

# America First on Climate Action?

## What US Climate Leadership Means for Our Region

**Alden Meyer**

Senior Associate at E3G

**Lagipoiva Cherelle Jackson**

Journalist and Editor of the Pacific Environment Weekly

**Audrey Quicke**

Climate & energy researcher at the Australia Institute

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Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 0:02

Hi, I'm Audrey Quicke, Climate and Energy Researcher at the Australia Institute, and welcome to our economics and pandemic webinar series. I'm filling in for your usual host Ebony Bennett but don't worry, she will be back next week! I'd like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land that I'm on. I live on Ngunnawal country. Sovereignty was never ceded and I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. The Australia Institute is aiming to do these webinars at least weekly, but days and times may vary. So make sure you register at [australiainstitute.org.au/events](https://australiainstitute.org.au/events). Just a few tips before we begin to help things run smoothly. If you hover over the bottom of your screen, you should be able to see a Q&A function where you can ask questions of our panellists. And you can also upvote questions and make comments. Please keep seeing things civil in the chat or we will have to boot you out. And finally this discussion is being recorded and will be posted on our website and emailed to you all after the discussion.

Tomorrow on International Earth Day, US President Joe Biden will host the Leaders Climate Summit. President Biden has invited 40 world leaders including the Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison to the virtual summit, which aims to encourage the world's major economies to enhance their climate ambition, and keep the goal of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius within reach. This is a key step on the path towards the United Nations Climate Change Conference COP 26 this November in Glasgow, and the summit is designed to increase the chances for meaningful outcomes on global climate action at COP 26. As the US attempts to convince countries to take bolder action on climate change, President Biden has flagged that the US will be announcing an ambitious 2030 emissions target, which the Washington Post states will be a target of at least 50% by 2030. Additionally, the UK is set to announce their emissions target as 78% cut by 2035 based on 1990 levels. Back home, Pacific environmental and humanitarian organisations have called on Australia to commit to at least halving emissions to match the ambition of other large emitters, like the US, the UK, the EU and Canada. So to unpack President Biden's Climate Summit and what US climate leadership means for our region, today, I am delighted to speak to Lagipoiva Cherelle Jackson, who is a Samoan journalist and Editor of the Pacific Environment Weekly. Cherelle writes for The Guardian and IISD's Earth Negotiations Bill Bulletin, which provides detailed coverage of the UN Climate Negotiations. Cherelle's writing focuses on environment, gender, diplomacy and human rights and she has been recognised by the US State Department for her work in empowering women through the media. I am also joined by Alden Meyer, who is an American Climate Policy expert with four decades of

experience in environment and energy issues, including as Director of Strategy and Policy at the Union of Concerned Scientists. Alden's analysis and advocacy have helped shaped both US and United Nations Climate policies. He has testified before the US Congress on Global Warming and has served on several US federal advisory panels. He's currently a Senior Associate at the international climate change think tank E3G, Third Generation Environmentalism and a Principal at Performance Partners. And last but not least, I'm joined by Richie Merzian, former Australian Government representative to the United Nations Climate Negotiations. Richie worked at the Department of Climate Change and Foreign Affairs for almost a decade on both domestic and international climate agendas. And he currently heads up the Climate and Energy team at the Australia Institute which researches all things from fossil fuel subsidies to electricity market reform to Kyoto carryover credits. So a big welcome to Cherelle, Alden and Richie, and thank you all for joining us.

Richie. If I can start with you, Richie. Australia's climate policies weren't ambitious enough to score us an invite to Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Climate Summit last December. Is Australia definitely invited to President Biden's climate summit tomorrow?

