

Reading between the lines this week:

1. Denticare—making a mountain out of a molar
2. Dissent is a dirty word
3. *A fair-weather friend? Australia's relationship with a climate-changed Pacific*
4. Extract from author Ben McNeil's speech at the launch of *The Clean Industrial Revolution*

Denticare—making a mountain out of a molar

After years of inaction, it seems that Australians who can't afford a trip to the dentist might finally be offered some more effective relief than Panadol, with the Rudd Government floating the idea of a publicly-funded 'Denticare' scheme. The Medicare levy would increase by 0.75 per cent to provide the required funding.

All the evidence suggests that Australia needs such a scheme.

But the (presumably) privately insured voices of fiscal conservatism seem to think it's just too expensive. *The Daily Telegraph* led the charge with alarmist headlines suggesting reforms will cost average taxpayers over \$1,000 per annum. For the vast majority of families, in fact, the costs would be much lower than the price of a few typical dental treatments.

For example, for a single person on \$25,000 a year, a 0.75 per cent Denticare levy would cost \$187.50 per annum, or \$3.61 a week. That's equivalent to the cost of a simple filling and a couple of six-monthly check-ups. If the person had a dependent spouse and children, there would be no payment at all under the proposed Denticare scheme as the family income would be below the threshold at which the existing Medicare levy cuts in.

Someone on \$50,000 would pay \$375.00 per annum or \$7.21 a week. But they should at least break even if they have a spouse and children. A six-monthly check-up each and just one filling a year and they would come out in front.

At higher incomes people will obviously pay more but that, of course is the whole point. By sharing the risks and sharing the costs, we can introduce a dental scheme that ensures that the main determinant of access to dental care is the size of your cavities, not the size of your pay cheque.

Dissent is a dirty word

As the recent ALP Conference highlighted, politics in Australia is becoming increasingly stage-managed.

In the UK and the US 'crossing the floor' to vote with your political opponents is fairly common but in Australia party discipline has become the be-all and end-all. This is as true for the Liberals as it is for the ALP. What all political hard heads in Australia know is that 'division is death'.

Remember the uproar when a leaked document revealed that not everyone in Rudd's Cabinet thought that FuelWatch was a great idea? In hindsight it seems that no one thought it was a great idea, but that's not the point—in modern Australian politics it's one in, all in.

It wasn't always this way. In his autobiography, former Environment Minister Graham Richardson describes how he helped 'persuade' his Cabinet colleagues that protecting native forests was a good idea.

'The first thing I did was let the environment movement know that this was a battle I would not or could not fight alone: I encouraged them to make 'a deafening roar' ... that could be heard all the way to Canberra. Unfortunately, ministers such as John Button, John Kerin, John Dawkins and Peter Walsh, who were pro-development, thought this was tantamount to calling on the people to revolt. There was much greater disagreement in Cabinet about the environment than about the economy: the economic ministers and I were in constant conflict, much of it public ... and we had some really bitter encounters over the next few years.'

Not so these days. When a few protesters taped their mouths closed to protest about the ALP's approach to tackling climate change, they were shouted over. And if that wasn't ironic enough, the person doing the shouting was the Climate Change Minister, Penny Wong.

And when Wilson Tuckey disagreed with the opposition leader over the CPRS legislation, he was labelled the crazy uncle at the family wedding.

The bigger question, however, is when did we get so worried about disagreement amongst Cabinet ministers? When did differences of opinion become a test of leadership? Surely, in a democracy debate is a sign of robust policy-making. It is no doubt easier to run a political party when MPs are forced to agree publicly but it is much less healthy to run a country that way.

It makes you wonder what Richo would make of it?

A fair-weather friend? Australia's relationship with a climate-changed Pacific

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is in Cairns today to host regional leaders at the 40th Pacific Islands Forum (PIF). High on the agenda will be Australia's response to climate change and our strategy for assisting our island neighbours.

