

The Fossil Fuel Proliferation Threat

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Climate change negotiations and debates are characterised by some curious features. For one, there are interminable stretches of discussion that never seem to feature the agents of cause. Chatter about horrendous fires, toxic smoke, and environmental degradation often skirts around the culprit of anthropogenic change, so ably aided by fossil fuels.

With the fossil fuel industries of so many countries buried in the treaty back cover and the subtext, their existence continues to thrive. Oil, coal and gas projects are being approved in an almost schizoid manner even as the trendily minded cosy up to the message of renewable energy. As the Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty Initiative [notes](#),

“While the Paris Agreement set a crucial global climate target, many governments – including self-proclaimed climate leaders – have continued to approve new coal, oil, and gas projects even though burning the world's current fossil fuel reserves would result in seven times more emissions than what is compatible with keeping warming below 1.5°C.”

Emblematic of this are such projects as the expansion of Canada's Trans Mountain Pipeline, which has seen government money poured into a project private investment simply would not back. In 2018, when the private company Kinder Morgan sought to cancel the initiative due to prohibitive costs, the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau [acquired the pipeline](#) for C\$4.5 billion.

Continued opposition from the indigenous Secwepemc and environmental activists has been rebuffed, even as Trudeau boasts of his green credentials on the world stage. To [quote](#) Angela V. Carter, a political scientist based at the University of Waterloo, “There's two versions of reality here, and they're not aligned.” In her view, “one of two things is going to happen. We're either blowing well past 1.5 degrees or we're aligning actions to meet [climate targets]. We can't have it both ways.”

In a peculiar twist of policy, one deservedly seen as ironic, moronic and ghoulish, governments are aiding – dare one even say cuddling? – the fossil fuel industry through massive subsidies and funding. In this exercise of offering a pillow and tea-party for the environmental assassin, *The Economist*, not exactly a leftwing bomb thrower, [came to a staggering figure](#): the industry, according to 2019 figures, was receiving annual subsidies to the tune of to \$427 billion. In Australia alone, both state and federal governments underwrote fossil fuels to the value of [A\\$11.6 billion](#) in 2021/22.

Much like Canada, Australia faces the expansive power of a fossil fuel lobby which sees no interest in surrendering its influence. It is no exaggeration to say that this lobby has destroyed the careers of several prime ministers, with the hope of doing away with a few more.

The Commonwealth Department of Industry, Science and Resources [2022 report](#) from the Office of the Chief Economist avoids mentioning climate change altogether. Emissions are only mentioned from the perspective of projected reductions, be they in terms of steel production or the iron ore supply chain. And in a curious twist, “new energy metals” such as nickel, cobalt and lithium are praised in the reduction effort, focused as they are on the production of battery cathode precursors and such conserving devices.

Despite the Albanese government being, on paper, a more ecologically sound one than its predecessor, little seems to have changed in the stunted Federal Environment portfolio. From that office, coal mine approvals or expansions have been issued like the enthusiastic emissions they will cause. The Australia Institute [has found](#), much to its horror, that there are 26 additional proposals for new or expanded coal mines on the books pending federal government approval. To these can already be added two approvals since May 2022. “Approving 28 new coal mines,” [warns](#) the thinktank, “and the 12.6 billion tonnes of emissions they would cause, is incompatible with limiting dangerous climate change.”

In March, the Australia Institute’s chief economist, Richard Denniss, [noted](#) no fewer than 116 new coal, oil and gas projects awaiting in the approvals pipeline. Were these to go ahead, an extra 1.4 billion tonnes of greenhouse gases would make their way into the atmosphere on an annual basis by 2030. This would be almost three times Australia’s domestic emissions in 2021-2, which came to 490 million tonnes. “That’s the equivalent,” writes Denniss, “of starting up 215 new coal power stations, based on the average emissions of Australia’s current existing coal power stations.”

This is further complicated by the accounting regime for such production. The emissions framework as it stands [tends to consider onshore emissions](#), not what happens at the export destination. Most of Australia’s oil, coal and gas will find their way into foreign markets, making something of a nonsense of the containment thesis on fossil fuels.

Any number of [wise words](#) issuing from such bodies as Australia’s Climate Change Council only serve to highlight the chasm between sagacious warnings and the ruthless continuation of the status quo. Initiatives such as free rooftop solar, pumped hydro, storage batteries and electric vehicle charging stations will mean little till the deep-seated influence of the fossil fuel lobby is wound back in the corridors of government power.

For any genuine change to take place, such initiatives as nailing down a non-proliferating fossil fuels regime, would have to take place. Till that happens, hope will have to rest in the hands of [eager child litigants](#), the legal instincts of First Nations peoples, and an assortment

of brief-wielding allies concerned about the genuine risks of harm that will arise from catastrophic climate change. To the courts they have gone, as many others will go. But as this takes place, fossil fuel proliferation continues.

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