

THE CLIMATE INSTITUTE

CLIMATE OF THE NATION

AUSTRALIANS ATTITUDES TO CLIMATE CHANGE AND ITS SOLUTIONS

MARCH 2007



CLIMATE OF THE NATION

AUSTRALIANS ATTITUDES TO CLIMATE CHANGE AND ITS SOLUTIONS

The Climate Institute has commissioned both qualitative and quantitative market research on the attitudes of the Australian community to climate change and climate change solutions over the past year.

This paper summarises research by the Australian Research Group (ARG) and draws on broader market research on public opinion on climate change.

This report is the first of the Climate Institute's quarterly updates on public attitudes to climate change and climate change solutions.

ESTABLISHED IN LATE 2005, THE CLIMATE INSTITUTE HAS A FIVE-YEAR GOAL OF RAISING PUBLIC AWARENESS AND DEBATE ABOUT THE DANGERS TO AUSTRALIA OF GLOBAL WARMING AND TO MOTIVATE THE COUNTRY TO TAKE POSITIVE ACTION.

THE CLIMATE INSTITUTE IS A NON-PARTISAN, INDEPENDENT GROUP THAT WORKS WITH COMMUNITY, BUSINESS AND GOVERNMENT TO DRIVE INNOVATIVE AND EFFECTIVE CLIMATE CHANGE SOLUTIONS. WE RESEARCH. WE EDUCATE. WE COMMUNICATE.

OUR VISION IS FOR AN AUSTRALIA LEADING THE WORLD IN CLEAN ENERGY USE AND INNOVATION, WITH CLEAN AND LOW ENERGY SOLUTIONS A PART OF EVERYDAY LIFE THROUGHOUT THE COMMUNITY, GOVERNMENT AND BUSINESS.

THE CLIMATE INSTITUTE IS FUNDED BY A DONATION FROM THE POOLA FOUNDATION (TOM KANTOR FUND).

SUMMARY

It comes as no surprise that concern about climate change is at an all time high and the vast majority of people no longer doubt that it is real or that it is caused by greenhouse gases created by human activity.

Not only is concern at an all time high, but climate change now ranks as more important to people than a wide range of issues including housing affordability and national security.

While many people are still unfamiliar with the more detailed science of climate change, this does not detract from their passion to deal with it.

Focus group research shows that people see climate change and weather as interchangeable. As such, drought, water supply and management, and climate change are often linked in the minds of the general public. This is backed up by quantitative polling which has water management and climate change topping people's concerns.

A common theme in the research is that people are looking for leadership. They accept there may be a price to pay and they are hungry for decisive action. They are also keen to know more about the problem, and importantly they want to be able to take action which will make a real difference.

Support for clean energy solutions like solar and wind is very strong and there is a view that Australia's abundant sunshine is not being put to good use. People also feel strongly about cutting energy waste.

Themes that emerged strongly through the research were:

- growing understanding that climate change is already happening
- particular concern about water resources and the impact of water restrictions
- a view that Australia should lead and is not yet doing so
- concern about our children's future (both jobs and environment)

People expressed very strong support for a future in which our children are protected from the worst impacts of climate change and are able to be involved in a new economy built around renewable energy sources.

Climate change as an issue is a mixture of economic (including households) management and environmental protection. In the UK and the US for example conservative politicians are moving swiftly to ensure their opponents don't "own" the issue.

Currently however there is a perceived credibility gap between the major parties on climate change which makes this a difficult (but not impossible) issue for the Government, but one which also needs to be taken seriously by the Labor Opposition.

THE SCIENCE

People generally believe climate change is happening and most of the public's knowledge comes from media stories.¹ Although people understand that there is now a great deal of scientific evidence for climate change, most refer to their own experiences to support their view that climate change is real – they have noticed flowers in the garden blooming out of season, water restrictions and of course, the drought.²

