

Australian Government Action in the 1980s

Joan Staples

Twenty years ago in 1989, Environment Minister Graham Richardson took a proposal to Cabinet for a 20% reduction in greenhouse emissions by 2005. He was unsuccessful, but two years later Cabinet agreed to a similar proposal, on condition it would not affect the economy. The Opposition Liberal Party after 1987 had a strong climate change policy under Shadow Environment Minister Chris Puplick, and took that policy to subsequent elections. Scientists and environment organisations promoted the need for action via many current affairs programs, a major scientific conference took place and a multi-venue public conference was held throughout the country. So where did all this action go? And why is the Australian public only just becoming aware of the gravity of climate change some 20 years later?

It would be misleading to suggest that climate change was a significant issue for the Hawke government. It was only one of many issues addressed in the late 1980s by a government that did 'more to protect the environment than any national government before or since'.¹ However, it is instructive to note that climate change was being taken very seriously in the 1980s and that scientists and non-government organisations were able to get the ear of government on the issue. In fact, with many people asking today, 'Why did we not act sooner?', it is amazing to realise just how much government

action and community awareness there was during the latter years of the Hawke Government.

As the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) National Liaison Officer during the first four and a half years of that government, I was certainly aware of the threat of climate change. However, it was not the priority issue on which I was trying to attract the Government's attention up until 1987. The Government had acted to save the Franklin River in 1983 when it came to power, but the early years of the Hawke Government were lean ones for the environment movement. Environment Minister Barry Cohen was not sympathetic to the big issues which required Federal Government intervention in State affairs. Stopping rainforest logging in Queensland's wet tropics, extending and protecting Kakadu as World Heritage and getting Federal Government intervention on logging in Tasmania's forests were strategically chosen as the major urgent priorities when that government seemed unsympathetic to our entreaties. Fortunately, Graham Richardson opened his door to my lobbying in 1985 and the following year visited Tasmania with Bob Brown — a visit that Richardson has described as good for him, for the environment movement and for the Labor Party.²

Richardson subsequently became Minister in 1987 and began implementing an ambitious environmental agenda. It was also after the 1987 election that the Opposition tried to rebuild its credentials on the environment and Chris Puplick began developing a strong policy for the Liberal Party. So 1987 is a useful starting date from which Australian Government and Opposition domestic policy began reacting to climate change.

Richardson's climate change Cabinet submission of 1989 was a response to over a decade of local and international scientific conferences and lobbying by environment organisations. There had been a number of developments during the 1980s that informed the knowledge of environment organisations like ACF on the issue. In 1979 the first World Climate Conference in Geneva had expressed concern over the link between greenhouse gases and climate change. In 1980, the Australian Academy of Science held a conference to review 20 years of measurements showing increasing carbon-dioxide levels, and by then there was an understanding that the greenhouse effect would result in climate change. However, there was still little confidence in

models that were being developed and it was generally the nature of scientists to be cautious in making statements. So, at first the issue was known mainly in scientific and environment circles. The first major international statement on the issue was in 1985 at Villach in Austria, when a UN conference of scientists from 29 countries assessed the growing evidence and released a statement calling for international government action to address the threat. However, 1988 is one of the most important dates in the history of climate change, because it was when an international conference in Toronto actually set targets, calling for a 20% reduction of CO₂ emissions worldwide by the year 2005, with the brunt of this to be borne by developed countries. It was these so-called 'Toronto targets' that were echoed in the ministerial proposals to the Hawke Cabinet.

Climate change sceptics would do well to learn some of this history of the climate change debate. Cautious scientists were calling for international action as long ago as 1985. In 1988, after 30 years of measurement of carbon dioxide levels, they were concerned enough about the situation that the UN set specific targets. It is important to remember that scientists who use scientific method are likely to work from a different paradigm to politicians. For scientists to call for action and set targets is a significant development.

Here in Australia, the CSIRO was at the forefront of international research and they joined up with the Commission for the Future (the Commission) in holding two conferences in 1987 and 1988. The published papers from the first conference in 1987 are a testament to the quality and cutting edge work that was being done by Australian scientists at the time.³ The second conference in 1988 was actually a multi-venue affair with meetings throughout the country, organised primarily by the Commission. This government instrumentality was established by Barry Jones in 1985 as a forum for wider exploration of future scientific, social and economic issues outside the constraints of short-term government planning. At the 1988 conference, Jones was involved, being Science Minister at the time, and Graham Richardson opened the conference in his capacity as Environment Minister. It succeeded in publicising climate change very widely for the first time, with a number of current affairs television programs taking up the issue and *The Age* doing a four-page lift-out in association with the Commission. The indefatigable Ian Lowe, currently

President of ACF, was acting Director of the Commission for the Future at the time and did much to assist in communicating the issue to the public, including numerous public-speaking engagements. One important step he took in 1989 was to write a book, *Living in the Greenhouse*, which is remarkable for its perspicacity on the issue and for the accuracy of its claims and predictions.⁴ The book was directed to a generalist audience and it is a testament to Lowe's remarkable patience that 20 years on, he continues to write and speak to the nation on the issue with the same clarity and commitment.

