

4th July 2001

News release

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Australia May Have Casting Vote on Climate Change Treaty

A new analysis of the provisions of the Kyoto Protocol reveals that Australia's decision to ratify or not may be vital for the world to reach the threshold needed for the treaty to become legally binding.

The report by The Australia Institute, commissioned by the Australian Conservation Foundation, comes a week before a high-level European delegation arrives in Australia to press the Howard Government to take a more responsible stance on climate change.

It points out that countries accounting for at least 55 per cent of industrialised country carbon dioxide emissions must ratify the treaty before it enters into force. The new analysis contradicts the widespread belief that, after withdrawal by the USA, ratification by Japan is essential to achieving the target.

The report concludes that the countries of Europe, including Russia, together account for 49.7 per cent of the required total, and that ratification by Australia and Canada would mean that 55.15 per cent of the total would be counted, enough for the Protocol to become binding.

The USA accounts for 36.1 per cent of relevant emissions while Japan accounts for 8.5 per cent. Australia accounts for 2.1 per cent and Canada for 3.3 per cent.

"Canada has not expressed the same degree of reluctance to ratify as the USA or Australia", the report notes. "The Australian Government has said that it sees no point in proceeding with the treaty without the USA. However, the terms of the Protocol along with recent positioning by various nations suggest that the crucial decision about whether the Kyoto Protocol comes into effect could fall to Australia."

Commenting on the report, its author and Executive Director of The Australia Institute Dr Clive Hamilton said:

"To date the Federal Government has said it does not matter what Australia does as we are only a small player. The new analysis shows that in fact Australia could have the casting vote.

"If the scenario discussed in the report is played out, it is no exaggeration to say that the future of the world's climate could rest in the hands of Mr Howard. At a minimum, Australia is in a position to demonstrate moral leadership."