saddled with the answer before he has researched the question.

Ex-ABARE chief Dr Brian Fisher, Australia's lead delegate to the May 2007 IPCC meeting, says the two-degree target, with emissions peaking by 2015, "is exceedingly unlikely to occur... global emissions are growing very strongly... On the current trajectories you would have to say plus three degrees is looking more likely" (6).

The shift is plain in the most recent IPCC report. Of the 177 research scenarios assessed for future emissions profiles, only six dealt with limiting the rise to the range of 2 to 2.4 degrees. By contrast, 118 covered the range of 3.2 to 4 degrees, which suggest that the IPCC researchers have also largely shifted focus from two degrees (7).

We know that two degrees is too much. Today at less than one degree, the floating ice at the north pole is disappearing fast, likely to be gone within a few decades (8); and we are close to or at the tipping point when the Greenland ice sheet starts the irreversible melting that will lift sea levels by five to seven metres, in as little as a century according to Hansen (9). At two degrees it will be too late for Greenland, and over a third of species will be committed to extinction. The research suggests that in a three-degree world the Amazon rainforest will have gone and the carbon cycle will be thrown into reverse so that vegetation and soils start a net release of carbon dioxide, boosting global warming by another 1.5 degrees (10). Three degrees becomes four to five.

So what should be said? Few would fail to criticise the federal government for its lack of targets, for the prime minister's line that it is "crazy and irresponsible... to commit to a target when you don't know the impact" and for his revealing answer on ABC TV Lateline earlier this year that four-to-six degrees would be "less comfortable for some than it is now" (sic) (11).

And a response to Labor's three-degree target? Should we say publicly, as Hansen does, that three degrees means the end of the planet as we know it, the loss of a fair proportion of the human population and most species? That Labor's climate change policy is vague and empty, lacking politically-enforceable, meaningful targets and unsupportable by those who understand that monumental policy changes need to be in the next decade or it will simply be too late? That Labor is committed to supporting increased coal exports and the opening of new coal mines (12), has opposed the continuation of mandatory renewable energy targets in the Senate (13), will not end logging in old-growth, high-carbon-sink capacity forests, opposes a 2-degree target (14) and has no short-term emission targets?

Or are there sound tactical reasons to be quiet? The general climate advocacy position of the major green organisations seems to be that Howard must go (yes); Rudd will be significantly better (to date more faith than fact); nothing should be done to jeopardise getting rid of Howard (so criticism

of Labor should be muted); access to Labor in power should not be jeopardised; and the policy platform put forward should be less than the science dictates because the truth is too hard for the political parties and/or the general public to bear (or the fact that we are, in Hansen's words, "on the precipice of climate system tipping points beyond which there is no redemption" is too much for some climate lobbyists to bear?).

So, for example, the Australian Conservation Foundation has decided to weld itself onto Labor, and is whispering quiet on Labor's great climate policy shortcomings. There is a revolving door between the ACF and Labor's front-bench offices, and the ACF conspicuously failed to sign off on the peak-green election manifesto "Turning Down the Heat" (15), or the web-centred thebigswitch campaign (16), instead provocatively launching a counter-site. The ACF's whoonearthcares.com is celebrity-driven greenwash, lacking climate change information or policy analysis. In a double- or triple-counting sleight of hand (depending on whether your hot water is gas or electric), Cate (as in Blanchett) shows you how to "save" CO2 emissions by buying greenpower, then "save" more emissions by installing solar hot water, then "save" more emissions by using cold water laundry washing. It is ill-informed and misleading, a triumph for ACF's corporate branding team over its marginalised climate campaigners, a paradigm of election soft-peddalling.

ACF is positioning itself to be close to Rudd in power, but is the approach one of hope and trust that Labor will repay their charity by doing "the right thing" (for which there is so far no public evidence) or are there substantial, non-public assurances? (In the recent NSW state contest, a pre-election "commitment" to peak greens by the outgoing environment minister to review emissions targets after the election has simply been dumped by the new minister, who claims not to have heard of it.)

Will ACF's soft-peddalling succeed in drawing a reasonable climate change policy out of Labor, or will its tactic simply dovetail with Rudd's smile-without-commitment strategy, its silence interpreted as consent to a policy of climate catastrophe?

