

When will Australia's government act on the climate imperative?

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Our politicians are elected to listen to and represent the interests of their constituents, and to address issues and meet challenges in the national interest.

So, how is it that the Morrison Government won't listen and act on climate - the most significant economic, social, political and moral issue of our time, and for which it has a clear responsibility and duty of care to current and future generations.

How is it that it can ignore the overwhelming public pressure to act, and with urgency, in our longer-term national interest, rather than pay off certain vested interests that it perceives to be to its short-term political advantage.

How can the government ignore:

- The climate science, which is much more substantive and peer-assessed than COVID science
- The political and other messages - overwhelming public support for decisive action in almost every poll or survey on the issue in recent years (90 per cent in latest Lowy Survey), and election results such as the Wentworth by-election.
- The calls by business, including the big miners now committed to exiting thermal coal, now embracing various objectives including net zero emissions, 100 per cent renewables, etc.
- Most recently, the "Group of 10" business, farming, union and environmental leaders warning that Australia is "woefully unprepared" for the impact of climate over coming decades.
- The gathering momentum in the finance and investor community - banks not lending for fossil fuel projects; insurers not insuring them; the big asset owners - including sovereign wealth and super funds - exiting climate exposed investments; shareholder activism; big global fossil fuel companies writing down asset/corporate exposures and values.
- State governments adopting net zero commitments, and city/local governments recognising a climate emergency.
- The mounting recognition of the significance of the climate challenge by our key regulatory institutions including the Reserve Bank, Australian Prudential Regulatory Authority, Australian Securities and Investment Commission, Australian Stock Exchange and Australian Competition and Consumer Commission.
- Our global position as now a conspicuous laggard in climate policies, especially given our responsibilities as one of the top five or six emitters when our position as a leading exporter of fossil fuels is recognised.
- Our real prospects to be an energy superpower, exporting renewable energy, hydrogen and ammonia, and exploiting our potential to develop a globally significant battery industry on the basis of our endowment of lithium and graphite.

After several decades of policy failure and squandered opportunities for growth, investment and jobs by successive governments, how can the Morrison Government now squander the opportunity - indeed imperative - of a COVID-19 pandemic recovery strategy to commit to, and accelerate our transition to a low carbon Australia by mid-century? This is especially so given how we, at all levels of our society, have demonstrated just how quickly we can change our behaviour in responding to COVID-19 - changing the way we live, work, travel and so on, accepting the magnitude and urgency of the challenge to do so.

Setting aside the current government's irresponsible intention to rely on our historical carry over credits from Kyoto to reach our Paris commitments to emissions reduction by 2030, we are way short of even reaching that very modest commitment - about half what it should have been if we are to have any hope of achieving net zero emissions by 2050.

The opportunity is for the government to detail a vision for a low carbon Australia, and to develop transition pathways in key sectors, such as in energy to renewables, the electrification of transport, regenerative agriculture, "green" building codes, industrial processes and so on.

In these circumstances, it is alarming to see the Morrison Government continuing to pander to their mates in the fossil fuel industry, to be contemplating new gas projects, new coal mines, and new coal-fired power stations as the basis of their COVID-19 recovery strategy.

Morrison will be tested in coming months, with the prospect of a Biden win being a sea change accelerating the global climate response; his budget on October 6; Zali Steggall's climate bill seeking a parliamentary conscience vote; and an attempt to approve the Collinsville coal-fired power station when there is absolutely no commercial case to do so.

Morrison's response to these events will define him - and determine his political future.

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