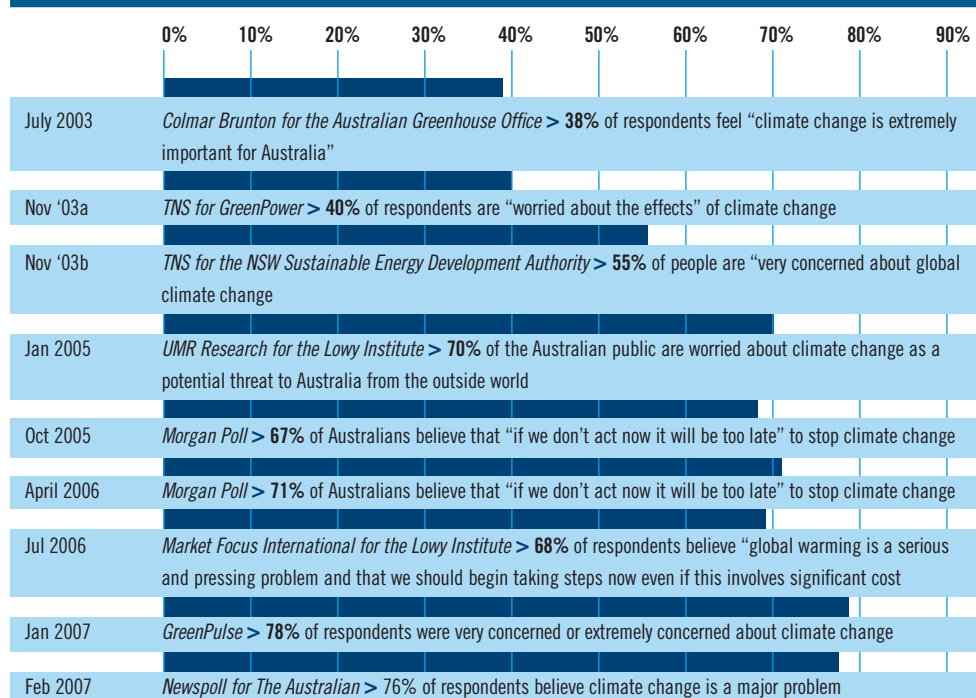
“Why do my bulbs flower in July instead of September now?” — Kingston voter, Coalition leaning

Some even commented on the challenges of planning caravan trips when it had become so difficult to predict the kind of weather they would encounter.

Research shows that over the past five years, increasing numbers of people say they believe in the effects of climate change, with significant growth in the last two years, and a more dramatic leap in interest and understanding from late 2006.

Nine polls taken from mid 2003 show a growing level of concern about climate change from around 40% to more than 75% (Figure 1). The sorts of questions asked in these polls included whether respondents think climate change is a “real threat” or “a major problem”, and what sort of threat respondents believe that climate change represents.

Figure 1. Levels of concern about climate change

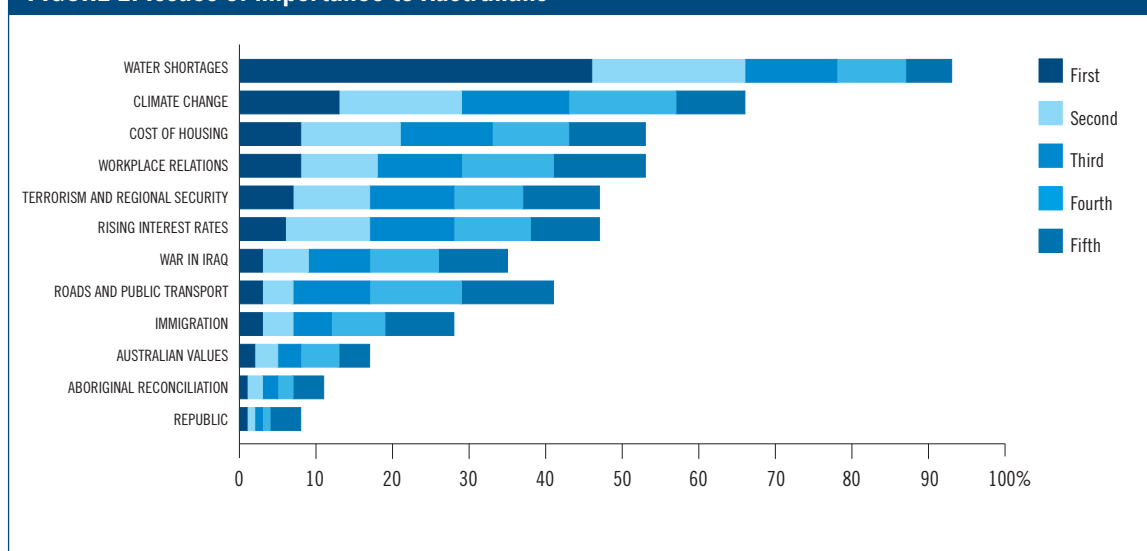


WHAT IS THE AUSTRALIAN PUBLIC MOST CONCERNED ABOUT?

Water and climate change

ARG research undertaken in February 2007 shows water shortages as the leading issue of concern with climate change as the second most concerning issue, above housing costs and terrorism, as the chart below shows.

FIGURE 2: Issues of importance to Australians



ARG focus group research reveals that water or fears about the continuing lack of it, is perhaps the most significant motivating factor in the response people have towards climate change.³ Many people said that the continuing drought and related water restrictions had changed their views about climate change.

“The problem is very real and I think we’re running out of water. How long is this drought going to last for?”

— Bowman voter, Coalition leaning

“We hardly get any rain anymore, we used to have continual rain, and now we hardly get any anymore.”

— Kingston voter, Labor leaning

Interestingly, there appears to be little differentiation in attitudes to water between rural and urban communities, with both these groups increasingly exposed to water shortages.

Water and climate change are linked in people's minds. The drought and water restrictions have shifted thinking about climate change and its impacts and it is unlikely people will forget the issue even once the drought breaks.