ACF's general stand on climate change is soft: the targets it advocates are substantially lower than the other peak greens and clear contrary to that which the science demands. The ACF and its website are very low-key on coal, appearing, like their former president Peter Garrett, not to oppose increased coal exports. In the leadup to the recent NSW state election, some climate activist groups (including Greenpeace and Rising Tide) and The Greens did campaign hard for Emma to make a firm pre-election statement on new coal mines and exports, but the publicly-identified peak green lobby refused to make coal a part of their campaign, which focused on an ask on mandatory renewable energy targets for 2020, and the coal issue was marginalised. Within months of the election Labor, unconstrained, approved new mines and export facilities. The day the Anvil Hill Coal Mine was approved, the Nature Conservation Council held their awards night with Labor Minister Verity Firth as the guest of honor. Now Labor has not only given approval for the world's biggest coal port to double its exports, but is planning at least one new fossil-fuel power station, and the Treasurer wants to build new aluminium smelters in order to provide guaranteed demand for the power.

The 2007 election focus for most peak green groups (not including ACF or WWF) is represented by the website, thebigswitch.org.au. The messaging is soft (the banner reads "... make simple lifestyle changes. Urge politicians to lead with vision ... ") but it is a complex site that tries to do too many things. Labor's refusal to adopt a two-degree target isn't mentioned, but it is straightforward in elaborating Labor's lack of commitment on key issues.

A diverse range of election demands seems to lack the capacity to nail candidates, who can simply duck and weave; an outcome that may be inherent in schemes to rate politicians by given them numerical scores in answer to a show-bag of questions. For example, while Labor is rated 1.75 out of 5, it would be hard for an ALP backbencher not to score an easy pass without seriously crossing the party leader's position. A canny politician can rate more than 30 out of a possible 50 while being opposed to any legislated minimum emission reductions by 2020, being opposed to any legislated renewable energy target by 2020, supporting new coal-fired power stations and opposing the phasing out of the coal industry (17). It's an odd message to be sending.

Thebigswitch proposes, as do The Greens, the 80/2050 target (cut emissions 80 per cent below 1990 levels by 2050), a political compromise with the science. Whilst the ACF incorrectly views 80/2050 as a target that "allows us to be true to the science and risk analysis" (18), most now acknowledge that it is an inadequate figure, resulting in 2050 per capita emissions in Australia four times what they would need to be for a two-degree target (19). A two-degree target means an 80 per cent global emissions cut below 2000 levels by 2050, and a reduction of 95 per cent for developed countries such as Australia, according to Oslo's Centre for International Climate and Environmental Research (20). Why say 80/2050 when it needs to be somewhere between 95/2050 and zero emissions?

It's a far cry from British Labor's environment (now foreign) minister, David Miliband, who says that "essentially by 2050 we need all activities outside agriculture to be near zero carbon emitting if we are to stop carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere growing" (21), an evident fact beyond the imagination of Labor ministers here, or it seems that of peak green lobbyists.

Whilst thebigswitch advocates emissions to be 30% below 1990 levels by 2020, and 80/2050, it is not clear that the quantifiable policies advocated by thebigswitch would achieve those targets. Australia's non-primary industry emissions are growing around 1.8 per cent a year (population/workforce growth plus increased labour productivity, offset by increases in energy efficiency and technological substitution), but for emissions to start decreasing from 2010, the targets of 30/2020 and 80/2050 require year-on-year emissions cuts of around 4.1 per cent from 2010 onwards (22). So we have to bring a 1.8 per cent annual rise in emissions down to zero, then we have to drag emissions down at least another 4.1 per cent each year; the gap between where we are currently headed and where we have to go for the 30/2020 target is almost six per cent each year. And every year, as long as there is population/labour force/economic growth, there will continue to be an upward pressure on emissions, so lifestyle and technological changes will have to continue to be more powerful than the net four per cent reduction in order to counterbalance these pressures.

The two quantifiable policies proposed by thebigswitch – energy efficiency annual reductions of 1.5% each year after 2010 to 2020, and a legislated renewable energy target of 25% by 2020 – would contribute only around half the specified reduction, so there is gap between the general demand and the quantified policies (23). To be upfront, thebigswitch could say that the 30/2020 and 80/2050 targets require a comprehensive (no exclusions) emissions trading scheme from 2010 with a strong cap that declines four per cent year-on-year, every year. But it doesn't, perhaps because in joining the dots the vision thing would be transformed into a more daunting look.

