

GOVERNANCE

HOW TO EXPLAIN: AUSTRALIA'S LAGGING CLIMATE POLICY

Fiona Hurrey, CS2P member

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FOREWORD

This article is published as part of a collaboration between the Climate Security & Peace Project (CS2P) of the NGO CliMates, and the Climate, energy & security program of the French institute of international and strategic affairs (IRIS). This collaboration aims to support the engagement and visibility of young research fellows working on the impact of climate change, and other forms of environmental degradation on human security, by offering a supervision contributing to the development of their competencies.

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Composed of a team of researchers, students and professionals from diverse fields and backgrounds, the **Climate Security and Peace Project (CS2P)** aims to raise awareness and develop knowledge on how environmental degradation and climate change contribute to the emergence and dynamics of risks and threats to human security, peace, and international stability.

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The IRIS's **Climate, Energy, Security Programme** analyses the geopolitical and security issues of climate change and energy transition. This programme is structured around the Observatory of Climate Change Impacts on Defense and Security, the Observatory for the Security of Energy Flows and Materials, contracts led on behalf of the DGRIS of the Ministry of the Armed Forces, and the GENERATE Project (Renewable Energies Geopolitics and Future Studies on Energy Transition), jointly managed with the Ifpen, and supported by the French National Research Agency.

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the factors driving Australia's continued climate inaction and its resulting reputation as an international climate 'laggard' despite major vulnerabilities to climate change. Increased frequency and intensity of severe weather events such as bushfires, floods and drought, and environmental degradation, such as biodiversity loss and coral bleaching, are already visible. Regardless, coal is Australia's main source of domestic energy production, it is one of the world's largest coal exporters, the Federal Government has no clear plan for even a long-term phase out of fossil fuels, and carbon emission reduction targets remain both unambitious and unrevised. This article finds that **current policies are inconsistent with the concerns of the Australian population, industries, the private sector, and local governments**, who are leading climate action in the country. With domestic and international pressures mounting, it concludes that **the question of a significant change in climate stance is not 'if', but 'when', and what the future consequences of inaction up until this point will be.**

KEY WORDS: Climate change, climate action, Australia.

INTRODUCTION

Australia has long been called a land of fire and flooding rains, meaning that climate change poses a variety of security risks to the vast island country. **Severe bushfires, extreme heat, droughts, coastal erosion exacerbated by sea level rise, extreme flooding, and loss of biodiversity** are just some of the symptoms already visible. Despite this, Australia remains a climate laggard in the international community, failing to adopt adequate - let alone significant - climate and environmental policies. The country trails behind its European and American counterparts in both acknowledgement and ambition. **How is it that this democratic country remains suspended in climate inaction despite its major vulnerabilities, considerable wealth and resources, international pressure to mobilise, and growing voter concerns about the issue?**

This article will briefly outline main elements of the Australian context, discussing major factors sustaining climate inaction as well as those pushing for change. It first locates the country within international climate politics before discussing unique environmental and security challenges posed by changing climate. Next, it considers past and current domestic policies, domestic pressures in the form of increasing public concern, and the limiting effects of the media. Finally, it highlights the squeeze of non-Federal government and industry domestic pressures alongside those from international sources.

Australian national climate policy is entangled in a web woven by lobbies with vested interests, the media, and opportunistic political actors. These forces have been highly successful in spreading misinformation and uncertainty, encouraging

climate denialism through the minimisation or erasure of language related to climate change, and exacerbating a civil political divide through the othering of different demographics. **However, the Australian Federal Government faces rapidly increasing domestic and international pressure to take major, meaningful action.** The desperately needed shift in governance towards a deliberate, ambitious climate policy appears inevitable. **Given the increasing urgency of the climate crisis, the question of 'when' has become more relevant than 'if' for both Australian and international audiences.**

Australia's international reputation as a climate laggard was constructed over past years through a **lack of domestic action, feeble international commitments, and questionable carbon accounting methods.** Under the Paris Agreement, Australia set a target of reducing national emissions from 26-28 percent below 2005 levels by 2030, a goal which remained unchanged in the Australian Government's 2020 update on its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) [1], [2]. This lack of ambition is made even starker when compared to revised targets of other wealthy nations, such as the United States' (US) goal under President Joe Biden to reduce net greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 50-52 percent below 2005 levels in 2030 [3], [4, p. 1]. Australia's continued refusal to collaborate was visible throughout the much-anticipated COP26 held in Glasgow this month. Not only did the country refuse to join over 100 others in signing a pledge to cut methane emissions by 30 percent by 2030, but they also used the event to actively promote new oil and gas projects, and to oppose the inclusion of the phasing out of fossil fuels in the conference's final report [5]-[7]. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has previously justified frugal emissions targets by placing emphasis on 'doing' rather than 'promising',

a symbolic declaration carrying little weight in context of the country's current trajectory [8], [9].

