

Australia's Foreign Policy Approach on Climate Change: Leader or Laggard?

Written by Elizabeth Feeney

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/04/15/australias-foreign-policy-approach-on-climate-change-leader-or-laggard/>

ELIZABETH FEENEY, APR 15 2015

More than 120 heads of state and government convened in New York at the United Nations 2014 Climate Summit, to renew their commitments to developing a binding, equitable, and ambitious global agreement at the international climate conference scheduled for Paris in 2015. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop attended the Summit on behalf of the current Australian Coalition Government. She outlined Australia's direct action policy for climate change, stating that the nation was "striking the responsible balance of safeguarding economic growth while taking action on climate change" (Bishop 2014), as well as calling for decisive action "especially from the world's biggest emitters" (Bishop 2014), adding to the mounting evidence that Australia is increasingly eschewing environmental leadership responsibilities in favor of laggardship (Eckersley and McDonald 2014). At best, Bishop's statement at the Summit demonstrated that Australia is "not to be considered to be among the most helpful of international actors" (O'Malley 2014) on climate change. At worst, it signaled the potential for long-lasting harm to Australia's international reputation as a constructive middle power.

Yet Australia's position and foreign policy approach to climate change defies both simple characterisation and glib explanation. Rather, Australia's engagement with the international climate change regime highlights complex dilemmas embedded within the very nature of the issue itself. As a truly diabolical transnational policy problem (Garnaut 2011: 34), climate change represents an exceedingly contested and divisive subject of political debate. In order to explain Australia's approach to global climate change, and in particular its climate diplomacy, it is essential to acknowledge the numerous factors that have conditioned its response. Firstly, an examination of the science and politics of climate change must be undertaken in order to properly situate Australia as a case study within the global climate regime. Next, an examination of the convoluted relationship between domestic and international considerations is necessary in order to further map and decipher Australia's foreign policy engagement (McDonald 2007: 385). It is impossible to fully understand the specific difficulties for Australia's implementation of domestic climate change policy measures to meet international obligations without assessing the national episteme and material conditions that underlie the construction of national interest (Bulkeley 2001: 164). It is this array of domestic dynamics that contribute to the ongoing politicisation of climate change and the relative continuity of policy options in recent years sought by both Coalition and Australian Labor Party (ALP) governments, despite a partisan gulf in respective party rhetoric and ideology. Finally, as the interface between national priorities and global environmental action, Australia's climate diplomacy presents a mixed history of action and inaction. Despite differing approaches to the international climate regime, it can nevertheless be seen Australia has ultimately pursued an increasingly narrow diplomatic agenda, due to perceived tensions between the construction of national interest and broader foreign policy obligations, particularly by the current Coalition Government.

The Science and Politics of Climate Change

Over the past five decades, the science behind climate change has alerted humanity to the threat posed to the basic elements of life by global warming, such as food and water scarcity, access to land and large-scale population displacement, spread of disease, and increased risk of conflict (Taylor 2013: 17). However, the politics behind the global climate regime have yet to fully address the enormity of the problem. Climate issues are not a recent addition to international politics, with environmental imperatives emerging in the 1960s, compelling policymakers to engage

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with the environment as a broad policy issue requiring attention (Carter 2007: 174).

Governments initially viewed the issue simply as a regrettable side effect of positive economic growth, rather than as a fundamental issue embedded in the political-institutional configuration of the contemporary liberal democratic state. The ideological commitment to endless growth that was endorsed by neoclassical economic theory was embraced as a central pillar of modernisation, which helped reinforce the assumptions made by policymakers that environmental issues were a new and separate policy issue, rather than the result of the complex interdependency between political systems and the ecosystem (Purdey 2010: 3). Policy responses were thus largely reactionary, serving to address symptoms only, rather than causes, inevitably leading to a shortfall in policy prescriptions and actual outcome. Consequently, the state of the environment worsened throughout the 1970s, with trends demonstrating a broad decline in key pollution indicators across advanced industrialised states (Carter 2007: 176).