In defence of their election targets, peak green advocates will say, for example, that it is "more important that we agree and campaign on targets heading in the right direction than having discussions about what the targets should be", and that the combined green election strategy will not be a leading position because "it is always possible to go further and call for more". Which raises the issue: should policies be advocated that are sufficiently short of the science that even if those policies were fully implemented the result would still be catastrophic climate change?

There is always an election around the corner somewhere in Australia, so there is always an argument for tactical pragmatism. But does the big strategic need get lost in too many toned-down tactics?

Is there any way out of the dilemma of wanting to engage in practical politics (that is, to have some leverage in the current, constrained political playing field) but knowing that this appears to require tactics that will deliver little to help society grapple effectively with the real catastrophe that we face (in terms of the needed scale and speed of change)? More bluntly, are we getting the advocacy we deserve because we simply don't know how to do it better or differently?

As Thomas Homer-Dixon argues in his just-published "The Upside of Down", climate change politics is caught somewhere between denial and reluctant managerialism, and far from creative thinking about the new strategies that it demands. Like Homer-Dixon, Philip Sutton of the Greenleap Strategic Institute argues that the corollary of acknowledging that we face a new, catastrophic situation, is that we also acknowledge the need to actively work out a new politics or paradigm.

In thinking about a "new politics" and a new strategy, our starting points may include recognising that:

- * the present political momentum is too little, too late and there are no signs of it picking up sufficient speed: emissions are rising at an increasing rate, and are now tracking worse than "business-as-usual", the most pessimistic of the IPCC scenarios; Hansen warns that another decade of "business as usual" and it will be too late;
- * fast and dramatic action is required, a "crash emissions program" (24), unprecedented in contemporary political economy;
- * we are facing a global emergency that requires an emergency response, as with other "natural" emergencies, where the normal workings of the society are suspended and extra resources applied to the extent necessary to deal with it;
- * it seems inconceivable that politics "as usual" and business "as usual" (the neo-liberal deregulated economy) have the capacity to drive our emissions to near-zero by 2050; because

* it is practically impossible to rely on market mechanisms (a price on carbon) and micro-economic regulation to achieve the transition to the low-carbon economy deeply and quickly enough.

What political and economic means can achieve a crash emissions program? I don't know the answer. Some of us have been promoting discussion and research on carbon rationing and personal carbon allowances (25), not such a way-out idea since former NSW premier Bob Carr told an audience earlier this year that "Individual carbon rationing with penalties for those who exceeded their quotas was one of a number of radical measures that might be needed to tackle climate change" (26). And on his last day as Victoria's deputy premier and environment minister, John Thwaites "raised the idea of a personal carbon allowance which would involve a quota being put on the level of emissions an individual or household could use in a year" during a speech in Beechworth (27). In the UK and elsewhere researchers have pointed to the 1939-45 war economy, where very quickly economic production was redirected in the service of the great emergency that was the fight against fascism (28). There are many examples of rapid transformation: the Manhattan Project, the growth of the Asian Tiger economies and China, the transformation of the economy of Cuba after Soviet oil was cut off. And major economic transformations in democratic and participatory countries such as Sweden.

We need to study such transitions and rapid structural and social adjustments, because without a similar scale of change our world as we know it will not survive. How can we gather widespread political support for a fast, sustainability-driven economic transformation? What new political strategies can deal with the unprecedented implications of the full sustainability emergency? The problem of developing new strategies is very challenging, but there is a growing acknowledgement that the current climate action political strategies are obsolete, that there is a need together to find a pathway to the development of new strategies that can fully deal with the impending climate catastrophe.

Notes

- (1) Clive Hamilton, "Fear of Climate Change: A rejoinder to George Monbiot", 6 July 2007, www.tai.org.au/documents/downloads/WP103.pdf
- (2) James Hansen, "The Threat to the Planet: Actions Required to Avert Dangerous Climate Change", presentation to SOLAR Conference on Renewable Energy, Denver, 10 July 2006, www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/threata talk_text_05Sept2006.pdf
- (3) James Hansen, "The Threat to the Planet: How Can We Avoid Dangerous Human-Made Climate Change?", Remarks on acceptance of WWF Duke of Edinburgh Conservation Medal at St. James Palace, London, 21 November 2006, www.columbia.edu/DukeEdin_21Nov2006_complete.pdf
- (4) Nicholas Stern, Launch presentation of report, 30 October 2006, http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/A/8/stern_speakingnotes.pdf
- (5) "Stern ratchets up climate change debate", ABC radio "PM", 28 March 2007, www.abc.net.au/pm/content/2007/s1884012.htm
- (6) The Age, 5 May 2007
- (7) IPCC Fourth Assessment Report, WGIII, SPM, page 23, Table SPM.5, www.ipcc.ch/SPM040507.pdf
- (8) J. Amos, "Arctic sea ice 'faces rapid melt'", BBC News, 12 December 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/sci/tech/6171053.stm>
- (9) James Hansen, "Scientific reticence and sea level rise", Environ. Res. Lett. 2 (2007) 024002 doi:10.1088/1748-9326/2/2/024002

