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**TITLE: Good politics, pointless policy**

**AUTHOR: Richard Denniss**

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It is often said that actions speak louder than words. How quaint. In the world of the 24-hour news cycle, it's the words about actions that, for politicians at least, speak the loudest.

Words and symbols have, it seems, become far more important than actually solving problems. How else could you explain the government's approach to tackling climate change; and how else could you explain Housing Minister Tanya Plibersek encouraging a million women to engage in futile attempts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions?

But how could any attempt to reduce emissions be futile I hear you ask?

Unfortunately, the answer is as simple as it is depressing. If the Rudd Government's Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS) makes it through the Senate, any emissions saved by households, or by the women Minister Plibersek is urging to take action, will simply free up extra pollution permits and allow the big polluter to increase their emissions.

The Prime Minister and the Climate Change Minister finally conceded this point recently, yet we see the spectacle of a Minister urging women to walk more, drive less and turn off their air conditioners. In an era in which it seems that perception is valued more highly than reality, Ministers feel comfortable encouraging people to take 'symbolic' action, knowing full well that it will do nothing to reduce emissions.

Of course the Rudd Government's concern with symbolism over substance on the issue of tackling climate change runs much deeper than the ongoing deceptions about the role for individual action. Consider, for example the selection of the dismal target range of 5 to 25 per cent. Of course, even the environment groups, which support this policy, concede that such timid reductions in emissions will ensure the death of the Great Barrier Reef but that, we are told, is missing the point. What we have to focus on is the symbolism of having any targets at all.

The previous government was reckless in its indifference to tackling climate change and the rhetoric from Kevin Rudd has been much more positive. But announcing that we are going to avoid dangerous climate change and avoiding dangerous climate change are two quite different things. It is easy to see why some want to celebrate the 'new direction' of this government but the facts speak for themselves. The highly

conditional promise to reduce emissions by 25 per cent is inadequate to prevent dangerous climate change.

It might seem unfair, but the simple fact is that governments are either willing to do what it takes to tackle climate change or they are not. The government might be able to negotiate with the Senate, but it can't negotiate with the atmosphere.

Positioning itself half-way between what the scientists say is necessary and the big polluters say is acceptable might be good politics but it is pointless policy. Would a government that built half a bridge or half an airport expect praise from anyone or condemnation from everyone? Taking a 'step in the right direction' is about symbolism, not solutions.

The other big symbolic argument for the CPRS is the signal that it allegedly sends to the rest of the world. It's hard to pin down what is actually meant by this argument but effectively it seems as though CPRS boosters think that the rest of the world is sweating on the passage of our domestic legislation. Apparently if we don't pass the CPRS legislation before the international negotiations in Copenhagen, all the other countries will lose enthusiasm for tackling climate change.

In the olden days the purpose of legislation was to introduce new laws to govern Australia but these days, according to the government, the reason we pass laws is to send a signal to other countries. With all of those diplomats posted abroad, you would think there was an easier and more concise way of sending such a signal than passing hundreds of pages of legislation that lock in huge subsidies and lock out individual action. Maybe a letter from the PM would do the trick?

Kevin Rudd was right to say that tackling climate change is the greatest moral challenge that we face but his government is wrong to put symbols ahead of science when it comes to developing a solution.

There is no doubt that symbols matter in politics but there is also no doubt that they are no substitute for genuine solutions. The CPRS has been designed to provide the appearance of action while driving no real change. It has been described as though it helps to achieve an international agreement when its actual purpose is to make such consensus harder. And it contains design features that have the bizarre effect of discouraging individuals from trying as hard as they can to reduce emissions.

While it may not have been the government's intention, it looks like the most potent symbol associated with the CPRS might be the Senate uniting to vote it down.

The likely delay in implementing an effective scheme is a source of much regret for someone like me who has called for urgent action for many years. But urgent symbolism should not be confused with urgent action.

Dr Richard Denniss is the Executive Director of The Australia Institute, a Canberra based think tank [www.tai.org.au](http://www.tai.org.au)