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TITLE: No urgency for bipartisan win by climate sceptics

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What's the rush?

Politicians can't win. When they admit they don't read the legislation they pass we call them lazy, but when they demand time to consider hundreds of amendments to a policy as complex as the CPRS the Government accuses them of obstructionism.

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not suggesting some members of the Liberal Party aren't using delay as an excuse for inaction. But what exactly is the rush to pass the CPRS by today?

One justification the Government uses for its arbitrary deadline is the urgent need to tackle climate change. Now anybody who takes the science seriously knows that we need to reduce emissions a lot, and that we need to do it fast. So surely those who believe the science should support the speedy passage of the legislation, shouldn't they?

Not at all. While the Government has been tireless in the name-calling it has directed towards the Coalition the fact is the CPRS ignores the same science the sceptics in the Opposition are so unconvinced by. The Government has completely ignored the science in setting its timid emission reduction targets.

Of course the Government argues that the CPRS is a 'step in the right direction' but the design of the Bill is such that, once implemented, it will be extremely expensive to adjust the scheme. Every time you hear Minister Wong talking about 'providing business with certainty' you just heard her say 'once we pass this scheme the big polluters will have a right to keep polluting until at least 2020'.

Bizarrely, Minister Wong has managed to create a sense of urgency to get on with reducing emissions while the legislation before the Senate has a delayed starting date of 2011.

While the Rudd Government went to the last election promising to have a scheme up and running by 2010 it backed down on that commitment early this year in response to pressure from polluters. Apparently it's OK for the atmosphere to wait for emission reductions but it's not OK for the polluters to endure another day of 'uncertainty'.

The other reason used by the Government for rushing the CPRS through the Senate is the need to have a scheme in place before next month's meeting in Copenhagen. Without a scheme in place, it was argued, the rest of the world would be less likely to reach an agreement to reduce emissions.

I use the past tense for good reason, you don't hear this argument nearly as much these days, especially now that the US and China have finally put offers on the table. The timing of this week's events clearly demonstrate the inflated sense of Australia's significance in the international negotiations implied by the Government – just as the prospects of the CPRS passing the Senate plummeted the two biggest polluters puffed some life into the flagging prospect of an outcome at Copenhagen. It's as if they weren't even paying attention to what was happening in Australia.

So if the scheme doesn't start for another 18 months and the rest of the world doesn't really care about it, what is the rush to get the CPRS through?

The answer, you might be surprised to learn, is politics.

Like the Opposition, the Rudd Government has its fair share of climate sceptics. Unlike the Opposition, however, the sceptics in the Rudd Government have been quietly successful in crafting their party's position on climate change. The ALP sceptics have secured targets that are so low they are almost pointless, so much assistance to polluters that it beggars belief and pushed back the starting date of a carbon price so far that Australia's polluters are not expected to pay a single cent for their pollution in the entire first term of the Rudd Government.

The sceptics in the Coalition, on the other hand, have until recently been unsuccessful both in keeping their identities concealed or in shaping their party's policy position. The widespread knowledge of the rift in the Coalition on this issue made it all too easy for the Rudd Government to design a CPRS capable of appeasing its own sceptics while driving a wedge between those members of the Coalition who are keen to address climate change and those who do not.

But while the CPRS is the wedge, the phoney sense of urgency is the hammer that drives it deep into the Coalition. As last week made clear, it is the timing that is causing all the grief. Given a bit of time, and some more adept footwork than that shown by Malcolm Turnbull in recent times, the Coalition could most likely have minimised the damage associated with dealing with this issue. It's not actually that hard to tear the CPRS to pieces.

According to the Treasury's own modelling the CPRS doesn't actually reduce Australia's emissions. The whole scheme rests on the assumption that we can simply import lots of 'offsets' from developing countries. And the scheme can hardly be said to deliver 'least cost abatement' when tens of billions of dollars are unnecessarily be handed away to the biggest polluters.

The scheme is good for neither the environment nor the budget bottom line. And none of the Government's arguments for rushing it through pass the common sense test. The only thing it seems to have going for it is that it has done so much harm to the Liberal Party, but even that seems too generous. Malcolm Turnbull had to stray a long way into the wilderness to fall into a trap this clumsy.

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