- (10) Jorge L. Sarmiento & Nicolas Grube, "Sinks for Anthropogenic Carbon", *Physics Today*, www.aip.org/pt/vol-55/iss-8/p30.html; Peter Cox et al, "Acceleration of global warming due to carbon-cycle feedbacks in a coupled climate model", *Nature*, 408, pp 184-7
- (11) John Howard interview, ABC TV "Lateline", 5 February 2007, www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2006/s1840963.htm
- (12) Peter Garret interview, ABC TV "Lateline", 15 March 2007, www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2007/s1873091.htm
- (13) In the Senate on 14 June 2007 Labor joined with the government to block support for the continuation of mandatory renewable energy targets
- (14) In the Senate on 7 February 2007 Labor joined with the government to oppose a motion that called for climate change policy consistent with constraining temperature rise to two degrees
- (15) "Turning Down the Heat: A Climate Change Action Agenda for Australia", www.cana.net.au/Policies_positions/TurningDowntheHeatWEB.pdf
- (16) www.thebigswitch.org.au, about page
- (17) For "the questions we asked" at www.thebigswitch.org.au, a politician can answer in the negative for questions 1, 4 and 5 and still accumulate 30 points by supporting Kyoto, an unspecified price on carbon, energy efficiency, land-clearing measures, some transport expenditure changes, global equity concerns, and opposition to the nuclear industry.
- (18) pers. comm., ACF Sustainability Programs Manager, 11 April 2007
- (19) All two-degree emissions scenarios have a global target of around or less 3 GtC/carbon per year by 2050 (www.carbonequity.info/2degrees/images/2degrees.pdf). Spread over a projected world population by 2050 of around 8.9 billion, that is a 2050 target of 0.34 tonne of carbon per person per year. Australian carbon emissions in 1990 were around seven tonnes carbon per person per year. A cut of 80% by 2050 would leave Australian emissions per head at 1.4 tonnes, four times the global target. [This analysis is based on the principle of "contract and converge", which is an inadequate framework for dealing with issues of global equity: see "Greenhouse Development Rights" forthcoming in September 2007 from EcoEquity on the role of a Responsibility and Capacity Index in allocating global emission reduction targets.]
- (20) Nathan Rive et al, "To what extent can a long-term temperature target guide near-term climate change commitments", *Climatic Change* 82:373-391. DOI 10.1007/s10584-006-9193-4
- (21) "The great stink: towards an environmental contract", Speech by the Rt Hon David Miliband MP at the Audit Commission annual lecture, 19 July 2006, www.defra.gov.uk/corporate/ministers/speeches/david-miliband/dm060719.htm
- (22) www.carbonequity.info/2degrees/images/2050reductions.pdf
- (23) www.carbonequity.info/2degrees/images/bigaskfigures.pdf
- (24) Tom Athanasiou et al, "Greenhouse Development Rights: An approach to the global climate regime that takes climate protection seriously while also preserving the right to human development", 2006, EcoEquity and Christian Aid, www.ecoequity.org
- (25) www.carbonequity.info/PDFs/ration.colour.pdf
- (26) Sydney Morning Herald, 18 April 2007
- (27) "Rebate to 'help the battlers'", *Border Mail*, 30 July 2007, www.bordermail.com.au/news/bm/local/879731.html
- (28) For example, Michael Meacher (former UK Environment secretary), "I would turn the lights out", *The Ecologist Online*, 2 January 2007, http://www.theecologist.co.uk/archive_detail.asp?content_id=769; Mark Roodhouse (University of York), "Rationing returns: a solution to global warming?", *History and Policy journal*, March 2007

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