A recent paper by The Australia Institute found that Australia is at risk of failing the Pacific if the Prime Minister doesn't use this week's Forum to move beyond rhetoric to concrete action on mitigation, adaptation and, ultimately, migration.

Despite Labor's strong commitments in opposition and symbolic early steps in government, there has since been a disappointing lack of meaningful assistance to Pacific nations. This week's PIF will again put the spotlight on Australia's failure to deliver, in contrast to our competing claim of regional leadership on the issue.

A fair-weather friend? Australia's relationship with a climate-changed Pacific recommended that the government:

- enact deep emissions cuts at home
- fulfil its election promise and establish a 'Pacific Climate Change Alliance' which would allow it to lend its voice to the Pacific during international negotiations
- commit a percentage of revenue from the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme to ongoing adaptation assistance and emergency relief in the Pacific
- consider establishing a new sub-class to the humanitarian intake under the Migration Act which would allow entry and residence for Pacific Islanders displaced by climate change and at risk of displacement.

The remainder of the \$150 million that the Labor Party pledged in opposition should also be guaranteed for adaptation-specific activities and be ring-fenced for the region.

The issue of climate change may have become bogged down in political debate in Australia but for the people of the Pacific it is already threatening their way of life. It is to be hoped for their sakes that the Prime Minister is able to resist the temptation of turning the Pacific Islands Forum into another opportunity to put the boot into the opposition and, instead, offer some real solutions for the increasingly vulnerable Pacific region.

Extract from author Ben McNeil's speech at the launch of *The Clean Industrial Revolution*

In 1980, the floppy disk drive for an Apple IIe computer weighed two kilograms and one floppy disk held the equivalent of one email.

Twenty years on we have the iPhone—it holds 10,000 emails, 5,000 photos, 2,000 songs, nine movies, all the software you could ever need, has cheaper real cost and weighs a few grams. All this has been achieved in 20 years.

Protecting a high-carbon economy in Australia is equivalent to protecting the Apple IIe disk drive in the 1980s. Is that really a wise economic decision?

Or, it's like protecting the asbestos industry at the outset of mesothelioma and asbestosis.

With carbon costs rising globally, it boggles the mind to think that some politicians and commentators can honestly contend that it would be better for the Australian economy and jobs in the long term to protect our carbon obesity in a world that will move away from carbon.

Protecting Australia's carbon obesity will ensure we shut out low-carbon investments, from data centres to new aluminium smelters. Not only that, we will forgo the tremendous capacity for Australian scientists, engineers, innovators and businesses to develop, commercialise and export the low-carbon materials and technology the world will need this century.

Cutting Australian greenhouse gas emissions isn't just a feel good exercise—it will actually transition our economy towards low-carbon production, which will spur innovation and all sorts of clean technologies from new ways to trap emissions from coal-fired power plants, to more efficient building materials, to commercialising advanced non-food biofuels.

A low-carbon economy will boost prosperity through hundreds of green cochlear-style firms. We all know about solar, wind and geothermal but green manufacturing from low-carbon steel, to advanced battery systems, to smart energy systems—the opportunity is enormous.

Recent publications

- *A fair-weather friend? Australia's relationship with a climate-changed Pacific* at <https://www.tai.org.au/?q=node/27>
- *State of Denial: the impact of the CPRS on state government budgets* at <https://www.tai.org.au/?q=node/22>

Recent media

- 'Australia must do more to help our Pacific neighbours to limit and adapt to the effects of climate change', says Louise Collett on *Radio National Breakfast* at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/breakfast/stories/2009/2637140.htm>
- 'What does the Pacific want out of this week's Pacific Islands Forum?' Listen To Richard Denniss on *Australia Talks* at <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/australiatalks/stories/2009/2641241.htm>
- *People's Bank déjà vu: a potted history of competition in the banking industry*, writes David Richardson for *Online Opinion* at <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=9196>