

Foreword

Forty years ago, I analysed Australia's future energy alternatives in the very first issue of *Social Alternatives* (Lowe 1977). It then became clear that climate change was significant and would demand a new approach to energy supply and use (Lowe 1989). Vested interests and right-wing politicians have prolonged the fossil fuel industry, largely through carefully orchestrated misinformation, but rapid change is now evident. The 2019-20 bushfires demonstrated the scale of the threat. While an optimist might think that even Coalition governments will have to bow to the inevitable, the fixation with growth remains a fundamental obstacle.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced even the ideologues in the Morrison government to listen to health experts and base their responses on expert advice. There was broad agreement about the threat to human health. If anyone doubted the risks, there was no denying the results of expert advice having been denied by elected buffoons like Donald Trump and Boris Johnson. So why isn't the similarly concerted advice from climate scientists producing a response? By 1997, the evidence convinced the global community to conclude the Kyoto Protocol, despite the opposition of energy-intensive industries, the commercial world generally and a few rogue states like Saudi Arabia and Australia. In 2020, there is no longer any serious challenge to the science showing that human activity is changing the global climate in a wide range of ways. The 2016 Paris agreement was recognition by political leaders that the problem demands concerted global action to slow climate change. A small group still say the science is uncertain, but a recent review pointed out the obvious fact that there is no coherent alternative theory (Benestad et al, 2016).

Coalition governments have consistently acted as if the issue of climate change could safely be ignored. The Howard government's studied inaction became an obvious electoral liability as the 2007 election approached. Kevin Rudd was elected with a clear mandate for action, having declared that climate change was the biggest moral challenge of our time, but his proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme failed to pass the Senate. Malcolm Turnbull, as Leader of the Opposition, was prepared to support the plan, but this led to his being deposed by disgruntled Liberals opposed to the whole idea of responding to climate change. Tony Abbott became leader, committed to frustrating the government's plan. Elected in 2013, he tried to roll back all the measures introduced by the short-lived Gillard government. When Malcolm Turnbull overthrew Abbott, many hoped he would act to slow climate change, but it soon became apparent that he would not tackle this contentious issue. Appeasing those in his government that still don't accept the science, Turnbull had no coherent response to climate change. When he was in turn overthrown by Scott Morrison, the Coalition continued a strategy of masterly inaction. Ministers assured voters in regional Queensland that coal still has a bright

future, supporting proposals to develop new mines in the Galilee Basin and even suggesting that the government could subsidise a new coal-fired power station in northern Queensland! The world is still on track for much greater increases in average temperature than two degrees, while Australia has no strategy to achieve our inadequate Paris target.

The community has moved on, in Australia as in other countries. About two million households now have solar panels providing some or all of their electricity, while about a million use solar hot water. South Australia now gets more than 50 per cent of its electricity from renewables and exports its surplus. The eastern States grid got the majority of its power from renewables at midday on Easter Saturday. However, the Morrison government is still acting as if science can be ignored and growth promoted. The first global systems models showed nearly fifty years ago that there are limits to the scale of economic activity that the natural systems of the planet can accommodate (Meadows et al 1972). The “standard world model” of *The Limits to Growth*, based on extrapolating the growth trends that existed in 1970, led to economic and ecological decline after 2030. Recent comparisons with forty years of data show that the global community is still on that gloomy trajectory (Turner 2013). Despite detailed explanations of the environmental emergency we face, politicians still behave as if the problems caused by growth in human consumption can be safely ignored or, more improbably, solved by even more growth. The persistent delusion is that all our social and environmental problems can be solved by economic growth. While the Coalition more obviously acts on behalf of the business community, ALP governments are also committed to promoting growth. Unless we can escape from the toxic meme of growth, there is no realistic prospect of slowing climate change and shaping a future that could, at least in principle, be sustainable.

References

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