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TITLE: 'Green jobs' won't save the debate

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Imagine your doctor suspected you had a deadly illness, but given the cost of the diagnostic test they decided to wait a year or two to see if things got better, rather than potentially waste money looking for something that might not be there. How would you feel about that?

Now imagine that your doctor, having waited long enough that the disease became clearly apparent, was reluctant to prescribe the best available treatment because there was no certainty that it would work. Indeed, imagine that the data showed there was only a 75 per cent chance that the treatment would work in a patient with such an advanced case of the disease. Should the taxpayer be expected to pick up the tab for expensive and time consuming treatment in the absence of certainty?

Finally, given all the suffering in the world, and the fact that other countries were doing nothing to curb the rise of lifestyle diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure, how would you feel if the doctor, in a fit of nihilism, decided that there was not much point in treating a sick person in Australia as it was hardly going to make much of an impact on worldwide health outcomes?

There has been a lot of talk about the need to 'reframe' the debate about climate change among the Australian environment groups who have tasked themselves with persuading our politicians to reduce Australia's greenhouse gas emissions. Unfortunately, their attempts to reframe the debate have been as unsuccessful as their attempts to persuade our politicians.

The worst example of this failure is the repeated attempts to get people to focus on 'green jobs' or 'low-carbon jobs' or, these days, 'clean energy jobs'. Now don't get me wrong, transforming our energy infrastructure will create a lot of jobs, but focusing on this point is neither successful as a strategy to reframe the debate, nor is it successful at persuading marginal voters to change their minds about the urgent need to reduce emissions.

Leaving aside the fact that there is no clear definition of what is meant by a 'green job,' and that the lowest-carbon jobs in the economy are service workers employed in child care and other human services, the biggest problem with the 'green jobs' argument is that it is actually exactly the same frame of reference being used by the polluters.

Talking about green jobs does not help the public see climate change from a different perspective to that being described by the scare mongers on the pay roll of the big polluters. On the contrary, talking about green jobs simply reminds the audience that tackling climate change will have impacts on the labour market. The proponents of 'green jobs', however, hope to persuade people that the green job creation associated with tackling climate change will be greater than the brown job destruction associated with using less fossil fuels.

It's always interesting to watch when the two sides of an argument are both convinced they are right and are willing to bet their house on their judgement. The polluters have never wavered from their determination to talk about jobs and neither has the environment movement. Both sides still believe they are onto a winner, but the problem is only one of them will be. The polls say that the environment movement is getting thumped.

It's not hard to see why the polluters would win a fight on such ground. First, they can talk about specific jobs that people already have while the environment movement must talk about abstract jobs that people might get. The lessons of behavioural economics, not to mention Machiavelli, make clear that people fear losing what they have, more than they look forward to receiving a future gift.

The second reason that the environment movement will lose a fight on this ground is credibility. Voters and politicians trust different experts on different topics. The environment movement is held in high esteem and its views are highly valued on a wide range of issues, but the design and impact of industry policy is not one of those issues. The public is rightly sceptical that organisations that have spent decades saying that economic growth is not the be all and end all are, as luck would have it, experts on the best way to create a specific kind of economic growth.

The final reason that the environment movement will lose a fight on climate change if it is fought on the battlefield of jobs is that their arguments lack emotion. While the environment movement has tried to turn itself into the voice of economic rationalist reason, the big polluters have flicked the switch to vaudeville and are crying wolf about the impact of a carbon price on their profits, shedding crocodile tears about the thought that a worker might lose their job and laughing all the way to the bank with all the free pollution permits we are about to give them.

The irony that the environment movement has embraced economic modelling at precisely the time that the big polluters have reinvented themselves as the workers' friend would be hilarious if the consequences weren't so dire.

When the Newcastle steel works shut down, where was the big business concern for the 20,000 people who lost their livelihood? When the coal mine owners figured out how to swap giant long wall mining machines for tens of thousands of coal mining jobs, where was the big business concern for the small communities in the Hunter Valley?

The economic consequences of tackling climate change are important and need to be considered and discussed. Indeed The Australia Institute, for whom I work, has dedicated a great deal of effort towards that economic work. But such arguments, while necessary, are not sufficient to win the public debate about the need to put a price on pollution.

Consider the big policy areas in which enormous amounts are spent, often in order to create inconvenience for the public. The war on terror costs billions each year and slows down every plane traveller every day. No one is certain who our new \$50 billion submarine fleet will protect us from, but both sides of politics agree that it is better to be safe than sorry. Even the broadband network, which has been subject to economic scrutiny, is primarily defended in terms of 'nation building' and optimistic statements that the reason we need the NBN is that 'we can't even imagine the benefits' that will flow from it.

Well, we can imagine the costs of failing to act on climate change, and we can imagine the benefits that will flow from moving away from our reliance on fossil fuels. But we have failed to explain to the public that we don't need certainty before we can act to solve a problem. Indeed, we usually fail to solve problems that we are certain exist. As the old adage says, an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure.

Most Australians insure their homes against the unlikely risk of fire. Most Australians are happy to buy the occasional lottery ticket or scratchy. And all mining companies are willing to spend millions of dollars prospecting for resources with absolutely no certainty about what they find.

But most Australians do not have, nor aspire to, hold a green job. They care about protecting the planet for their grandchildren but they also care about protecting their job for their children.

As long as it's the polluters running the scare campaign and the environment groups sounding like policy wonks there is no chance of turning this debate around. The environment movement is in the fortunate situation of not having to choose between relying on facts or emotion to win this debate as it has both on its side. But for those who believe that there is no room in the climate change debate for emotion I would suggest a quick look at what the industries that are winning are up to.

This article is based on a presentation Richard Denniss gave to the Doctors for the Environment medical students' conference on climate change, environments health and political change.

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