Australia has the highest per capita carbon emissions of all OECD countries, is the world's biggest exporter of coal, and continues to rely heavily on fossil fuel electricity generation without a clear plan for transition to renewables [10, p. 18]. In 2019, **79 percent** of electricity produced in Australia was generated from fossil fuels [11]. The Australian Federal Government has repeatedly insisted that Australia is well positioned to challenge climate change and is a global leader on climate change action. Insisting that the country is on track to meet its meagre targets, they previously relied on the 'carryover' of emission credits from the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, an accounting method which is neither relevant nor used by other members of the international community [12, p. 5], [13]. While Australia has ceased using such arguments, **the Federal Government was reluctant to adopt a net zero by 2050 target until recently**, despite examples set by close allies such as the US [3]. Furthermore, government projections of GHG emissions for the coming decades **exclude agriculture and forestry, as well as exported Australian coal** [14]. Given Australia's staggering role in exacerbating the climate crisis through carbon emissions, alongside its significant wealth which provides the facility to take drastic climate action, Australian climate policy is disproportionately complacent. This is even more absurd when considering Australia's acute vulnerabilities in traditional and human security terms.

THE LAND OF FIRE AND FLOODING RAINS: AUSTRALIA'S VULNERABILITY TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Australia's vulnerability to climate change was laid dramatically visible for the world during events such as the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires, the 2021 Eastern Australian Floods, and ongoing mass-bleachings of the Great Barrier Reef. The cost of these events is substantial: biodiversity, environmental resilience, community resilience, infrastructure, livelihoods, human life, and economics have all suffered immensely as a direct consequence [10, p. 28]. The release of the Royal Commission's final report into the Black Summer Bushfires confirmed two truths that climate change activists have been asserting for decades, that **1) this 'once in a lifetime' event was but a 'glimpse' of more frequent, extreme bushfires and weather events to come [15], and 2) that the increase of frequency and intensity of these weather events is irrevocably linked to climate change [16, p. 22].** The Royal Commission's findings echoed those of countless reports and warnings, including the CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology's biannual State of the Climate Reports [17], [18]. They highlighted the direct and indirect costs of natural disasters, listing "significant, and often long-term, social impacts, including death and injury and impacts on employment, education, community networks, health and wellbeing" [16, pp. 68-69]. The CSIRO stressed the importance of investment into climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction, predicting that **every AU\$1 invested directly results in savings of AU\$2 to AU\$11 in reconstruction and post-disaster recovery costs** [16, p. 406].

Furthermore, it is projected that many Australian natural systems, such as the Great Barrier Reef and Kakadu National Park, will exceed critical temperature thresholds as global warming reaches 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels [19]. As of today, warming has already reached approximately 1°C and continues to rise at an increasing rate [20]. **The often cited ‘worst case’ of a 3°C increase would see most ecological systems changed unrecognisably with catastrophic loss of habitat and biodiversity** [19, p. 9]. These dire images of the future carry an implied threat against all manner of life, stretching far beyond the politically and geographically drawn borders of Australia. The gravity of this is not reflected in national policy.

Threats posed by climate change to Australia are not limited to its geographical borders, as they also take the form of regional and international security issues. Shortages of food and potable water, depleted fish stocks, and natural disasters have devastating effects including regional destabilisation, increased risk of conflict, and mass displacement.

Already, the estimated average of people displaced from climate-related disasters on an annual basis since 2008 is estimated to be 22.5 million to 24 million internationally [13]. Neighbouring Pacific Island countries are particularly affected by the crisis, seeing increased coastal erosion, coastal flooding and sea level rise, and tropical cyclones [21, p. 39]. In 2018, Pacific Island Leaders defined climate change “...as the single greatest threat to the livelihoods, security and wellbeing of the peoples of the Pacific...” within the Pacific Islands Forum’s Boe Declaration [22]. **Given Australia’s responsibilities as a regional power, wealthy country, and major contributor to global carbon emissions, supporting Pacific nations and other particularly affected nations would be to act in its own security interests as traditionally defined.** However, the Federal Government’s response to Pacific Island nation leaders in the form of its Pacific Step-up program has been widely criticised for both erasing and minimising language related to climate change and for failing to take adequate direct action [23].