In the years since, the science on climate change has continued to develop findings on the extent of global warming, the scale and significance of the risks posed, and the extent to which humanity is responsible. Recent studies and statistical analysis have found that the accumulation of anthropogenic global greenhouse gas emissions are 99.99% likely to have caused anomalously warm global temperatures over a 304 consecutive month period, with solar radiation found to be an insignificant contributor to global warming (Kokic, Crimp and Howden 2014), an argument advanced by numerous other studies (Allen *et al.* 2000, Benestad and Schmidt 2009, Medvigy and Beaulieu 2012). Yet despite the overwhelming scientific consensus on both the severe scale and human causes behind climate change, global political action remains acrimonious in the face of a general unwillingness to compromise on immediate demands for economic growth, development, and poverty eradication.

The difficulty of balancing economic needs and consistent growth with environmental concerns is a key sticking point for many states entrenched in international negotiations (Sinha 2010: 398).

Domestic Dynamics and International Considerations

Australia, in particular, is located centrally on the uncomfortable nexus of fiscal prosperity and environmental preservation (McDonald 2012: 391). With a long and mixed history of climate diplomacy and a particular vulnerability to the effects of climate change (Eckersley and McDonald 2014: 230), environmental issues and realities have become an economic and political lightning rod in the Australian foreign policy agenda. As a disproportionately large per capita contributor to greenhouse gas emissions among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the policies implemented by the Australian government in recent years have arguably pursued short-term trade interests, rather than establishing a progressive position on climate (Hamilton 2001: xiii).

Meanwhile, public opinion on climate change has remained unfathomably divisive and fickle (McDonald 2013). Australian activism on climate change as a traditionally constructive middle power has ebbed and flowed over the past few decades, though its ambition and engagement with the international climate regime can largely be surmised as self-serving. Most notably, both the Coalition and Labor governments have approached respective international commitments to climate change with an agenda dictated by the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (Elliott 2011: 214). Common but differentiated responsibilities was a central stumbling block in the negotiation of the Kyoto Protocol, with the Prime Minister John Howard's government arguing forcibly for lenient national targets due to Australia's particular economic reliance on primary industries and fossil fuel exports (Australia constitutes the world's second largest coal exporter), against a backdrop of burgeoning population growth (Papadikis 2002: 267).

Common but Differentiated Responsibility

Ultimately, this proved successful; Australia was granted an increase of 8% in emissions, though former Prime Minister John Howard rebuffed ratification of the Protocol in the final stages of negotiation as a matter of national interest (McDonald 2012: 394). Howard stated that the Kyoto Protocol would undermine Australia's economic prosperity, trade competitiveness and employment growth, in a statement that carries strong parallels with current Prime Minister Tony Abbott's remarks on Australia's ability to meet its international climate obligations "...without a

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job-destroying economy-wrecking carbon tax” as a policy tool (Sturmer 2014). The approach to the Kyoto Protocol taken by Howard stands as the clearest signal on the government’s indication that domestic policy, and thus international climate action, would be dictated by national interest, rather than engagement with multilateralism and international agreement.

This step away from middle power diplomacy was reversed when Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s ALP government was elected to federal office in 2007. One of the first articulations of the Labor government’s multilateralist model was to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, and the large delegation at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Bali conference in 2008, led by Rudd himself, signaled the desire to return Australia to an image of good international citizenry (McDonald 2012: 395). Yet though the ALP platform under the leadership of both Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard spoke of climate change as a vital foreign policy objective, Australia’s engagement with the international regime was still framed in terms of the common but differentiated principle, with former Minister for Climate Change Penny Wong stating that Labor Australia would not increase its commitment to a 5 per cent reduction in emissions until “the level of global ambition becomes sufficiently clear, including both the specific targets of advanced economies and the verifiable emissions reduction actions of China and India” (Wong 2010), and reaffirming that Australia would “do no more and no less than the rest of the world” (Wong 2010).

Despite a clear change in rhetoric, and a pivot back towards multilateralism under Labor stewardship, much of Australia’s foreign policy toward climate change remained firmly constituted in terms of a national interest closely linked to maintaining economic prosperity. Domestically, environmental values remained marginal to the policy process, thus stifling Australia’s ability to reconcile international obligations with domestic politics, irrespective of government ideology (Elliott 2011: 219). It was deemed politically inexpedient by both ALP and Coalition governments to compromise on international trade competitiveness, positive employment rates and overall fiscal growth, despite the growing demand both domestically and internationally for effective adaptation action and climate risk management.

