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News release

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Seven Silly Excuses Used by the Government For Not Ratifying the Kyoto Protocol

Silly Excuse No. 1

“Unlike most developed countries, Australia is a net exporter of energy and that puts us in a very special position.” (Prime Minister Howard)

The greenhouse gas emissions from our energy exports have no bearing on Australia’s obligations at all. The emissions are counted in the country where the coal, oil or gas is burned.

Other countries may decide to import less fossil fuels, but there is nothing Australia can do about that, except try to sabotage the Kyoto Protocol.

This has been pointed out repeatedly to the Prime Minister but he still doesn’t get it.

Quite apart from the irrelevance of the excuse, it is simply wrong to claim that Australia is in a special position. Canada, Norway, the United Kingdom and Russia are also net exporters of energy, and all have either ratified the Kyoto Protocol or have indicated their intention to do so.

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Silly Excuse No. 2

Australian firms will shift off-shore if we ratify.

The Government never says which industries it is talking about mean, because if they did in each case it could be disproved.

The industry that makes the biggest threats to move off-shore is the aluminium smelting industry, which uses 16% of Australia's electricity and is responsible for 6% of total greenhouse gas emissions.

The six aluminium smelters enjoy very cheap electricity from long-term contracts signed with State governments. They receive a subsidy of around \$250 million each year, and enjoy access to abundant raw materials, a skilled labour supply and political stability.

Why would an aluminium company shift a smelter with a 30-40 year life span to a developing country to escape greenhouse restrictions in Australia, when everyone accepts that developing countries too will have to take on emission reduction obligations within a decade? Are their CEOs that short-sighted?

The aluminium industry is so worried about the implications of Kyoto that it has just committed \$3 billion to build a brand new smelter and refinery at Gladstone in Queensland.

While the Australian Aluminium Council has mobilized more anti-Kyoto lobbying power than any other industry group, the parent companies of the biggest smelters in Australia, including Alcoa and Comalco (Rio Tinto), have signed up to the Pew Center on Climate Change's Business Environmental Leadership Council which favours implementing the Kyoto Protocol as a first step in addressing climate change.

While it is unlikely any firms will shift off-shore if we ratify, several have already announced that they plan to shift off-shore if we do *not* ratify.

Silly Excuse No. 3

“Any shift of production off-shore would ... undoubtedly... increase global greenhouse gas emissions.” (Foreign Minister Alexander Downer, Media release 15 August 2002)

Apart from recycling erroneous belief that all developing countries are dirty, polluted and inefficient, just which firms is the Government talking about?

Vague ideas about aluminium smelters seem to float around the Government. But what are the facts?

Fact 1: Australian smelters produce more greenhouse gases per tonne of aluminium than smelters anywhere else in the world. Australian smelters' emissions from electricity consumption are around 2.5 times the world average because they rely almost wholly on electricity from coal burning.

Fact 2: According to the International Aluminium Institute, smelters in developing countries are cleaner than those in developed countries, producing lower direct greenhouse gas emissions per unit of output.

Respectable corporations nowadays don't threaten to take their dirty factories to poor countries so they can exploit lax environmental laws, yet that is how the Federal Government seems to view them.

Silly Excuse No. 4

“Kyoto is going to make barely 1 per cent difference to global greenhouse gas emissions.” (Environment Minister Kemp, Lateline, 3 September 2002)

Kemp concedes we need to cut by 60%. Any scheme to cut by 60% will begin by cutting by 1%.

Astonishing hypocrisy as the Howard Govt has worked hard to reduce the effective of the prootocl

Silly Excuse No. 5

“... until all countries are treated on an equal basis, there will remain very strong argument in the national interest as to why Australia should not ... join the Kyoto Protocol.” Prime Minister Howard.

It is universally acknowledged that Australia received a very lenient target under the Kyoto protocol and would need to do less than other industrialised countries.

Former Environment Minister Robert Hill said that any alternative to Kyoto would see a much tougher target for Australia.

The Howard Government has previously argued that countries' targets "be differentiated according to national circumstances." ...MORE

Silly Excuse No. 6

"... we don't know what the obligations in the next two assessment periods [of the Kyoto Protocol] are ..." (Prime Minister Howard)

Nobody knows what targets the world community will set for the period beyond 2012. But the Kyoto Protocol says that the Parties will negotiate these targets in 2005, seven years before the end of the first commitment period.

By refusing to ratify, does the Government intend to play no role in determining what the obligations will be in subsequent commitment periods? Does it imagine that Australia will be able to refuse to be part of the international process indefinitely?

It is widely expected that developing countries will sign up to legal obligations in the second commitment period, after 2012. Yet China and India have been willing to ratify even though they have no idea what their future obligations will be.

Silly Excuse No. 7

Developing countries are exempted from the Protocol and this is unfair on countries like Australia.

“[I]t is no solution at all ... if China and India and Brazil can go ahead and pollute the environment to their heart’s content because we’re all feeling a bit sorry for them.”
(Alexander Downer, *AFR*, 26 March 2001)

Apart from the gratuitous insult to some of the world’s poorest people, the Government’s argument ignores some vital facts.

Fact 1: 80% of the increased concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere have been put there by developed countries.

Fact 2: It will be 50 years or more before developing countries are responsible for half of the increased concentrations.

Fact 3: In per capita terms developing countries typically have one tenth to one twentieth of the emissions of the USA and Australia. Australia’s annual per capita emissions are 27.9 tonnes, the highest in the industrialised world and 35% higher than the USA. Australia’s 19 million people produce more greenhouse pollution than Indonesia’s 200 million. Who should act first to reduce emissions?

Fact 4: Poor countries will suffer most of the impacts of climate change, including decreased crop yields (leading to starvation), sea-level rise, and increased incidence of tropical diseases such as malaria, dengue and yellow fever.

Fact 5: The principles of polluter pays and ability to pay are accepted as fair by the international community, including in other contexts the Australian Government. Both principles mean that a wealthy country like Australia with high emissions should do much more.

Fact 6: Every international agreement on climate change – the 1992 Framework Convention, the 1995 Berlin Mandate and the 1997 Kyoto protocol – explicitly recognises that developing countries should be required to cut their emissions, but only after rich countries have led the way.

Fact 7: US Energy Department analysis shows that between 1997 and 1999, China reduced its greenhouse gas emissions by 17% [Age article?]. In the same period, Australia’s emissions grew by 5% [Check 3rdNC].