In a recent Green Pulse survey respondents were asked what they thought the main factor affecting future water supply would be. The largest response was "climate change", with 28%. Failure to use rainwater or stormwater was the next most popular response with 22%.

One of the main reasons that water has shifted people's attitudes to climate change is the immediacy of the issue. In contrast, issues such as sea level rises and the effect on species and ecosystems appear to be felt less keenly as they do not have a real and tangible effect on their lives.⁴

National Security

Starting in 2005, broad-based national issues polls have included climate change as a stand-alone issue, indicating that climate change has taken on a much higher profile and is no longer seen simply as an environment issue.

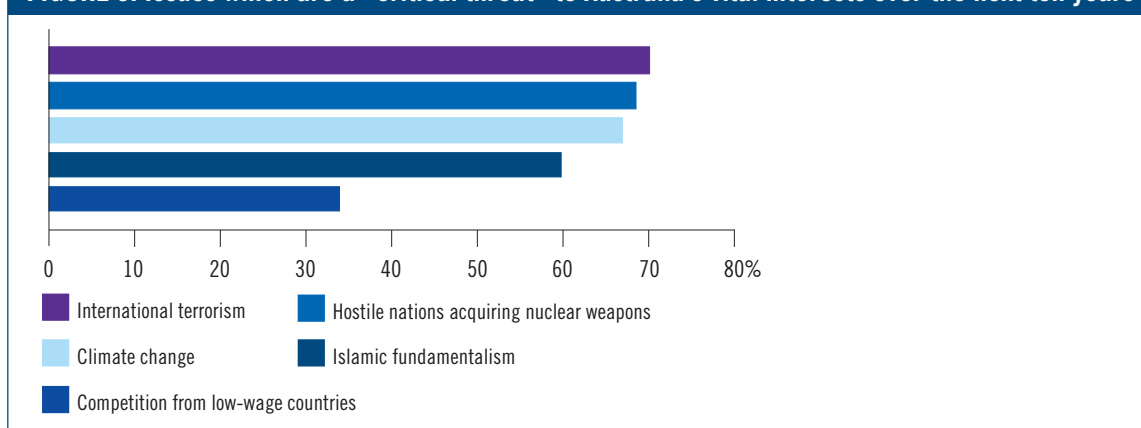
The Lowy Institute's Australians Speak 2005⁵ public opinion poll on foreign policy revealed that climate change was a narrow second on the list of issues that Australians are worried about as threats from the outside world. The poll found 70% of the Australian public are worried about the global threat of climate change, while 71% were worried about "unfriendly countries developing nuclear weapons".

Similarly, a national McNair Gallup poll of 1,000 people taken in April 2006⁶ included climate change and climate change solutions ("alternative energy sources") as separate categories. Both were considered more important than issues such as "national security" and "the war on terrorism" but were ranked lower than health and education.

The Lowy Institute Poll 2006⁷ on public opinion and foreign policy taken in October 2006 included climate change in a list of potential critical threats to Australia over the next 10 years. It found 68% of Australians believe climate change is a critical threat (figure 3), ranking third behind international terrorism and the risk of unfriendly countries becoming nuclear powers.

Some 87% of respondents listed "improving the global environment" as a significant foreign policy goal for Australia, above all other issues, including combating international terrorism.

By February this year water shortages, climate change, cost of housing and workplace relations in that order were the leading issues of concern ahead of terrorism and regional security. (figure 2)

FIGURE 3: Issues which are a “critical threat” to Australia’s vital interests over the next ten years

Leadership and Politics

Both in focus group research and in quantitative polling, people expressed a clear view that the government should lead the way in addressing climate change.

The argument that we shouldn’t act until China and India did had some logic for many people involved in the ARG focus groups, however there was also a strong view that Australia needed to show leadership, not just stand back and wait until everyone else takes the right action.

In a poll conducted by ARG between the 23rd and 26th March 2007, respondents were asked whether Australia should lead the way on climate change solutions or wait and see what the rest of the world does.

81% agreed that Australia should lead the world, compared with 9% who thought we should wait and see what other countries do.

Figure 4: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about climate change?

	Strongly Agree	Agree	No Real Opinion	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Our governments should make Australia a world leader in finding solutions to climate change	48	33	15	3	1
Our governments should wait and see what the rest of the world does to deal with climate change	2	7	11	46	33
Australia should lead the world in clean energy (solar, wind and geothermal) use	48	35	13	3	1
We must act now to protect the world for our kids	54	33	10	2	1
Renewable energy like wind and solar is just not going to meet our national energy needs for a very long time, if ever	9	28	21	31	10
Quite frankly I'm fed up with hearing so much about climate change	9	17	22	35	17

“It’s really up to countries like us to coerce or persuade other countries to follow us.” — Kingston voter, Labor leaning

“If everyone sits back and waits for someone else to take the lead, nothing will get done... If no one else is going to step up and say let’s change it, then maybe we need to.”

