

Australia's Climate Change Insurgent: Tony Abbott's Crusade

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He is the inimitable, true political ugliness, the bad boy with a mistimed punch. While not quite professorial in his lunacy (that honour will have to go to Pauline Hanson of One Nation, whose sincere bigotry remains pungent), he aspires to it with a greater sense of reason.

This Exocet missile of Australian politics continues to direct his power and magic into the vessels of the Turnbull government, hoping that his relevance will resume form. His victories, gained from the right wing of the Liberal-National coalition, have been significant, effectively trimming the efforts of the government.

Tony's never so immaculate releases always tend to rumble. Before an audience at the Global Warming Policy Foundation in London this week, Abbott was very clear:

"Primitive people once killed goats to appease the volcano gods."[1]

The societies of now were certainly more "sophisticated" but for all that progress humans were still characteristically delusional, a superstitious lot "sacrificing our industries and our living standards to the climate gods to little effect."

Environmentalism had become a dangerous dogma rather than an indispensable pursuit for a healthier earth.

"Environmentalism has managed to combine a post-socialistic instinct for big government with a post-Christian nostalgia for making sacrifices in a good cause."

This was not all. A heated earth was something to relish not abhor.

"In most countries, far more people die in cold snaps than in heatwaves, so a gradual lift in global temperatures, especially if it's accompanied by more prosperity and more capacity to adapt to change, might even be beneficial."

In this calculus of death, Abbott's point is distorting. True, cold is a natural killer of the infirm and elderly, and generally, more effective on current figures. But then again, excessive heat is set to catch up in its reaping potency.

According to the World Health Organisation, the middle of the century will see malaria, diarrhea, heat stress and malnutrition gathering up an extra 250,000 people a year.[2]

“Areas with weak health infrastructure – mostly in developing countries – will be the least able to cope without assistance to prepare and respond.”

Abbott, in the true spirit of a climate insurgent, adopts a two pronged approach. Even if climate change was happening (which it’s not, being the science of “absolute crap” in his charming terms), it could hardly be a bad thing even if it was. Having looked at photographs of Manly beach over a century, he saw no signs of rising sea levels. (Such a scientifically inquiring mind!) But surely, a heated earth was far better than a frozen one?

Beneath the currents of the Abbott show was a sense that the science, and scientists, could not be trusted.

“The growing evidence that records have been adjusted, that the impact of urban heat islands have been downplayed, and that data sets have been slanted in order to fit the theory of dangerous anthropogenic global warming does not make it false; but it should produce much caution about basing drastic action upon it.”

The coalition government’s response back in Australia was that Abbott had become a mind changer. If they were consulting the politician who greeted world leaders at the G20 summit in Brisbane in 2014, this was certainly the case. Then, as prime minister, Abbott felt duty bound to make the case that there was such a grave thing as climate change. Climate change scepticism was tantamount to Holocaust denial, and Abbott was playing along, so much so he endorsed the Paris Climate Agreement. But before his audience in Westminster, he suggested that he had always had doubts.

During the Turnbull tenure, Abbott has become the spear thrower for the climate change deniers, manoeuvring himself into territory that embraces both unalloyed radicals and resident nutters. There is much to admire about this suicidal tendency, which is purely political rather than scientific or environmental. It is the pursuit of self-interest and national interest, a view that suspects, combats and dismisses. Few Australian politicians could ever do it and get away with it.

The coalition government, however, risks being outflanked yet again. On Thursday night, Foreign Minister Julie Bishop vented on the ABC’s 7.30 Report, suggesting that the former PM had lost the plot.

“It is up to him to explain the differences between his opinion [as prime minister] and his opinion now.”[3]

In an effort to douse the flames of doubt now engulfing the ministry, Bishop insisted that “the important thing is the government’s position and under Prime Minister [Malcolm] Turnbull we are working hard to come up with a plan that delivers affordable and reliable energy that will meet with our international obligations.” A plan, in short, that did everything.

Prime Minister Turnbull had hoped that the Finkel Report would fireproof him against the next Abbott surge and finally put the climate change voodoo to bed. But the Abbott war against Turnbull is taking place in several theatres, all of which have shown Turnbull to be a modern Maginot line.

On climate, Turnbull's embrace of the Finkel recommendations, largely because of sceptics within his own party, remain limited, centred on the idea of a Clean Energy Target Abbot regards with satanic scorn. Abandoning it will be Abbott's prize, and a sign of a government gazing further over the precipice of electoral annihilation.

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Notes

[1] <http://tonyabbott.com.au/2017/10/transcript-hon-tony-abbott-mp-address-global-warming-policy-foundation-westminster-london/>

[2] <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs266/en/>

[3] <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/julie-bishop-says-abbott-should-explain-change-of-heart-in-loopy-speech-20171012-gz0205.html>

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