Richie Merzian, Climate & Energy Program director, Australia Institute 4:22

Thanks, Audrey. And thank you to our guests for joining us here. The answer is basically that this is a different beast altogether. So in December, you had Boris Johnson organising a conference with France and the United Nations Secretary General. And then the criteria for an invite was your level of ambition, what more you could bring to the table. Now we have a summit organised by President Biden and the criteria, at least in the original format is the size of your emissions. So in that sense, Australia is invited because it's a big emitter, not because it is actually taking action to address that. Alongside that, it is joined by 16 other large emitters. They form the Major Economies Forum, which is the format for this meeting. It's a format that Obama started a while back and now President Biden is continuing. But alongside that, you have a number of other voices joining the table making up 40 leaders. And that's really to expand and push the boundaries of ambition. So you have a number of small island states, including representatives from the Pacific; you have countries that are smaller, but have higher ambition targets like the Nordic countries, as well. And you also have some members from outside the international community too joining. So it's really an opportunity to push ambition and the US wants to lead by example. And we know that the Prime Minister is under pressure as to what to do to respond to that. But right now, Australia is a major emitter, it's in the top 20, the third largest exporter of fossil fuels in the world after Russia and Saudi Arabia. And it has a really unambitious target that's currently on the table, which is a 26% emission reduction by 2030. So nothing to brag about, and nor have we heard anything to date to really fix that.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 6:07

Alden, I might go to you next. Why is Biden organising this climate summit? And why has the US prioritised climate diplomacy so highly? [Oh, you're just on mute there.]

Alden Meyer, Senior Associate E3G 6:20

[You'd think after a year this we'd have it down by now, but apparently not.] But you got to remember in his campaign for President, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, prioritised the climate change issue as an existential crisis. And they said, along with the recovery from COVID, economic recovery

and racial justice, it would be the centrepiece of their administration. And of course, during the campaign, President Biden committed to hold a summit of world leaders in the first 100 days of his Administration. And he's basically following through on that pledge. You've seen the Administration take a whole-of-government approach to this issue, from the people they put in charge, like John Kerry on the international front and Gina McCarthy on the domestic front. You've seen every Cabinet Secretary that he's brought in, including climate on their policy agenda. You've seen a series of Executive Orders in his first 100 days, you've seen major legislation proposed now with the American Jobs Act, to invest hundreds of billions of dollars in climate-friendly technologies to help decarbonize the American economy and reach the target that he will be putting forward at the summit on Thursday for 2030. So this is a very serious government, they think it's a key pillar of their foreign and national security policy. They do believe it's an existential crisis, and they do believe it's in the world's interest to rally together and take this on.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 7:50

And Cherelle, the Marshall Islands currently chairs the Global Ambition Alliance, and they'll also be attending the climate summit. How important is it to have Pacific voices around the table rather than than just those major emitters?

Cherelle Jackson, journalist and editor of the Pacific Environment Weekly 8:05

I think it's extremely important. So first of all, thank you so much, Audrey and Richie and the team in Australia Institute for inviting me to speak with you today. I think having Marshall Islands at the table is extremely important because the Pacific does need to be at the table when the US is discussing these very important issues. And given the pivot by the US policy on climate change over the, you know, the change with the shift in Administration, the Pacific needs to hear that the US is genuine about that shift. So having Marshall Islands at the table is an excellent signal that the US is regarding the Pacific in terms of what they have to say about the US role. But at the same time is one country enough? Bainimarama [Fiji's Prime Minister] has certainly expressed his slight discontent at the fact that there's only one Pacific Island as part of the summit. But at the same time, there's also a lot of the politics in the Pacific region in terms of regionalism, and the stance, the united stance of the Pacific on climate change is also something that might impact Marshall Islands engagement in the summit itself. But at the end of the day, what's more important than participation is actually the US delivering and, you know, putting up ambitious targets.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 9:38

Richie or Alden, did you want to comment on that?

Alden Meyer, Senior Associate at E3G and Lagipoiva 9:42

Yeah, I can say I agree entirely, that it's essential to have the small island states to have other vulnerable countries represented. It's not as many as we would have liked to see. It's not as representative as it should have been. But you saw our Special Envoy Kerry adding a stop in Bangladesh on his way back from his trip to India, and spending a day there, meeting with the Prime Minister, meeting with other leaders, learning what Bangladesh is doing to be one of the leaders in the world on adaptation strategies. You know, I think they're gonna take this seriously. They're

engaged with the small island states, with the Africa group, with the least-developed countries and others. One issue that I think we will not see addressed to the extent it should be at the summit, is loss and damage, which is basically the issue once you get beyond mitigation and adaptation. And you're left with unavoidable climate impacts, whether it's slow onset climate impacts, like sea level rise, or sudden events like typhoons, and downpours. This needs to be addressed. And this has been something that the US under both administrations has not been forthcoming on for the last couple of decades. And it's not just the US, it's all the industrialised countries - Australia, Europe, Japan, others - and I think you'll hear from some of the leaders of the vulnerable countries - Bhutan, Bangladesh, Antigua, Barbuda from the Caribbean, Marshall Islands - the need to have an adult conversation about this issue and really start to mobilise the resources needed to help these countries deal with what's coming at us. Because we know even we got to net zero emissions overnight, impacts would continue to mount over the next couple of decades because of past emissions in the atmosphere. So it's our ethical and moral responsibility to help these countries who, through no fault of their own, are facing unavoidable impacts, cope with those impacts.