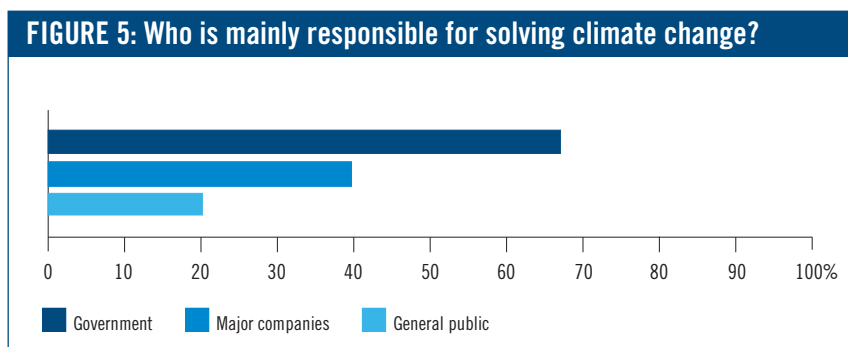
— Bowman voter, Coalition leaning

There was also a view that there was too much talk and not enough action:

“There always seems to be a lot of discussion and everything else always gets talked about, but nothing much happens...”

— Eden-Monaro voter, Coalition leaning.

A national poll of 501 people undertaken by TNS for GreenPower in 2003⁸ asked respondents who they thought was mainly responsible for solving climate change. The Government was singled out by a majority of respondents. The findings are shown in Figure 5.



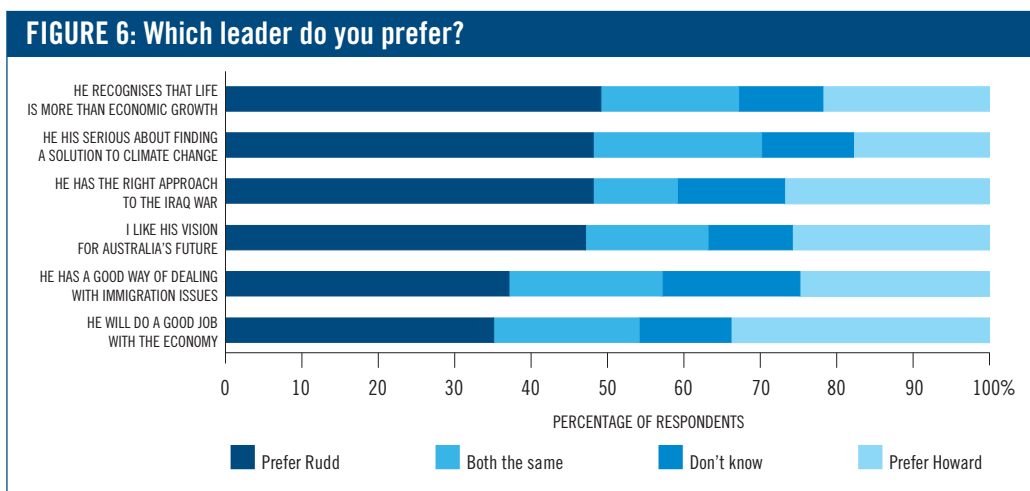
The view that the Government should be doing more has only strengthened in more recent times with a Newspoll conducted between the 27th and 29th October 2006 showing that 90% of respondents said the Federal Government should significantly increase current investment in renewable technology and 81% said the Federal Government should be doing more than it currently is to tackle the issue of climate change.

“For me, the climate is the big issue. The world’s climate and how it’s changing. We can see that happening in front of our eyes, and I don’t think a lot of the governments have a good idea of how they’re going to solve the problem. There’s a lot of talking going on, but there’s not a lot of action.” — Bowman voter, Coalition leaning

“In the interests of Australia, you’ve got to make it a bipartisan thing. The planning is not for five years, not for ten, but for 50 years, and that both sides of politics agree that we have to do something.” — Parramatta voter, Labor leaning

Until recently voters said they saw little difference between the two major parties on the issue of climate change. However, a poll of 1200 people conducted in mid-February by ARG showed that 48% of people thought Kevin Rudd was serious about dealing with climate change compared with 17% who thought John Howard was.

This was reflected in attitudes towards Peter Garrett and Malcolm Turnbull when participants were asked who would make a better Minister for Environment and Climate Change. 49% of respondents said Peter Garrett would be better, 18% preferred Malcolm Turnbull.



In March, ARG asked 1000 people which party would be better at handling climate change. Labor was still seen to be better on the issue than the Coalition but a large proportion of respondents said “both parties are the same”, or “don’t know” (figure 7).

