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TITLE: Hamilton: Rudd at Bali and Beyond

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When Kevin Rudd announces to the plenary session of the UN climate change conference in Bali in two weeks' time that Australia will ratify the Kyoto Protocol he will receive an ovation like no other in his life, one that will reverberate in headlines around the world.

Rarely has a Prime Minister been granted the opportunity to become a celebrated world leader within weeks of being elected. If Rudd can translate the cachet Bali will give him into an active role helping to broker the next climate treaty, he could carve out for himself a position of global leadership. The former diplomat will instinctively understand the importance of this both for Australia and his personal standing.

It is expected that the Bali conference will agree to a mandate to negotiate a global agreement to succeed the first stage of the Kyoto Protocol, which expires in 2012. The process is likely to culminate at the Conference of the Parties in Copenhagen in December 2009. Given the increased scientific certainty about the causes and impacts of global warming, and the relentless rise in greenhouse gas emissions, a new treaty agreed in Copenhagen will have a global significance vastly beyond that of the Kyoto Protocol of 1997.

Such is the accumulation of resentment and frustration at Australia's climate obstructionism under Howard that the rest of the world will view the election of a pro-Kyoto government with enormous relief. Australians travelling abroad will no longer find themselves apologising for their country's stance on global warming.

The Howard Government has frequently claimed that Australia contributes only 1.4 per cent of global greenhouse gas emissions, as if that fact absolved us of responsibility. In all other spheres the former foreign minister Alexander Downer was fond of claiming that Australia "punched above its weight"; yet when it came to climate change he always wanted to take us down to the flyweight division.

In fact, Australia's role in international climate change negotiations has been an important obstacle to progress. Our government has been at the centre of attempts to form coalitions to oppose faster action, including the Umbrella Group and informal alliances with OPEC countries and the United States. It has also attempted to undermine

support for the Kyoto process by trying to draw various nations into alliances that could become alternatives (AP6 and APEC).

Most importantly, Australia's repudiation of the UN process has provided cover for the Bush Administration's intransigence. Ratification of the Kyoto Protocol will leave the Bush Administration isolated on the world stage in the same way that vigorous action by city mayors and state governments has left it isolated within the United States. Australian ratification will not force Bush to capitulate, but it will raise the stakes on climate change among the candidates bidding to succeed Bush.

Australian ratification will therefore have enormous symbolic significance. The Rudd Government will find the international community grateful and forgiving. Our return to the international fold will raise expectations that we will adopt a new cooperative spirit, in which we balance our own interests (both economic and environmental) with those of the world. In other words, a Rudd Government will need to reject the narrow and self-centred "national interest" doctrine formulated early in the Howard years, a doctrine that placed single-minded emphasis on short-term trade and investment.

The shift in approach – effectively a return to that mapped out in the Hawke years – will cause ripples in Canberra, and especially in DFAT which over the last decade has become dominated by people unable to distinguish between the public interest and the political interests of the government of the day.

The nations gathered in Bali, represented by some of the world's most sophisticated diplomats, will pay close attention to whether Mr Rudd's declaration of change is matched by the behaviour of our delegation in the closed sessions and back-room meetings where the real business is transacted.

One of the more scandalous aspects of Australia's participation in Conferences of the Parties has been the participation of fossil fuel lobbyists in the official delegation. No other country allows the industry with most to lose from emission cuts to play a formal role in negotiating international agreements. These members of the self-styled "greenhouse mafia" are accustomed to pulling the strings and being consulted on every contentious point at the international negotiations.

Ejecting these lobbyists from the official delegation would be a significant practical and symbolic move by the Rudd Government. It would signal to the world community that the new administration is serious about its commitment beyond ratification.

It would also signal to the business community that it wants to listen to progressive rather than reactionary voices. The business community has been realigning itself over the last two years and will adapt quickly to the Rudd climate change agenda. But it is important for the new government to dispatch the greenhouse mafia, which was Howard's closest corporate ally.

Over subsequent months, the new foreign minister will find it necessary to sideline some of the DFAT negotiators too. Instead of maintaining the traditional stance of neutral public servants, they have become implicated in the dirty dealing and obstructionist efforts of the Howard Government and are viewed with deep suspicion by diplomats abroad. Some public servants who have played leading roles in prosecuting the Howard

Government's position have taken lucrative jobs with fossil fuel corporations, a fitting reward for jobs well done.

The remaining climate sceptics in the Labor Party (such as Gary Gray and Martin Ferguson) will need to be firmly side-lined. There is a danger that the Rudd Government's approach will be too heavily influenced by the Garnaut report, expected in the middle of 2008. Ross Garnaut is a conservative economist and businessman who will probably be recommending caution at a time when urgency and boldness are needed.

It is no exaggeration to say that the way the Rudd Government deals with climate change will make or break it. Howard will be judged harshly by the historians for his resolute refusal to face up to the dominant economic and moral challenge facing the nation.

The science is becoming more alarming by the month, and so are the impacts of global warming itself. The demand for decisive action can only intensify over the next three years; it will require far-sighted policies to bring about a wholesale transformation of the nation's energy economy, a structural change on a par with that brought about by the dismantling of tariff protection.

The Howard Government has been punished by the electorate for its climate scepticism. Yet the expectation that Labor will take resolute action can only intensify. Any government that fails to tackle Australia's greenhouse gas emissions with sufficient vigour will be seen to be craven and guilty of sacrificing the national interest to the demands of the industries of the past.