Richie Merzian, Director Climate & Energy, The Australia Institute 11:35

Audrey, if I can add to that. On Alden's comment around loss and damage, this is a concept in the UNFCCC (the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) where the unavoidable impacts of climate change and the damage bill they'll cause and the loss they'll cause needs to be paid for. So who will pay for it? And the argument is that it should be those who are most responsible, those who have emitted the most and therefore should help those who are least responsible, but facing those consequences. And it's very similar here in Australia, to the concept of who pays for the climate damages faced by those in the Black Summer bushfires, or those faced by the additional flooding we're facing or the drought. And really, in Australia, if we can localise that argument, it should be the fossil fuel producers, the fossil fuel exporters. You know Australia exports emissions through its fossil fuels that are more than twice the size of what it domestically emits here, and yet they're paying nothing for that pollution that they're contributing. And so it's a similar concept. The Australia Institute is proposing a climate compensation fund, a Climate Disaster Fund. We tax fossil fuel exports, and that helps pay for the damages. Similarly is this concept of loss and damage in the international stage, where we find a way for developed countries, industrialised countries, to pay for those damages that are unavoidable in developing countries. And this is an argument we want to see percolate up to the top of the table and having those who are most impacted like small island states, like least-developed countries represented is essential to do that.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 13:13

So Alden, what can we expect from the US at the summit? And what role do you think that China will play?

Alden Meyer, Senior Associate at E3G and Lagipoiva 13:21

Well, from the US, they've made clear that they will be unveiling their 2030 target under the Paris Agreement. We've urged them to put forward a bold and ambitious target of at least a 50% reduction below 2005 levels by 2030. That compares to the 26 - 28% by 2025, that President Obama put forward. We have also encouraged them to say more on climate finance. We know that Special Envoy Kerry has been working on a private sector finance initiative with banks and major investors like BlackRock to try to shift their investment portfolios much more dramatically over the coming

decade than they have been. We also are seeing the US put a lot of pressure on countries like Japan and Canada and South Korea to increase the ambition of their Paris commitments and to phase out importantly, financial support for coal expansion - in Asia in particular. We think there may be some announcements on this front from those countries at the summit, we're not exactly sure what they will be. They will also be having a session on the second day of the summit on technology innovation where Bill Gates and other private sector leaders will be talking about how to mobilise the resources we need to continue to innovate, advanced technologies to deal with this crisis. And they will have a concluding session on "building back better", and prosperity, and the jobs that can be created by decarbonizing the global economy as well as not to leave behind communities and workers that are currently in the fossil fuel sector. There's no reason that they should bear a disproportionate brunt of this shift away from fossil fuels. We need serious and significant just transition policies to help those workers and communities in this shift. Oh, in terms of China, well, you saw the the joint announcement from the US and China last Saturday night in the States, I guess it would have been Sunday morning there in Australia. I think that was a fairly significant achievement, especially if you put in the context of the very tense meeting that the US, China had in Anchorage, Alaska last month. It makes clear that there's an interest in both sides and cooperating and collaborating on climate change. We are the world's two largest economies and two largest climate emitters. If we don't cooperate and work together to address this, we really don't have a hope of meeting the Net Zero commitments and avoiding the worst impacts of climate change. Of course, the proof will be in the pudding. There was a lot of areas of future work laid out in that joint statement. But how they will live into that and especially what China will say at this summit remains to be seen. We know that President Xi made a pretty bold statement last September at the General Assembly opening where he committed China to reach Net Zero Carbon emissions, not greenhouse gas emissions, but Carbon emissions by no later than 2060. But the five year plan that China has put forward and the initial steps they've taken are nowhere commensurate with that 2060 goal. So everyone's waiting to see what President Xi will say at the summit on Thursday.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 16:32

And Richie, just coming back to Australia. We heard today that the PM is putting an additional \$500 million towards hydrogen and carbon capture and storage. How do you think that that will be received and what can we expect from Australia at the climate summit?