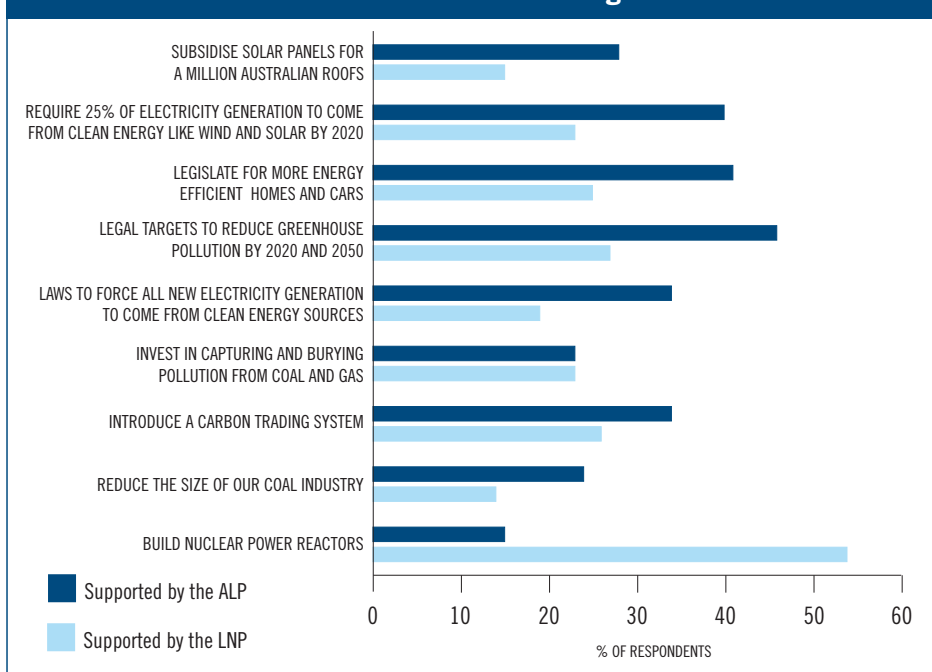
Figure 7: Which of the major political parties would be better at handling climate change?

	Labor	Coalition	Both the Same	Don't know
TOTAL	38	15	30	17
Male	39	17	31	13
Female	36	14	29	21
18-29 yrs	42	15	18	26
30-49 yrs	41	11	35	13
50+ yrs	32	20	31	16
NSW	32	19	30	18
Vic	39	15	30	16
Qld	42	15	27	16
SA	41	9	26	23
WA	42	9	34	15
Metropolitan	40	15	28	17
Rural & regional	33	16	33	18
Labor voters (1st pref)	63	2	22	14
Coalition voters (1st pref)	7	45	33	15

Despite respondents saying they were uncertain about the differences between the two major parties, respondents did identify some policy areas where they thought there would be different positions. Although neither party has released their full plans, it was thought that Labor would support targets for cuts to greenhouse pollution by 2020 and 2050 and that there was strong support for nuclear power by the Coalition (figure 8).

In the same poll, respondents were asked whether a clear plan to address climate change would influence their vote (figure 9).

66% said they would be more likely to vote for a party with a strong, clear climate change plan. 42% of respondents who said they had voted for the Coalition last election listed the Government's failure to deal with climate change as amongst the top three most important reasons for them deciding to change their vote away from the Coalition this year.

FIGURE 8: Policies to deal with climate change

With almost half of Australians thinking both major parties were the same, or not knowing which party would be better, there seems to be scope for both parties to claim leadership by delivering a strong, clear plan to deal with climate change.

Figure 9: Effect of a climate plan on voting intentions

A: Much more likely to vote for that party **B:** More likely to vote for that party
C: No effect on my vote **D:** Less likely to vote for that party **E:** Much less likely to vote for that party

	A	B	C	D	E
TOTAL	31	35	34	<0.5	<0.5
Male	29	35	35	<0.5	<0.5
Female	32	35	33	<0.5	1
18-29 yrs	32	42	25	0	<0.5
30-49 yrs	31	32	36	1	1
50+ yrs	29	34	37	0	<0.5
NSW	29	34	35	1	1
Vic	27	35	38	0	<0.5
Qld	35	31	34	1	0
SA	26	41	31	0	1
WA	34	39	27	0	0
Metropolitan	30	36	34	<0.5	1
Rural & regional	31	33	34	1	<0.5
Labor voters (1st pref)	38	31	31	<0.5	0
Coalition voters (1st pref)	21	36	42	<0.5	<0.5

The March ARG poll shows that twice as many Australians believe quick action is required rather than gradual action, even if it leads to the loss of some jobs (figure 10).

Figure 10: Which of the following best describes your view?