Coral bleaching and following degradation at Lizard Island in 2016
Credit: The Ocean Agency Image Bank



The Australian Defence Force has taken a contrasting stance to the Federal Government's tendency to erase concerns over climate change, instead framing it as a serious issue. For years, it has recognised the traditional security risks of climate change, noting increased demand for humanitarian aid missions, increased conflicts, changing international geopolitics and global security environments such as in the Arctic and Antarctica, and an increase in illicit trade[24, p. 16]. These risks were identified in Australia's 2016 Defence White Paper, 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, and again echoed in 2019 by Australia's Defence Force chief during a private address[24]-[26]. The Defence Force places a clear emphasis on the need for adaptation and mitigation within its diverse functions, noting the strain that the consequences of changing climate will increasingly place on resources and missions [24]. Despite the clarity of these threats to Australia, the pressure of regional neighbour states, and growing lucidity from the Australian Defence Force, their urgency has not translated into responsible domestic climate governance.

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AUSTRALIA'S DOMESTIC CLIMATE POLITICS

A democratic country, Australian politics is locked in bi-partisan governance between two right-wing parties, the Liberal National Party (LNP) and Australian Labor Party (ALP), of which the former is more conservative than the latter. The LNP currently holds government under the leadership of Prime Minister Scott Morrison, a man who once brought a lump of coal into Parliament to underline his support for the fossil fuel industry [27]. Indeed, **Australia remains heavily reliant on fossil fuels for electricity generation, with coal accounting for approximately 75 percent and gas approximately 16 percent** [28]. While Europe has largely relied upon nuclear generation as its preferred source for the transition to renewable energies, discussion of nuclear sourcing is strongly taboo in Australian politics and society despite the country's significant uranium reserves [29]. Instead, the Morrison Government has pushed to extend the closure dates of coal-powered electricity generation plants set by their owners and **endorsed 'natural' gas and 'clean coal' as its preferred method of economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic** [32, pp. 14-18], [33]. In 2020-21, the Morrison Government spent AU\$10.3 billion on subsidising fossil fuels. This means that every minute, AU\$19,686 of Government funding and taxpayer money was received by the fossil fuel industry. This colossal sum amounts to more than was spent on the Australian Army in the same year [34], [35]. National climate policy wasn't always so complacent. In 2011, the ALP introduced a carbon taxing mechanism within the Clean Energy Act and was considered to be an example in climate policy internationally [36]. The policy was short-lived due to an intensive LNP campaign against the 'Carbon Tax' which branded it as

an “...attack on [the public’s] cost of living...” [37]. It was repealed in 2012 by the elected Liberal Government and PM Tony Abbott [38]. Any possibility of a future carbon pricing mechanism has been heavily hindered by the success of the LNP’s ruthless political campaign which left the Australian **public largely hostile** at the time and **politicians wary to this day** of broaching the subject. **Similar arguments of unaffordable energy prices, unemployment, and consumer and regional economic losses have been used repeatedly in domestic politics, particularly when discussing the transition from fossil fuels to renewables** [39, p. 7]. While the ALP suggests a more progressive climate stance if they were to be elected in the upcoming Federal election, which is to be called before or in 2022, the standard for action has been set shockingly low. This inaction has not gone unnoticed by Australian voters.

The lack of climate governance in Australia contrasts with the increasing concern of voters as they learn more about the climate crisis, as well as those who have experienced first-hand climate-intensified events such as the 2019/2020 Black Summer fires. The Australia Institute’s 2020 and 2021 Climate of the Nation reports revealed that **Australians are increasingly in favour of strong climate action and the phase-out of old coal plants. Furthermore, a record 75 percent** of Australians were found to be ‘concerned’ about climate change[10], [32, p. 36].

"A record 75 percent of Australians were found to be ‘concerned’ about climate change."

This trend was confirmed in countless other surveys including a 2021 Lowy Institute poll which found that **74 percent of Australians agree that ‘the benefits of taking further action on climate change will outweigh the costs’** [40]. Even studies conducted by the mining industry show a clear and recent decline in public goodwill towards the fossil fuel industry [41, p. 8]. Of all Australians, younger participants and those who have been affected directly by natural disasters are consistently more likely to support increased action. Youth led movements and groups, such as the Australian branch of Fridays for Future, School Strike 4 Climate, and the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) have been particularly active in the space. In May 2021, a Federal Court case brought by a group of schoolchildren formally declared that the **Australian Government has a ‘duty to take reasonable care’ that youth will not be harmed or killed due to increased carbon emissions** from future approvals of coal mine projects [42]. Although this shift in opinion and increasing concern is encouraging, it has so far failed to elicit a proportionate response from the Federal Morrison Government. In October 2021, the Federal Environmental Minister approved another coal mine extension, the third new coal project within the span of a single month [43]. The Federal Government continues to avoid and censor language related to climate change, therefore minimising and trivialising related threats. This lack of response has the potential to threaten votes for the LNP in the upcoming election, conversely providing an opportunity for the opposing Labor Party (ALP). The ALP is pushed into this space not only by the current vacuum created by the absence of policy on the subject, but also by public interest and historical partnerships with the more progressive, left-wing Greens Party [44]. However, **the ALP has so far failed to provide any encouraging evidence or promise that their campaign will include progressive climate policy** [45].