Richie Merzian, Climate & Energy Program director, the Australia Institute 16:50

Yeah. Not well, is how I think it will be received. And I'm very interested in Alvin and Cherelle's views on this, which is just news that we woke up to this morning that the government will put an additional, almost a quarter of a billion dollars to hydrogen, and a quarter of a billion dollars to carbon capture and storage. The problem there is that Australia's hydrogen strategy has no mandate to focus just on the cleanest form of hydrogen, the zero emissions hydrogen, which is using renewable energy, and water. And we know that the majority of hydrogen is made using gas. We know that the gas companies are pushing for a hydrogen industry because they want to lock in their technology to continue their licence to sell energy, just in the new form of hydrogen. The problem is it emits a lot. It emits more than if you just burn the gas for energy straight up. And so the solution there is to claim that you will bury the emissions from the process of making hydrogen using gas. And the problem is carbon capture and storage as a technology is really just a marketing tool for the fossil fuel industry. The Australian Government has invested over \$1.3 billion in carbon capture and storage over the last 15 years and has no commercial CCS facility for coal, and only has one for gas. And that has been a pretty big failure, a failure in the sense that it started producing gas and then it

didn't actually sequester anything for three years. It emitted about 10 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> - 10 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, that's about the same as Australia's annual domestic aviation emissions. So when you get CCS wrong, which has been pretty much the case around the world, it'll lead to a much bigger emissions footprint. So \$500 million for technologies that are really only going to benefit fossil fuels is nowhere close to the ambition that is required, and hopefully expected at the Biden summit.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 18:49

Alden or Cherelle, keen to get your comments on this one as well. Do you think Australia's hydrogen and CCS announcement is going to cut it at the summit?

Alden Meyer, Senior Associate at E3G and Lagipoiva 18:59

Well Cherelle, why don't you come in and then I'll come behind you?

Cherelle Jackson, journalist and editor of the Pacific Environment Weekly 19:02

I think Alden you'd be better placed to comment on this but I think from a broader standpoint of Australia's responsibility to the Pacific Islands, I think it's just, it's about time that it actually brings its emissions to well below half of the current levels. And after a while, the talk is just talk. Action. The Australia needs to deliver on its promises or actually it needs to, first of all, make the proper promises and then deliver on it. For a long time, Australia has taken the Pacific under its wing and has acted like it is the protector of the Pacific, when in all actuality at the regional level, Australia has done so much to actually betray the people of the Pacific in terms of policy and at the negotiations. So I'm looking forward to seeing what the promises are and if they truly deliver. And I just want to touch again on the issue of loss and damage, the fact that Australia has not once stood up for the Pacific in terms of this issue. The fact that it will not be addressed at the summit is very unfortunate given that that would be one of the very few high level opportunities for the Pacific Islands to address this issue and to actually call Australia, call out Australia on this topic. So I think it's a very important time for these issues to be raised. Unfortunately, sadly, only one Pacific Island is part of the summit, as we've discussed, but that Pacific Island was representing all our voices from the Islands, is actually a very well placed voice. RMI [Republic of the Marshall Islands] has consistently been representing the Pacific well beyond their capacity, their very small capacity as an island nation. I think their affinity to the US actually gives Marshall Islands, you know, an excellent kind of platform to speak on behalf of the Islands. And I think just to, to continue on that thought of loss and damage, the fact that Marshall Islands also raised the issue of climate refugees at the Human Rights Council and wanting for Australia, the US and others to address that issue, is also another issue that should be addressed. Sorry, I think I went off topic there. And do excuse my children shouting in the background. I'm not in an office environment. Alden, over to you.