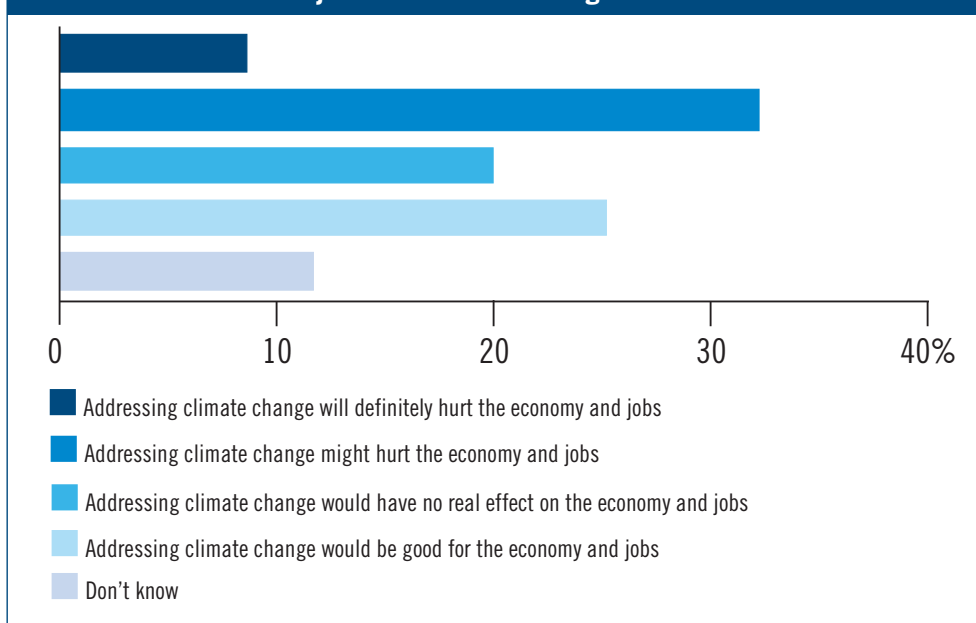
A: We should move slowly to deal with climate change and be very careful to protect jobs

B: We should move quickly to deal with climate change even if it leads to the loss of some jobs

C: Don't know

	A	B	C
TOTAL	31	58	11
Male	30	63	7
Female	31	53	15
18-29 yrs	30	57	14
30-49 yrs	30	62	9
50+ yrs	32	56	12
NSW	31	55	14
Vic	29	61	10
Qld	35	55	10
SA	29	58	13
WA	28	66	6
Metropolitan	29	60	12
Rural & regional	34	56	10
Labor voters (1st pref)	29	61	10
Coalition voters (1st pref)	43	48	9

Interestingly, despite repeated claims over the past decade, only 8% of respondents think that addressing climate change will definitely hurt the economy and jobs. Amongst Coalition voters only 12% held the view that our economy could be seriously hurt by plans to cut greenhouse pollution (figure 11).

FIGURE 11: Attitudes to jobs and climate change

SOLUTIONS

Focus group research suggests that swinging voters are interested in hearing about solutions that “offer an answer for our children”, and are concerned about the “legacy” we leave for our children. Research also suggests that a national plan to cut greenhouse pollution with 2020 and 2050 targets was a popular solution.

In February this year ARG found that renewable options of more solar panels (91% support) and more wind turbines (82% support) were favoured alongside the proposal of reducing our overall energy consumption (78% support).

Solar power attracted a significant following, with most people easily grasping the image of “a solar panel on every roof”. This also allowed people to feel they could make individual contributions to combating climate change.

In the March ARG poll respondents were again asked which solutions they favoured. Once again there was very strong support for solar and wind, as well as strong support for legal targets to reduce greenhouse pollution (figure 12.)

There is also a high level of support (70%) for reducing our use of coal in electricity generation and investing in clean coal technology, which suggests more people are realising the contribution that coal makes to greenhouse pollution.

Most people think clean coal sounds like a good idea, although there was also a fairly high number of respondents who said they didn’t see how you could make coal clean (figure 12).

Figure 12: When you hear the words “clean coal” how much do you agree with the following :

	Total Agree	Total Disagree	No Real Opinion	Don't know
It sounds like a good idea	65	10	18	7
I understand what “clean coal” means	35	28	19	17
I can't see how you can make coal clean	46	21	21	12

Is there such a thing as clean coal? — Kingston Voter, Labor leaning

I'm not sure what clean coal means. — Bowman Voter, Coalition leaning

Consistent with previous polling, respondents are very clear that Australia should be leading the way on climate change solutions and clean energy technology such as solar and wind.

People also expressed a moderate level of support for nuclear power – until questions about where they would go were raised.

This was reflected in the Newspoll in The Australian conducted in early March this year which asked people if they were personally in favour or against the development of a nuclear power industry in Australia, as one of a range of energy solutions to help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

In response, 45% said they were in favour and 40% said they were against. But that changed when they were asked if they would personally be in favour or against a nuclear power station being built in their local area. The response was 66% against and 25% in favour.