Domestic Dynamics in a Global Context

Australia’s reluctance to embrace the leadership responsibilities expected from an OECD nation in the global climate regime, despite significant shifts in Australian climate diplomacy over three successive governments, suggests a foreign policy continuity informed by domestic ideational and material conditions. In order to truly understand Australia’s foreign policy engagement with the climate change regime, it is important to “open the black box of the state, permitting an indepth overview of the myriad forces of power, influence and interest” (Smith, Hadfield and Dunne 2012: 8).

It is increasingly apparent that key norms in Australia have been particularly influential in conditioning and balancing the foreign policy responses relative to national and international goals and environmental concerns. As mentioned earlier, Australia is a nation rich in vast reserves of export commodities such as natural gas, uranium and coal, with an economy heavily dependent on fossil fuels for electricity generation (Head *et al.* 2014: 175). Further, most Australians accept that climate change is a real and occurring phenomena, though like other Western nations, a decline in climate change belief is observable, with main factors suggested to be the global financial crisis and the inability of Copenhagen climate summit to arrive at a robust international agreement (Pietsch and McAllister 2010, Tranter 2011).

These beliefs interact with the socioeconomic structures of the Australian nation in numerous and complex ways. Most notably, the normative commitment to traditional developmentalist policies, constructed in terms of endless growth, has proved very resistant to change. Compounding Australia’s development imperative is the powerful global structural trend towards international economic competition as a hegemonic discourse (Stevenson 2009: 170).

Consequently, successive governments have sought to capitalise on Australia’s non-renewable national capital, particularly its fossil fuel commodities, stimulating economic growth by removing export controls and encouraging free trade commitments vis-à-vis energy resource exports (Head *et al.* 2014: 182). The epistemic commitment to resource-based growth, demonstrably evident in the policies of successive Coalition and Labor governments,

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assume that "Australia can continue to achieve prosperity as a major fossil fuel user and supplier" (Eckersley and McDonald 2014: 240) without repercussion, and thus represents a substantial obstacle in the implementation of foreign policy initiatives that are consistent with an international commitment to collective action on achieving a low-carbon world. There is a clear contestation and incongruence between the normative structures of climate governance, and the domestic conditions that informs Australian economic orientation and national episteme. For a nation that has a foreign policy tradition of middle power diplomacy, good international citizenship is problematised when considered alongside the framework of economic liberalisation, security and prosperity (Dunne and Langlois 2014: 226). Though the Howard, Rudd/Gillard and Abbott Governments have had distinctive partisan responses to the problems posed by climate change, the lines of continuity underpinning respective foreign policy engagement are drawn around the idea of 'Australian Values' that are embedded within a traditional developmentalist discourse.

The obligation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions emerges as a direct contradiction to a national episteme supported by domestic material conditions, prompting policymakers to push for an insistence on differentiated and preferential treatment, rather than a movement towards low-carbon alternatives. While China and other big coal exporters move towards adopting carbon-friendly policies in order to meet emissions caps, Australia remains stubbornly recalcitrant, insisting on unique demographic, geographic and economic features as merit for preserving the status quo, demonstrating clearly the disconnect between domestic conditions and the goals and principles of the climate regime (Eckersley and McDonald 2014: 240).

Assessing Australia's Climate Diplomacy

As the interface between national interest and collective global action, climate diplomacy is utilised as the means through which governments may ensure national priorities are reflected in international climate change agreements. The absence of an extensive and nuanced international regime dedicated to limiting climate risk below perilous levels "represents one of the greatest on-going failures of modern diplomacy" (Mabey, Gallagher and Born 2013: 5), and one in which Australia plays an unhelpful role. Despite a largely poor scorecard overall, Australia's climate diplomacy has shown a mixed story over time (Eckersley and McDonald 2014: 242), even if the signals of the current Coalition government's commitment to action on climate change are worrying at best. The desire to be seen as a constructive middle power certainly shaped the Australian governments prior to the conservative Howard years (1996-2007).