Alden Meyer, Senior Associate at E3G and Lagipoiva 21:34

Thanks Cherelle. Yeah, I totally agree with what you said there. Just on CCS, I mean, I think you can make a case for a modest investment in CCS as a hedge against uncertainty in some of the hard-to-abate sectors like heavy industry. But in coal, coal is already uncompetitive with renewables, and efficiency and storage and in most markets around the world, and it's gonna get even more so. And



that's without the additional cost and energy penalty associated with trying to combine coal with with CCS. And of course, CCS does nothing to address all the other side effects associated with coal, from conventional air pollutants, the coal ash, to mining safety, etc. So if the Australian Government is putting forward CCS as a strategy to keep coal and natural gas alive, it makes very little sense. And certainly absent policies to drive down fossil fuel emissions substantially in the next decade, I don't think it'll be received very well at the summit.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 22:39

And Cherelle, I just want to come back to something that you touched on there. What is the Pacific sentiment towards Australia like? We know that last Pacific Island Forum, there was a pretty tense standoff on climate. Is Australia seen as part of the Pacific family or more like the removed greedy uncle?

Cherelle Jackson, journalist and editor of the Pacific Environment Weekly 23:00

Sorry, that's an excellent...! You know that uncle that comes to the party, and you know you won't like him. So it's that guy. So, Australia has, you know, as I've said before, it's kind of like this assumed Big Brother mentality in the Pacific. And so with that, it should naturally come with that responsibility of protection and being you know, a good friend and ally. But over and over, we've seen that fail. At the domestic level, it seems - well, I speak for for Australia's position in Samoa - they are doing all the right things. But then we're, when we're sitting with Australia at the table at a regional negotiation, or to come up with regional stances, they don't do the right things. So it's that uncle that is related to you, you have no choice because you're related to them. But then it's embarrassing some of the things that they do. So I think in that respect, it sounds like a very kind answer to Australia's role in the Pacific. But again, I come back to - if Australia is marketing resilience as a way to help the Pacific but minimise its responsibilities and loss and damage, things need to be changed. And yes, we want Australia's assistance in adaptation. Yes, we really enjoy and benefit as Pacific Islanders from infrastructural developments and the assistance that Australia provides at the national level and local level. But really, at the end of the day, if Australia is not committing globally to doing the right thing, then all those actions fall short of, you know, true meaningful action at the global level. So yes, naughty uncle that you won't invite at the next party.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 24:52

We've got about five minutes before we head to questions from the audience. So I might just ask a final question to the whole panel. If this is the start of the climate summit season, what should we keep an eye out for? What other climate related events can we expect beyond Earth Day tomorrow? Might come to you first Richie, then Cherelle, and then Alden.

Richie Merzian, Climate & Energy Program director, the Australia Institute 25:13

So yeah, so in a sense that there's a drumbeat of meetings in the lead up to the UN Climate Conference, the 26th one, which the UK will host in November. So next month, the International Energy Agency, a relatively conservative organisation, will release its first Net Zero pathway, which will step out exactly what will happen to coal, what will happen to natural gas, what will happen to oil, as countries actually implement their Net Zero, or their carbon neutrality targets, which will be

particularly important to Australia given that we're the largest exporter of coal, we're the largest exporter of liquefied natural gas. And according to many politicians here, we should continue this forever. Then in June you have, the UK will be hosting the G7. We know that the US and the UK are working together to target big emitters like Australia. So Australia has been invited to the G7 even though it's not officially a member, along with India and South Korea, to really push them to see if more can be done. The next month, hopefully, we'll have a Pacific Island Forum summit for leaders. We'll have a Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting as well, where again, you'll have many small Island states and least developed countries along with the UK, Canada and New Zealand, all pushing Australia. And we'll have the G20 in November which Italy will host. They're also on board with the climate agenda; they are co-hosting the COP with the UK. So they'll be pushing Australia at the G20 as well, and then finally the COP. So this is really just the start of mounting pressure. And it'll be really interesting to see how the Australian Government responds because so far, to date, it has let go of its Kyoto credits, I mean won't be using those, which is good because they're legally baseless. It's really dodgy to do so. They're angling towards a Net Zero by 2050 but haven't locked anything in. A lot more needs to be done and a lot more in the short term, especially around what Australia will do for between now and 2030.