There is no guarantee that the shift in public opinion indicated by surveys will propel a swift or effective change in policy, especially considering the absence of action despite sustained public concern over the past several years. However, a rapidly growing majority of voter concern and their higher reprioritisation of climate policy sparked by extreme weather events and local and international movements places renewed pressure on all political parties.

Inaction by the Australian Federal Government, despite public support for climate policy, is encouraged by monopolised, right-wing media and lobbying by the fossil fuel industry [39, p. 9], [41, p. 5]. The result of these efforts is **public confusion, polarisation, and widespread misunderstanding of both the importance of coal to the Australian economy as well as the effects of transitioning to renewable energy sources.** A popular technique used by political leaders, media, and lobbies alike has been **the othering of different demographics and the deliberate exacerbation of a rural-metropolitan political divide.** Rural and regional communities are targeted by advertising campaigns promoting fossil fuels and 'clean coal' while warning about job loss caused by renewable energy projects. They are particularly present within communities close to mines[41, p. 6].

"A popular technique used by political leaders, media, and lobbies alike has been the othering of different demographics and the deliberate exacerbation of a rural-metropolitan political divide."

Through analysis of various Australian media publications, academics have identified three key arguments that are used against the renewable energy transition: **1) concern about domestic energy security, 2) the loss of rural jobs, and 3) international energy poverty arising from the reduction or removal of Australian coal from trade** [39, p. 4]. The Australia Institute found that Australians believed that the Australian coal industry was 23 times larger than it actually is, overestimating that it made up 12.3 per cent of the GDP as opposed to its actual contribution of 2.3 per cent in 2019-2020 [10, p. 21]. This is likely to be an intentional outcome given the large presence and stakes of fossil fuel lobbyists. Alongside these campaigns, metropolitan populations have been repeatedly labelled as disconnected, 'woke city-slickers' or 'greenies', by the media and politicians. When elected in 2019, Prime Minister Scott Morrison credited the 'quiet Australians' - these being the implied true Australians - who "...know that traditional sources of energy like coal and gas will be around for quite a while yet...". He promised that his government was not going to "...destroy our economy because of the extreme views of some"[46]. These highly successful political messages claim consistently and above all that fossil fuels are essential to the Australian economy, and that the transition to renewable energy sources is an unrealistic goal that only 'latte-sippers' can afford to prioritise. **Using polarising, fearmongering, and deliberately misleading campaigns, the Australian media, fossil fuel lobbies, and political leaders have even a false narrative with very real consequences for public understanding. This works to undermine democratic policy making and limit climate action.**

INCREASING PRESSURE FOR CHANGE

Domestic pressure is mounting on the Australian Government to announce more decisive climate policy not only from voters, but also from **states, territories and regional governments, industry, and the private sector**. The Federal Government only adopted a target of net-zero by 2050 in the week before COP26, being one of the last developed countries to do so [47]-[49]. However, the adoption of this target is operationally insignificant as it **simply places national targets in line with those that had already been set by all Australian state and territory governments** [48]. **Policymakers are being left behind by the market, with energy giants having pledged to meet a 2050 net zero target before the Federal Government, and investing heavily in renewables** [39, p. 13]. These changes are often hindered rather than encouraged by the Australian Government. For example, major Australian energy company AGL had scheduled the closure of its coal-fired Liddell Power Station in 2022 but extended this date after the Federal Government **applied pressure to delay closure or sell to another company**. The cited reason for this delay was the need for affordable electricity pricing and energy stability [50]. This clearly clashes with the stances of industry and business. The Business Council of Australia recently called for an **acceleration of decarbonisation, supporting a target of 46-50 percent emissions reductions by 2030** [51], [52]. Similarly, the agricultural sector, including high-profile industries traditionally important to Australia such as livestock, is pushing for an increase in climate action. The National Farmers Federation, a representative body of over 80,000 farmers, has called for a 2050 net zero emissions target [10].