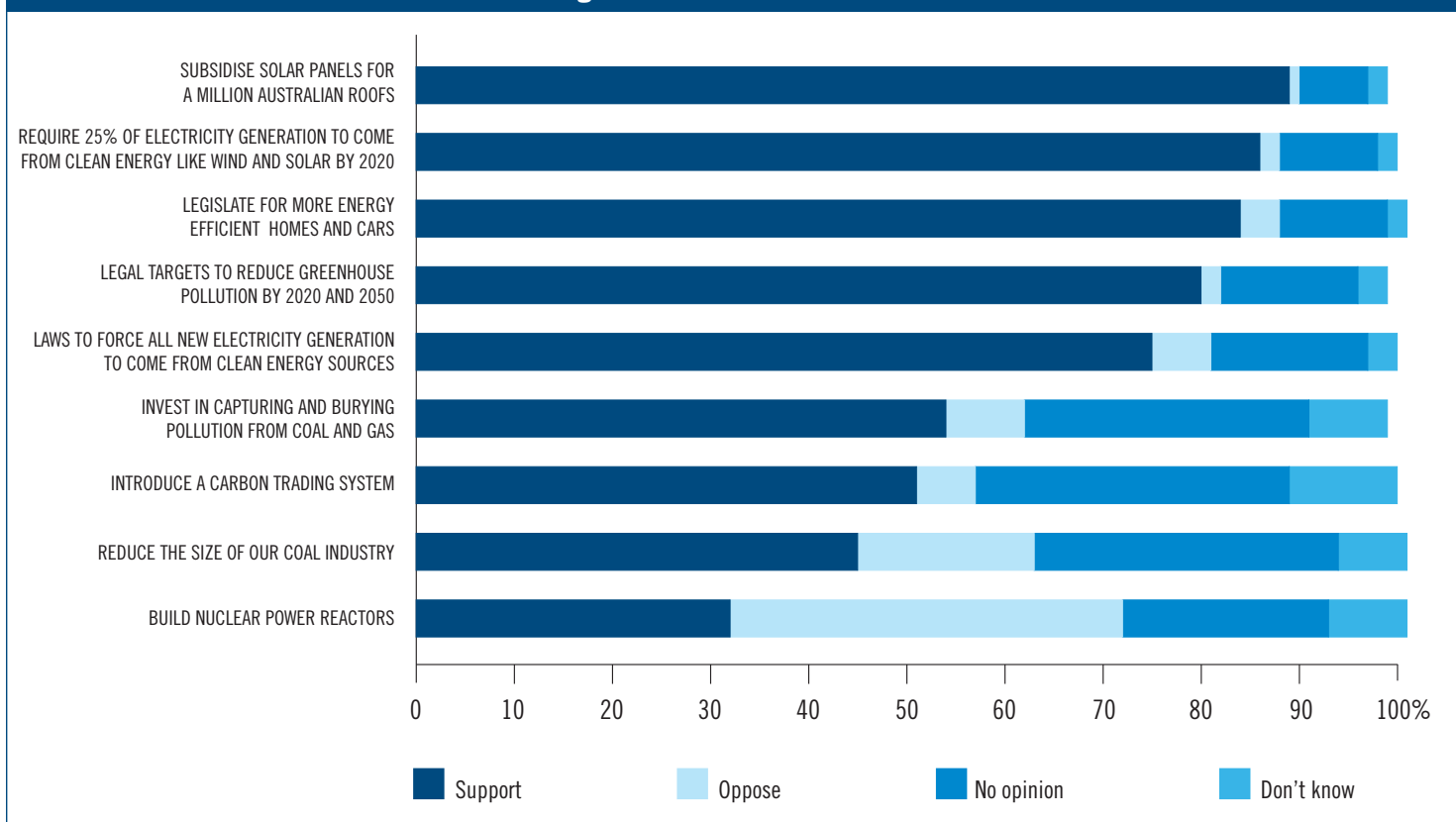
Most people also thought nuclear power would take too long to develop and be too costly. According to a February 2007 ARG study, there is low support for nuclear power, with about one-third of Australians prepared to support the idea of “nuclear reactors for electricity”.⁹

People were also concerned that there was the possibility of nuclear material falling into the wrong hands and made a connection between nuclear power for electricity and nuclear power for weapons.

Nuclear waste is also a concern. The February Green Pulse poll found 73 per cent of all Australians do not support “the storage of nuclear waste in Australia”.

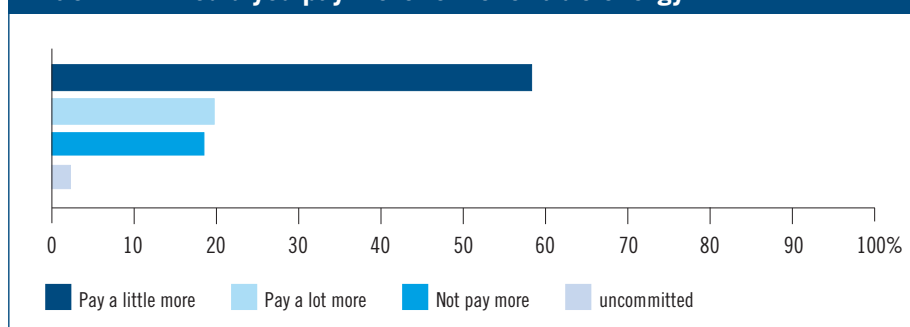
Strong support for clean energy solutions is not new. Over 3,500 people, included in five public opinion polls since 2002, expressed an overwhelming preference for clean energy when asked what should be done about climate change¹⁰.