In 1989, in this context of international calls for action by scientists and the UN, with Australian scientists playing a leading role and the public showing increasing interest, Richardson took a submission to Cabinet to reduce greenhouse emissions by 20% by 2005. His submission was rejected by the Economic and Resource Ministers. The country was experiencing a recession and the caution of the Ministers is probably not surprising. However, 1989 did see a greenhouse statement by the Prime Minister that provided funding for research. Later in the year, in the lead-up to a Federal election, a major environment statement, *Our Country, Our Future*, covered many traditional 'green' issues, but gave prominence to climate change. The statement was developed in close association with ACF and its Director, Phillip Toyne. On climate change, it supported international action, promised to look for ways to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, including cooperating with the States on transport use and it provided \$350,000 for public awareness and education.

Soon after, the Hawke Cabinet did agree to a climate change submission similar to that sponsored by Richardson, but it was in the context of an inducement to the environment movement to remain in negotiations known as the Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) process. The ESD process was ahead of its time in trying to bring together industry, government and the community on sustainability. It was even before the UN Rio Conference or 'Earth Summit', which focused on sustainability. The ESD process grew out of calls by industry and unions for a coherent system of assessment and it was suggested to Hawke by Phillip Toyne. Working groups were to investigate how ESD principles could be applied to various industries. However, to appease various industry interests, Cabinet changed the nature of the ESD process in such a way that the envi-

ronment movement saw this as the Economic Minister hijacking the process. The four big national environment groups, ACF, Wilderness Society, Greenpeace and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), refused to participate. The Government found itself struggling to give the process legitimacy. To appease the environment organisations, the Government agreed to the Toronto targets on greenhouse emissions for a 20% reduction of CO₂ emissions by the year 2005, but with a proviso that reduction would not be at the expense of the economy. It was a messy negotiation that eventually saw ACF and WWF staying uncomfortably within the ESD process, but the remainder of the groups leaving. When the climate change proposal finally came to Cabinet, it was after the 1990 election and it was Minister Ros Kelly who introduced it. The proviso about the economy, a lack of commitment by Keating, when Prime Minister, and the outright opposition by the Resource and Economic Ministers meant it was quietly ignored in following years as environment slipped from the public policy agenda.

This is not a simple story of Labor governments supporting and introducing climate change measures and the Howard Government resisting them or denying the existence of climate change. The story is more complex. The most active time on climate change was undoubtedly from 1987 to 1990 when Graham Richardson was Minister, environment organisations were active, and public interest in everything environmental was very high. During that period there was bipartisan agreement from the Liberal Party that the issue was significant and required action — at least this was the policy while Chris Puplick was Shadow Environment Minister. After the 1990 election, Ros Kelly became Environment Minister in the Labor Government but, without the unique negotiating skills of Richardson, environment did not have the same prominence. It was also a time of turmoil in the government as the Keating/Hawke leadership struggle dominated and the political fallout from the recession was felt.

After he became Prime Minister in 1992, Paul Keating actively tried to minimise Commonwealth involvement in environment issues. Proactive, progressive environmental action was no longer on the agenda. For example, the Keating Government abolished Commonwealth woodchip export controls and tried to divest itself of

concern for forestry issues. Soon after he became Prime Minister, the huge Rio Earth Summit on environmental sustainability was held, which produced action on environment and development, biological diversity and forest principles and set the agenda for much of the UN's work in the following decades. It also saw the ratification of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which later evolved into the Kyoto protocol. One hundred and seventy-two governments participated in the Summit, and 108 heads of state or government attended, including US President George Bush senior. However, notably, Australia's Prime Minister Keating chose not to attend.

From 1996 for over a decade under Howard, government inaction on climate change was the norm. Scientists, environment organisations and even some business organisations such as the Business Roundtable on Climate Change were angered, frustrated and saddened. The story of Australia's slide from being one of the international leaders on climate change in the late 1980s to one of its worst recalcitrants under the Howard Government has been well documented and explained by Guy Pearse in his book *High and Dry*. Pearse's book is important not just for the way it shows what he calls the 'greenhouse mafia' at work shaping Australia's policy during the Howard era, but because those forces are still operating. Pearse describes the 'greenhouse mafia' as representatives of the main carbon polluters who move between industry and government positions.⁵ I believe we see the effect of those forces in Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's current policy on climate change. Rudd was elected on a promise to take strong action, but current government policy is to reduce emissions by 5–15% by 2020, to provide free permits for major polluters and large compensation for industry that is not linked to international developments. This is an incredibly weak position. When we compare it to what was first proposed to Cabinet 20 years ago, we can only ponder on what might have been, if at that time we had begun reducing emissions by 20% of 1988 levels!

Endnotes

- 1 Toyne, P., & Balderstone, S. (2003). The environment. In S. Ryan & T. Bramston (Eds.), *The Hawke Government: A critical retrospective* (p. 170). Melbourne, Australia: Pluto Press.
- 2 Richardson, G. (1994). *Whatever it takes*. Sydney, Australia: Bantam Books.
- 3 Pearman, G.I. (1988). *Greenhouse: Planning for climate change*. Melbourne, Australia: CSIRO.
- 4 Lowe, I. (1989). *Living in the greenhouse*. Melbourne, Australia: Scribe.
- 5 Pearse, G. (2007). *High and dry: John Howard, climate change and the selling of Australia's future*. Melbourne, Australia: Viking.



Joan Staples is a Visiting Fellow in the Faculty of Law at the University of NSW. She was the Australian Conservation Foundation lobbyist in Canberra in the 1980s. She has worked on policy and advocacy for national NGOs in the area of environment, indigenous affairs, international development and consumers. Her academic work is on the role of civil society in promoting a healthy democracy.