

# The Australia Institute

Research that matters.

**TITLE: Climate change initiatives are just so much soufflé**

**AUTHOR: Christian Downie**

**PUBLICATION: OnLine Opinion & The Word**

**PUBLICATION DATE: 16/01/07 & Feb 2007**

When Kevin Rudd rose to speak for the first time as leader of the Labor Party one of the first things he mentioned was climate change. Rudd, like the Prime Minister, has quickly realised that climate change is now in the forefront of the public's mind. However, while Labor seeks to put its front foot forward on the issue it is not so easy for Mr Howard.

Historically, the Howard Government has had a general distaste for the environment seeing it as an issue of the Left and a constraint on the main game - the pursuit of economic growth, an approach normally shared by its conservative voter base.

But climate change is different. Because it is an issue that poses such grave threats it has appealed to people of all political persuasions, regardless of their ideological disposition. As a result, the government risks finding itself out of step with those who would normally support its conservative stance on environmental issues.

This is particularly the case for voters under 40 who are becoming more concerned about climate change. Why? Because many people who had previously thought that the effects of climate change would not happen in their lifetime are now not so sure.

As former British Secretary of State for Environment, Margaret Beckett has stated: "We've known for some time that we have to worry about the impacts of climate change on our children's and grandchildren's generations. But we now have to worry about ourselves as well."

Recent polling reflects this attitude. The Lowy Institute this year found that when people were presented with options for dealing with global warming, more than two-thirds of those surveyed supported the statement that "global warming is a serious and pressing problem [and] we should begin taking steps now even if this involves significant costs".

The release of the Stern Report in October reinforced the need to begin reducing greenhouse gas emissions now. By showing that the economic costs of doing nothing about climate change will far outweigh the costs of putting in place measures to combat global warming, the Stern Report strengthened the view among Australians that without environmental security our economic security will be undermined.

In dispelling the myth that climate change is just an environmental issue and not an economic one, the Stern Report has created further headaches for the Government.

Facing increasing pressure to act, the Government has resorted to its well-worn strategy of trying to bamboozle the electorate with lofty sounding initiatives and promises to spend millions on climate programs.

Unfortunately, the Government's announcements are much like a soufflé, they rise well in the media but collapse if you question their effectiveness too loudly.

Take the Asia-Pacific Partnership for example. The US Congress has twice rejected appropriations to fund Bush administration commitments to the pact. And US Senator John McCain, the front-runner to be the next Republican Presidential candidate, has described the partnership as "nothing more than a nice little public-relations ploy ... It has almost no meaning. They aren't even committing money to the effort, much less enacting rules to reduce greenhouse gas emissions."

Yet this is the cornerstone of the Howard Government's response to global warming.

Its spending on domestic programs to reduce greenhouse gas emissions are just as hollow. For example, the Greenhouse Gas Abatement Scheme which committed to spend \$400 million on projects to abate greenhouse gases by 2004 has not even been able to do that. As of 2006 only \$88 million had been spent.

And it is projected that for the years 2006-07 to 2009-2010 a further \$84 million will be spent. Thus, by 2010 spending on the scheme will still fall \$228 million short of the original \$400 million commitment. In 2005, the Australian Greenhouse Office claimed that the scheme will not achieve its purpose of realising "substantial emission reductions or substantial sink enhancement, particularly in the first commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol".

The Government needs to overcome its ideological prejudice against all things environmental. Its conservative voter base will, if it hasn't already. They realise that the effects of climate change will be felt in their lifetime and that material prosperity must go hand-in-hand with sound environmental stewardship.

The risk for the Government is that by being seen to do nothing on an issue of the future it increasingly looks like a party of the past. Not a good look, come election time.