FIGURE 13: Policies to deal with climate change



In February this year Newspoll and *The Australian* (figure 14) found that 77% of respondents were willing to pay more for the use of renewable or other alternative sources of energy, if it would help reduce greenhouse gas emissions.¹¹

FIGURE 14: Would you pay more for renewable energy?



“If we’re facing a situation where we have to pay more for power then we might pay less for our motor cars and that might help the reduction of the greenhouse gases because we won’t buy the huge gas guzzlers because we won’t be able to afford it. We’ve got to get our priorities right. Do we want to live or do we want to exist?”

— Kingston voter, Labor leaning

That does not represent a new trend with various polls in recent years showing the Australian public is willing to pay more for renewable energy. For example:

In a national poll of 501 people undertaken by TNS for GreenPower in 2003¹², 75% of people said they would be willing to pay more for renewable energy (but only a bit more).

A national poll of 1,027 people undertaken by ARG for AusWEA in 2003¹³ found 76% of respondents favoured paying 5% more on electricity bills for 10% more clean energy, when faced with an alternative to have cheap electricity at any cost.

Similarly, a national Morgan poll of 629 people in 2004¹⁴ asked respondents if they would be willing to pay an additional \$3.50 extra per month to increase the proportion of electricity from wind and non-polluting sources to an additional 10% by 2010; 89% of respondents said they would.

CONCLUSION

Many people are worried about the legacy they will be leaving for their children's futures. Some respondents believe it may be too late to solve climate change. Questions of adaptation are also of concern with the perceived speed of change a major factor in influencing how urgently people feel the need to take action.

Clean energy solutions like solar and wind are strongly supported and there is almost a sense of embarrassment that Australia is not leading the way. While people accept the argument that China is a big greenhouse polluter they do not accept that as a good enough reason to stand by and do nothing.

Water shortages and the drought have certainly sharpened the public's interest in the issue and a sense that we are already seeing the effects of climate change.

There is a passionate enthusiasm in many people who want to do their bit to reduce greenhouse pollution:

“If you don't try, what are we going to do? Just put our hands underneath our bums and sit down and wait for something to happen?” — Bowman voter, Coalition leaning

It is also apparent that the depth of concern is such that it is unlikely to be shifted by the drought breaking.

People now expect concerted action on the part of their political leaders and they want a way to be able to make a direct and useful contribution themselves.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Attitudes towards climate change among voters in marginal federal electorates, ARG, Dec 06, p8.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Attitudes towards climate change among voters in marginal federal electorates, ARG, Dec 06, p7.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Lowy Institute, 2005. Australians Speak 2005: public opinion and foreign policy. Report by Ivan Cook, March 2005. Lowy Institute, Sydney. Available at: <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=236>. Based on a national telephone poll of 1,000 people conducted by UMR Research
- 6 McNair Ingenuity, 2006. Health, Education, Energy and the Environment at the top of the list. Available at: <http://www.mcnairingenuity.com/>. National telephone poll of 1,000 people.
- 7 Lowy Institute, Poll 2006 Australia, Indonesia and the World – Public Opinion and Foreign Policy. Report by Ivan Cook, October 2006, Lowy Institute for International Policy, Sydney. National telephone survey of 1,007 people by Market Focus International. Available at <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Publication.asp?pid=470>
- 8 TNS Research, 2003. GreenPower Research November 2003: key findings and implications. National telephone survey of 501 people undertaken for GreenPower.
- 9 ARG Omnibus, February 2007
- 10 What Australians think about climate change, Cambiar Report
- 11 Newspan Climate Change Poll, 21/2/07
- 12 TNS Research, 2003. GreenPower Research November 2003: key findings and implications. National telephone survey of 501 people undertaken for GreenPower
- 13 Australian Research Group, 2003. National renewable energy: quantitative research. Report to the Australian Wind Energy Association, September 2003. based on a national telephone poll of 1,027 people
- 14 Roy Morgan Research, 2004. Catibus: Greenhouse CM3013. National telephone survey of 629 people

CLIMATE OF THE NATION

AUSTRALIANS ATTITUDES TO CLIMATE CHANGE AND ITS SOLUTIONS



The Climate Institute
Level 2 263 George Street NSW 2000 Australia
Phone 02 9252 5200 Fax 02 9247 6555
www.climateinstitute.org.au
ACN 116 713 592