During 1983-19912, former Prime Minister Bob Hawke and Foreign Minister Gareth Evans established Australia as a nation leading the way towards international agreement on climate, undertaking policy initiatives designed toward establishing an interim target for greenhouse gas emissions, with Hawke's successor, Paul Keating, announcing that his Government would not risk Australia being insulated from any international agreements on emissions reductions (McDonald 2013). Though despite this positive rhetoric, it should be noted that Hawke outlined few major domestic policy initiatives for tackling climate change, and Keating argued that Australian emissions would be reduced only "wherever economically efficient" (in Hamilton 2001: 34). The larger policy stance nevertheless painted a strong commitment to multilateralism, and active foreign policy engagement allowed Australia to initially play a constructive role in shaping the climate regime.

The subsequent Howard Government, however, sent quite a different global message; it rejected the legitimacy of the international agreements that the former governments had supported, representing a sharp departure from progressive overtures in favour of non-cooperation. With a foreign policy agenda dictated by more traditional conceptualisations of statecraft and national interest, Howard directed a withdrawal from multilateral discourse on collective action, preferring instead to protect Australia's security as an energy-intensive economy (Elliott 2011: 217). The Rudd/Gillard government saw the return of an ALP policy manifesto of internationalist ideology and idealism over a period from 2007-2013, with a commitment to "rebuild Australia's reputation as a world leader on international environmental issues" (ALP 2007: 241). Any positive international engagement obtained during this period has since been largely overturned by current Prime Minister Tony Abbott's Coalition Government, with a policy agenda that has once again returned Australia to a nation of concern.

Yet climate diplomacy goes beyond partisan rhetoric and international negotiations, and commitments of practical assistance and economic aid to countries vulnerable to environmental degradation has been a prominent tool in

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Australia's foreign policy platform for climate change action (Elliott 2011: 217). In its role as a middle power, Australian foreign policy performance is of particular importance in determining status and influence. Rudd's distinctively ambitious middle power agenda on climate diplomacy promised to deliver on increased aid expenditure, share Australia's technical knowledge on climate change with regional partners and released a strategy entitled 'Engaging our Pacific Neighbours on Climate Change' (DCC 2009). Aid, in various forms, was to constitute the cornerstone for Australian engagement within the region, holding true to understandings that middle powers seek to exert influence at the regional level (Hawksley 2009: 115).

Recognising the collective action problems posed by a lack of international consensus, Rudd appropriately observed that the argument for leading by example was a compelling diplomatic path for policymakers through which to pioneer regional climate change cooperation. Yet his failure to meet words with deeds and transcend the political risks inherent to the implementation of policies with uncertain, disputed and long-term payoffs ultimately contributed to his political downfall (Beeson 2011: 573). The Australian Labor Party under former Prime Minister Julia Gillard, whilst less vocal on clear diplomatic objectives on climate change, remained dedicated to the provision of financial and technological assistance to developing countries aimed at adapting to climate variation, particularly in the Pacific region. Further, Gillard was able to establish a far-reaching domestic carbon tax as part of the Clean Energy Package in 2011, which triggered a steady decline in greenhouse gas emissions and enjoyed growing public support (Eckersley and McDonald 2014: 247). More importantly, it represented the inclusion of a "moral interest in the health and well-being of other people, future generations and the environment" (Hamilton 2001: xii) into Australia's national priorities, and an important step towards climate policy harmonisation between the domestic and international.

Sadly, moves toward climate leadership have since been impeded by the election of Abbott's Coalition Government, who discarded both carbon pricing and Australia's aid commitments in a rejection of middle power multilateralism. Favored instead was a return to a national interest defined in terms of jobs growth and economic affluence that largely reflected the status quo of the Howard Government. Again, it appeared that domestic conditions would take precedence over an obligation to multilateral arrangements and international agreements (Beeson 2011: 572). The Coalition government's aid budget for 2013-2014 implemented A\$650 million in cuts, in addition to reducing funding for cross-regional environmental programs to A\$500,000 from the previous A\$6 million allocated by Labor (Davies 2014).