Cherelle Jackson, journalist and editor of the Pacific Environment Weekly 27:18

So I think Richie has listed off everything leading up to COP26 so I don't have much to add to that. But I do want to say a point in terms of US's pivot in terms of climate. It is actually going to make a huge difference at the local level in terms of financing and I think that's something that needs to be noted in moving forward, the summit being a beginning standpoint. When Trump came into office, a lot of smaller assistance, financial assistance by the US in the Pacific Islands were pulled as well. And you saw that cost a lot of communities. With Biden's entry, we're hoping to see that national-like bilateral engagement by the US and climate projects actually increased and improved over the next few years. In terms of preparation, moving toward COP26, I think the key issue for the Pacific is solidarity. And that solidarity has been at risk due to some, you know, issues in the leadership of the Pacific Island Forum. And how that will play out in terms of the Pacific positioning towards COP26, it remains to be seen. But at the same time, the PSIDS grouping for the Pacific in New York is actually a very strong entity group, and are unaffected by regional politics, so to speak. So very exciting times ahead for the Pacific and engaging with Biden, and also moving forward towards COP26.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 28:54

We might move to questions from the audience now. I've got one here from Tom Swann. And he asks, "Biden has declared an end to fossil fuel subsidies. Do you expect Australian plans to subsidise gas expansion will come under pressure from the Biden Administration?" Alden?

Alden Meyer, Senior Associate at E3G and Lagipoiva 29:13

Well, yeah, they clearly are pushing countries, including Australia, to phase out subsidies for fossil fuels. The old saying goes when you're in a hole, the first thing is to stop digging. We are in a big hole with climate change and yet we're paying people to produce and burn more of the things we say we don't want. Makes no sense at all. So we've got to phase out the hundreds of billions of dollars in subsidies for fossil fuel production and consumption. The US is putting a lot of pressure we know on Australia, Japan, South Korea, others that have been helping finance coal in Asia. I think that will continue through the summit and beyond the summit, through all the many meetings that Richie



mentioned and probably some other ones as well. So I don't think that pressure is going to abate and I think Australia ought to be very aware of the growing alignment between the US and Europe on this and even the conversations that are starting with China in this area. The US and China are co-chairing the Sustainable Finance Study Group this year for the G20, which will be reporting recommendations out for sustainable finance taxonomy and I'd be very surprised if those recommendations included continued subsidies for fossil fuel production and consumption.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 30:33

All right, we also have a question here from Beck Gredley. And she asks, "Morrison was defensive this week about Australia's achievements on emissions reductions, saying "Don't let it be said by those who want to talk Australia down in what we're doing on emissions, that we're not carrying our load. We are." How is that perceived on the international stage?" Might go to you Cherelle and then to Richie.

Cherelle Jackson, journalist and editor of the Pacific Environment Weekly 31:01

I mean, I always find that amusing when Australians are asked "how are we being perceived globally"? Well, it's not, it does not look good, guys. So I think that's my simple comment is that, you know, there needs to be better responses from Australia. If you're lacking in policy, at least take some sort of a moral obligation that is required in matters like this.

Richie Merzian, Climate & Energy Program director, the Australia Institute 31:32

To continue from Cherelle's quite polite response, I reckon. Which is - and that's probably part of the problem - diplomacy usually starts out with encouragement and hand-holding, and sort of a relatively generous berth given for countries to move into what is ambition, and the Pacific are particularly polite to Australia, which is why it's rare when there are quite forthright comments. And I think Bainimarama, the Prime Minister in Fiji is probably exceptional in that regard. But you know, others have said it before, like Enele Sopoaga from Tuvalu or Anote Tong, the former President of Kiribati, as well, that Australia is failing the Pacific, and that Australia is failing to do what is fair, what is equitable, what is expected of a wealthy country that has benefited from industrialisation and has benefited from the back of fossil fuels and massive exports, to then turn around and do as very little as possible. And that's what it's doing. 26% emission reduction by 2030 is weak and it's not seen as consummate, with what is required under the Paris Agreement, nor in keeping up with what other major economies are doing. And so really, I think Australia should be going back to the drawing board and doing more. It's not perceived - and I can say this as an Australian diplomat who did the climate negotiations for a number of years - Australia is seen as a laggard. When announcements like the one today around hydrogen and carbon capture and storage are given, you see your European counterparts roll their eyes, like Australia is just seen in the same way that that image is constantly circulated of Scott Morrison holding a lump of coal, saying 'Don't be afraid'. And likewise, Australia has pushed to ensure that coal financing continue from multilateral banks; has pushed to ensure that fossil fuels are not even mentioned in most of the international agreements we have; that there's no regard given to the supply of fossil fuels rather than just the demand. So Australia has to be doing a lot more and the very least would be to halve its emissions by 2030. That is what's required and that is what credible action would look like. Much like what the US is going to be bringing to the table. But very interested in Alden's comments as to whether Australia views from DC have changed under the current administration.

