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TITLE: The climate science sceptics

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PUBLICATION: Crikey

PUBLICATION DATE: 14/10/09

LINK:

Like most parliamentarians, the Climate Change Minister Penny Wong is a climate sceptic. Of course she prefers to use that term to describe those who ignore the overwhelming science about the causes of climate change, but yet she ignores those same scientists when it comes to deciding what to do about climate change.

The science says that we need to reduce emissions by around 40 per cent by 2020 if we want even a fifty per cent chance of avoiding dangerous climate change. Penny Wong has ignored that advice both in setting the targets for her so called Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS) and in developing Australia's negotiating position for the upcoming talks at Copenhagen.

Imagine the following situation. You observe increasingly worrying changes in your body's behaviour so you consult a doctor. The doctor diagnoses a serious illness but assures you that with a long dose of drugs with some nasty side effects you have a 90 per cent chance of pulling through. You seek a second opinion which confirms both the diagnosis and the prescribed course of treatment. Both doctors remind you that there is some chance that their diagnosis might be wrong and that there is no guarantee that the cure will work. What would you do?

Those with an interest in evidence-based medicine would most likely take the pills, wear the side effects, and hope for the best.

But the sceptics have got two options: ignore the diagnosis or ignore the prescription. When it comes to climate change, Penny Wong is clearly the second kind of sceptic.

Imagine walking out of the doctor's surgery and calling your accountant to help you decide whether to undertake the course of treatment. How much will the treatment cost? How long will you have to spend in hospital? How much money could you earn if you were working instead? What discount rate shall we apply? No doubt some people make decisions in that way, but would you?

But Penny Wong isn't just a science sceptic, she is an economics sceptic. There is no economic case for the billions of taxpayers' dollars that are to be given to the polluters and arguments about the need to protect our polluters are inconsistent with our longstanding strategy of lowering our trade protection to encourage other countries to follow suit.

But the economics of the minister's approach to climate change are much worse than her generosity with taxpayers' money when it comes to silencing the polluters. Does anybody remember Sir Nicholas Stern? Stern made it quite clear that the economic costs of doing nothing to tackle climate change are much bigger than the costs of decisive policies to solve it.

Of course some jobs and profits will be lost in the emission-intensive sectors of the economy if we are serious about reducing emissions. That is, supposedly, the whole point. We now find ourselves in the farcical situation of trying to transform ourselves into a low carbon economy without actually changing the behaviour, or the profits, of the biggest polluters.

Despite the fact that the Climate Change Minister is ignoring the scientists and ignoring the economists she does appear to be winning. Recent polls showing a reduction in concern for climate change will have been music to her ears. The strategy of boring everybody to tears with the byzantine detail of the flawed CPRS seems to be working.

Rather than being grilled about why her targets ignore the science, why her compensation package ignores the economics and why her scheme design ignores common sense she has simply been able to talk about the sceptics in the Opposition and her commitment to the passage of the CPRS. Neither one of those issues is in doubt, but neither of them is terribly relevant.

Fortunately for Penny Wong the sceptics in the ALP are only influential in cabinet rather than noisy in parliament. But unfortunately for the atmosphere the political pain of the Opposition is no substitute for a science-based approach to tackling climate change.

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