

“Emissions Accomplished”: Australia, Climate Change and the G20

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Theme: [Environment](#)

In-depth Report: [Climate Change](#)

The Australian delegation has provided the comic relief in diplomatic circles for some time now. Its pugilist humanoid of a prime minister, Tony Abbott, has made inane remarks about “shirt fronting” Vladimir Putin, something which distinctly did not happen at the APEC summit in Beijing. Photos were taken showing a disinterested Putin feigning interest in some zygotic life form. And Canberra’s toadies have been doing their utmost best to keep climate change off any meaningful agenda ahead of the G20 gathering in Brisbane. Why discuss something that, in the shallow minds of most of Tony Abbott’s front bunch, doesn’t exist?

The diplomatic charade has seen attempts by Canberra to water down any emphasis on climate change in the official G20 communiqué. A single sentence will do nicely, thank you very much. There has also been a steadfast refusal to contribute to the international Green Climate Fund which is ostensibly designed to assist developing nations combat global warming. A final corker here is that the Australian side of the climate change bargain will not involve updated emissions targets ahead of next year’s Paris summit.[1]

Then, the economic juggernaut of China, through its leader Xi Jinping, demonstrated that the most populous country on the planet can, at the very least, make a promise to cap emissions by 2030 for subsequent reduction. This was done with President Barack Obama, doing perhaps a less convincing job with a promise to cut emissions by 26-28 percent by 2025. Canberra’s post-modern officials were caught off guard – two fellow polluters had come to the table with a plan.

Instead, they have done something rather peculiar: resist calls from their erstwhile unquestionable ally and bully boy in residence in virtually everything except those about the climate change train. The US will be resisted on this score. “Yes,” writes Luke Ryan, “this is the glorious battle that we have chosen.”[2]

The Coalition government has been doing its best to insist that there is no hurry in terms of getting Australia off its voracious appetite for using finite resources. In October, Abbott declared at the opening of a coal mine in central Queensland that coal is “good for humanity”, making it sound much like a cereal laden with nutrition. It would be “the world’s main energy source for decades to come”. Individuals like Stephen Galilee of the overly dominant Minerals Council salivate at the prospect of continuing coal usage and feeding “cheap and reliable energy” to innumerable Indians and Chinese.[3] The plunderer’s credo is a simple one.

The Coalition has had a few magical treats for the electorate on the subject of

environment. The Abbott government's efforts to deal with catastrophic disturbances and disruptions will involve a toothless \$2.5 billion Direct Action Plan. This is a denialist's dream, a rejection by omission. The environment minister, Greg Hunt, as inappropriate for the post as a wolf would be at a gathering of sheep, has actually argued that the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change vindicates the policy. Another classic tactic: argue that the opposing position actually endorses your own.

That vindication naturally did not include recommendations that countries move to 80 percent renewable targets by 2050, or that the world had to stop using fossil fuels by 2100 to avert global warming of more than 2 degrees. What it did include – and here, the jaw await a sharp drop – was a reduction of a paltry 5 percent of emissions by 2020 – “one of the world's leading reductions”.[4] Australia's own Climate Change Authority considered the target “inadequate”, arguing that, “It would leave an improbably large task for future Australians to make a fair contribution to global efforts.”[5]

The directions are clear. Even as moves in Beijing and Washington are taking place on the subject of climate change, even as carbon pricing schemes are being put in place in the EU and ten American states, the Abbott government would rather change it altogether. Given coal is sovereign, the very idea of seeking renewable energy targets grates.

Hardly surprising then, that talks with the Australian Labor Party on the compulsory Renewable Energy Target were bound to collapse. The Coalition's revised figure for 20 percent of electricity to stem from renewable sources by 2020 was deemed an effective 40 percent reduction on the original target. The Abbott response: the 20 percent target was entirely appropriate, given that energy usage by Australians had generally fallen. But so has renewable investment, having taken a 70 percent plummet over the last 12 months.[6]

All this is part of that clumsy fictionalising that has come to typify Australian efforts to address the issue of climate change. Keep the existing coal factories, even if they are grotesquely inefficient, running. Improve the environment by using “clean” coal. Reduce subsidies to the renewable energy sector.

Heading to the Paris summit will no doubt involve one clear, scientifically unsound message. As the Australian comedian, Shaun Micallef featured on his program *Mad As Hell* (Nov 12), Australian parliamentarians could proudly proclaim that emissions had, in fact, been accomplished.

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Notes

[1] <http://junkee.com/australia-prepare-to-be-humiliated-on-climate-change-at-the-g20/44878>

[2] <http://junkee.com/australia-prepare-to-be-humiliated-on-climate-change-at-the-g20/44878>

[3] <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/greg-hunt-says-ipcc-report-vindicates-the-governments-direct-action-policy-20141103-11fw6w.html>

[4] <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/greg-hunt-says-ipcc-report-vindicates-the-governments-direct-action-policy-20141103-11fw6w.html>

[5] http://www.climatechangeauthority.gov.au/files/files/Target-Progress-Review/Targets%20and%20Progress%20Review%20Final%20Report_Summary.pdf

[6] <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/nov/10/renewable-energy-investment-->

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