Alden Meyer, Senior Associate at E3G and Lagipoiva 34:01

Yeah, I mean, I think that remains to be seen. Obviously, Australia is a strong ally of the United States. You saw Australia included in discussions on the Quad with Japan and India, in addressing the vaccine crisis in Asia for COVID. Clearly, the US is trying to rebuild security alliances in the Indo Pacific Region partly as a buffer against what it sees as Chinese expansionism. So climate is not the only issue that the US has with Australia but I think it could become a growing irritant in the relationship if the Morrison Government doesn't get more in alignment, not only with the US but where the rest of the world is going. So I think Australia needs to think about this seriously. We had a speech by the new US Trade Representative last week at the Centre for American Progress where she said that climate is going to be fully integrated in the US trade policy. That means greening trade agreements. That means removing barriers for deployment of clean technologies. That means getting the WTO to allow some form of border adjustments or tariffs to deal with countries that aren't doing their fair share. So I think that these are all things that the Morrison Government should be taking seriously and not take the relatively, you know, generous, outstretched hand from the US for granted. If it doesn't, it doesn't take more action.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 35:33

And we have a question from Rod. Under Rudd and Gillard, Australia had a South Pacific climate policy and strategy. The Abbott government abolished it. Should Australia recommence a cooperative program with the South Pacific on climate. Cherelle?

Cherelle Jackson, journalist and editor of the Pacific Environment Weekly 35:53

Certainly, Australia should have a Pacific program on climate. But again, you can do, Australia can do all of that, can do the right things regionally and nationally and locally. What if it fails to actually live up to the ambitions that they need to have the emissions? Then, you know, how true is that commitment? So Gillard and Rudd were not perfect by any means with their engagement with the Pacific but they did regard the Pacific as an entity and they took it seriously and the Pacific were, you know, constantly being consulted in terms of what Australia should be doing more of in the Pacific. So, yes, there should be a regional, a better regional engagement by Australia, but I mean, he's barely saying the right things nationally. So I hope that, you know, I'm taking Richie's words here in that the Pacific are very polite people. We're very respectful, but at the same time, for specific cultures are such that we will be respectful to you in the front, and then turn around and do our own thing. So at some point, the Pacific Islands will actually have some sort of exhaustion as a result of this continuous betrayal by Australia to do the right thing.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 37:23

Hmm. We're hearing a lot about what Australia should do, so I want to come to this question from Wesley who asks, "Do panellists have any insights on how the US Administration might actually bring real pressure on Australia to set more ambitious policy and put forward a new 2030 target to reduce emissions?" I might come to you first, Richie, and then to Alden, and Sherelle.

Richie Merzian, Climate & Energy Program director, the Australia Institute 37:51

Sorry, Audrey, it just broke up a bit. Could you repeat that?

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 37:55

I'm just asking about how the US could put pressure on Australia to come forward with a 2030 target, a more ambitious one.

Richie Merzian, Climate & Energy Program director, the Australia Institute 38:04

Yeah. It starts with incentives. So right now, we know that Australia exports a lot of lithium and a lot of the minerals required to build the technologies to green up transport, to green up industry, to green up households and electricity grids. And we know that the US is doubling down in that space. So there could be incentives, like additional US funding into Australian manufacturing or into Australian mining of the resources that are required to build these green techs. So it'll start out with incentives like that and more opportunities there. But eventually, if Australia doesn't really take to the encouragement to do more, then you'll start seeing more sticks, rather than just carrots. And that'll...much like the European Parliament agreed to investigate and bring forward a border adjustment - taxing goods that are coming in that are high in carbon, which would be most of the things Australia makes, because the majority of our electricity is still based on fossil fuels, as well as all the other kind of carbon inputs we put into our goods. And we know that the US is interested in the border adjustment. We know Japan and Canada are also looking at how this border adjustment unfolds. So you'll start with some carrots, but it will end up with sticks. And really, it just makes sense for Australia to move now, smooth out that transition, benefit from the opportunities. You know, we heard from the Opposition Leader in Australia, just yesterday, Anthony Albanese who addressed a Climate Technology jobs summit, and he's saying that his party wants to milk out every job opportunity that exists within a Net Zero pathway. We don't get the same kind of messaging from the current Federal Government and it's that changing, that concept that instead of Net Zero costing Australia, it will benefit Australia but the benefits will really come if we move now rather than be forced to later on.