Even more ambitiously, the Australian red meat sector set a 2030 carbon neutral target in 2017, going on to release a Carbon Neutral by 2030 'roadmap' in 2020[53], [54]. These actions do not guarantee that the Australian Federal Government will step up its climate policy, especially as past domestic pressures and trends have failed to do so even when coming from Government institutions such as the Australian Defence Force. However, **they do signify an understanding of the need to change practices in all sectors, as well as the mainstreaming of climate action in diverse areas of society**. The sustained presence of fossil fuel lobbies, conservative bipartisan government, and rareness of opportunities to vote for an alternative political party, **will continue to limit the swiftness and ambitiousness of change pushed by domestic forces**.

Australia's climate inaction hasn't gone unnoticed by the international community either. Other world leaders are proposing policies to pressure less ambitious countries into action, and **Australia is a clear target**. Before COP26, US, European, and UK diplomats met in Canberra multiple times to discuss how to convince Australia to lift its ambition [55]. This followed the European Parliament's vote to endorse the European Commission's proposal of CBAM, a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism. CBAM would see foreign imports of cement, iron and steel, aluminium, fertilisers, and electricity from countries with unpriced carbon, such as Australia, subject to increased taxes [56]. For Australia, this is likely to concern its primary metal manufacturing of alumina and aluminium which are highly reliant on coal and gas for production and make-up AU\$12 billion in international exports [57].

"Australia's climate inaction hasn't gone unnoticed by the international community either."

Further highlighting Australia's inaction, international organisations have expressed major concern about the degraded state of essential ecosystems in a symbolic call to action and a shaming of unfulfilled responsibility. In 2021, UNESCO's scientific advisors recommended the **re-classification of The Great Barrier Reef as an endangered World Heritage site**. The major reef system has been extensively damaged by warming waters, storms, and pollution over the last several years [58]. **The Australian Government reacted defensively, retaliating with an intense lobbying campaign** involving sending the current Environment Minister to more than a dozen countries in order to gain their support. The campaign was successful, and the vote of re-classification deferred to 2022 [59]. UNESCO's decision includes the condition of ongoing monitoring of the reef's condition, implementation of preventative measures against further degradation, and an updated report from Australia to be provided before the vote [60]. **As key allies take increasingly stronger action to address climate change, Australia's contrasting inaction is becoming increasingly obvious and unacceptable.** With heat being applied to the Australian Federal Government from both domestic and international sides, they may end up with no choice but to follow the example of allies such as the European Union and the US.

CONCLUSION

Australia's current national climate policy occupies a unique space in the world for all the wrong reasons. It is a country facing particularly severe direct threats from climate change in terms of both domestic and international security. The climate crisis has already stepped over Australia's metaphorical doorstep in the form of natural disasters, changed weather patterns, and degradation of essential ecosystems. **Predicted losses from further global temperature rise, even within the now highly optimistic 1.5 degrees Celsius scenario, would be devastating.** Despite this, the complacent policy and goals released by Australia's Federal Government are linked to projected temperatures at well above the worst-case scenario of 3 degrees. A persistent denial of the need for action, and even of the existence of climate change, is deeply ingrained within the policy of the LNP Government. It appears, on the other hand, that **most Australian voters (74 percent) are increasingly concerned about climate change and want to see more committed action despite known costs**, a phenomenon accelerated by lived experiences of bushfires, flooding, and environmental change[40]. The translation of these concerns into politics through democratic processes is hindered by powerful fossil fuel lobbies, monopolised right-wing media sources, and political opportunism. The resulting **civil divide, spread of misinformation, and uncertainty is a huge blow to more ambitious climate action.** Although previous domestic and international pressures, in addition to availability of scientific knowledge, have been so far unsuccessful in pushing the government to adopt more ambitious climate policy, they continue to mount at a significant rate.

Regardless of the outcome of the next federal election, a shift in future Australian climate politics is inevitable. The timing and magnitude of this shift is disconcertingly uncertain in a world where even the promises of the most ambitious fall short of the mark. Furthermore, the now-unchangeable future impacts of past and continued inaction are both ambiguous and ominous.

One thing is certain: unless the Australian Government adopts an immediate and drastic reformation of their currently absent climate policy, Australia will continue to fall further and further behind the pack of world leaders that it claims to belong to, with increasingly serious domestic and international consequences.

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CONTACTS

CLIMATE SECURITY & PEACE PROJECT (CS2P)

Sofia Kabbej

sofiakabbej@gmail.com

ENERGY, CLIMATE & SECURITY PROGRAM

Under the supervision of **Julia Tasse**,
researcher at IRIS

jtasse@iris-france.org

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FRENCH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AND
STRATEGIC AFFAIRS

2 bis rue Mercoeur

75011 PARIS/France

T. + 33 (0) 1 53 27 60 60

contact@iris-france.org

@InstitutIRIS