Further signals of disengagement with climate diplomacy and commitment to action were sent by Abbott's decision to renege on Australia's pledge to contribute to the Green Climate Fund at the 2013 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Sri Lanka, and by the lack of Australian senior federal representation at the UNFCCC climate summit in Warsaw (MacLellan 2014). Conversely, the presence of Foreign Minister Julie Bishop to the 2014 Climate Summit in New York was still met with widespread cynicism. The absence of Prime Minister Tony Abbott was a telling indication when contrasted against the presence of other world leaders, including President of the United States Barack Obama, who suggested that climate change "will define the contours of this century" (McCormick 2014) more than any other single issue. His presence held a particular weight at a time when the US Administration engaging in airstrikes carried out against extremist militants in Iraq and Syria. Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, meanwhile, indicated again that Australia's commitment to a post-2020 emissions target would come only after a thorough review of its trading partners and competitors (Climate Institute 2014). Finally, the refusal to include climate change on the agenda at the upcoming G20 meeting in Queensland further demonstrates the reluctance to balance conflicting economic and diplomatic goals, signaling the low priority assigned to environmental issues among Australia's national foreign policy interests.

Australia: Major Player in a Zero-Sum Game?

If the starting point for positive climate diplomacy is underpinned by engaging in fruitful contestation of national interests, a clear approach to climate risk mitigation and efforts to secure an effective global climate regime that will assist in the provision of tangible national benefits, then Australia is currently a major player in a zero-sum game. Despite the persuasive argument for a relative policy continuity between ALP and Coalition governments, notwithstanding vastly different partisan rhetoric and policy rationales (Elliott 2011: 222), the environmental activism and symbolism associated with the Rudd and Gillard Governments has discernibly been eroded by the current

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Government's abandonment of a course of meaningful action through which to address the international climate regime (Mabey, Gallagher and Born 2013: 42). The external projection of Australia's existing reluctance to shoulder leadership responsibilities is a demonstration of a clear return to the perceived tension between internationally competitive high carbon industries on the one hand, and climate mitigation action on the other. In a retreat from its middle power foreign policy tradition, the Coalition government has comprehended little importance in the rules and norms of the international climate regime, drawing instead upon a narrow interpretation of state interests.

Conclusion

Climate change is among one of the most complex problems faced by world politics, involving numerous factors that make the construction of a successful foreign policy deeply problematic; complex scientific and technocratic knowledge, the need for effective global agreements and multilateral engagement, ethical dilemmas of intergeneration equity, and widely diverging interests (Victor 2004: v). As a nation that is both acutely susceptible to the risks posed by climate change, and one of the highest per capita emitters of greenhouse gases in the world, Australia is demonstrative of the numerous foreign policy dilemmas posed by environmental concerns (Eckersley and McDonald 2014: 230). While the science is settled, the political games continue to play out on the international stage, stalling meaningful agreements and negotiations.

Despite its mixed record of action and inaction, Australian political leaders, irrespective of party ideology, have been fairly critiqued as wayward in terms of both a genuine approach to climate diplomacy, and the implementation of a genuine foreign policy framework on climate change action (McDonald 2013: 455). The diffidence displayed by the political leadership manifests in an environmental, economic and diplomatic price to be paid by Australia as a nation. Yet the reluctance of both ALP and Coalition governments to engage with the international climate regime highlights more than just the complex relationship between ideological differences towards bilateralism and multilateralism and good international citizenry. Importantly, Australia's foreign policy behavior and climate diplomacy is indicative of the complex interplay between national politics and international dynamics, rather than a singular focus on either domestic or external factors (Elliott 2011: 211). Most significantly, Australia's domestic ideational and material structures have informed a national episteme that favors an expanding exploitation of natural capital, which is largely incongruent with the obligations of international climate governance.

The need to reconcile environmental objectives with a national interest defined largely by economic goals has been a central preoccupation in Australian domestic and foreign policy, which translates into a relatively poor engagement with international obligations (Bulkeley 2001: 157). Though Australia's climate diplomacy has often outperformed when compared with domestic initiatives, the current Coalition Government has thus far proved itself unwilling to further engage with policies consistent with long-term sustainability, and has firmly retreated from a strong narrative for rigorous climate action. Diplomacy should align climate with other national interest priorities, thus bridging the artificial divide between the national and the international (Mabey, Gallagher and Born 2013: 13). Until the political leadership of Australia is able to transcend the current conformity to domestic and international policies that support only short-term trade interests, political polarisation and conflict over climate change is likely to continue in the foreseeable future.

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Date written: October 2014