Alden Meyer, Senior Associate at E3G and Lagipova 40:07

Yeah, I would totally agree with Richie on that. And I think the other thing I'd add, I said earlier that the Biden Administration is taking a whole of government approach. So Australia's not only going to hear about this issue when Scott Morrison has bilateral conversations with President Biden or when John Kerry comes to Canberra, Sydney or Adelaide or Melbourne, he's...the Australians are going to be hearing about this in every meeting they go to. So when they go to the Clean Energy Ministerial Mission Innovation Summit in Chile, at the end of May, beginning of June, they're gonna hear about this from [Secretary Yellen] Secretary Granholm [excuse me], the Secretary of Energy. When they go to the G20 Finance Ministers meeting, they're going to hear from Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, about the importance of addressing the climate issue and getting rid of fossil fuel subsidies, and moving away from high carbon economies. So this is gonna be unrelenting pressure on every front where Australia has to deal with the United States and I think increasingly with other countries as well, as Richie had said, and of course, the big concern I would have if I was Australia is if the US and China actually align in starting to move towards Net Zero emissions, particularly with China's coal consumption and financing of coal and the rest of Asia, that would be a huge shift that Australia probably wouldn't be ready for, and prepared to deal with.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 41:29

And Richie, you touched on border adjustments there. And we've got a few questions about that. What's the likelihood of large economies collectively developing and implementing border adjustment, so tariffs on exports from countries who have inadequate or no carbon pricing?

Richie Merzian, Climate & Energy Program director, the Australia Institute 41:47

It's a good question, and it's one that the Australia Institute will be putting a paper out hopefully in the next month from some analysts who have been working on border adjustments for the last three decades. So we'll hopefully add to that conversation. Before I started, I just wanted to add on to Alden's great point, which is when the US and China align, and Australia is nowhere near that alignment, it causes major trouble for Australia. That's what happened in the lead up to the Paris Agreement where the Obama Administration managed to stitch up a deal with China. And you had an Abbott Government that was pushing back against it. And fortunately, we had a Foreign Minister at the time that was smart enough to know that that we needed to move on it, pushed for it. And that Prime Minister didn't last. And instead, you had Malcolm Turnbull go to Paris and sign Australia up. Oddly enough, Malcolm Turnbull is back in the news again, because he actually pointed out the very uncontroversial point that maybe we shouldn't be opening up 23 new coal mines in New South Wales and that sort of got him kicked off a Net Zero panel. It just shows you how hard it is in Australia to have this conversation. And maybe that's why doing it through sticks, not just carrots might be more effective. And the way that will unfold is that you'll have a group of countries come together and form a bit of a carbon club. At least that's the language that Boris Johnson is using. And it's something that he'll be putting forward, hopefully at the G7, which Australia will attend in early June. And this will take the form of countries agreeing on what a proxy carbon price could look like. The EU already has an Emissions Trading Scheme as well but proxy carbon prices can be agreed as well. Many corporations have shadow carbon prices they operate on as well. And then, in a sense, trade will be opened between those countries and where it goes beyond those countries, then it will face an adjustment, a tax. And that will on all, you know likelihood right now include Australia given that we have no real indication that we'll be moving towards anything close to a fair share of a polluter-pay approach.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 43:57

We also have a few questions here about Net Zero targets. Sherelle, there's a question from Jenny here and she asks, "Do you think this climate summit will recognise that Net Zero emissions by 2050 is way too late? Is there any hope that nations might bring that target back to 2040 at least?"

Cherelle Jackson, journalist and editor of the Pacific Environment Weekly 44:20

I hope that this summit will be a step towards recognising that it's a little too late. But I hope that there will be proactive approaches after that. I think, I always like to bring things into perspective when we do these panels in that the Pacific has been experiencing the impacts of climate change for a very long time now but we're only seeing coverage of these issues now because the US is going through it, because there's bushfires in Australia. And coming from a media background, I think it's quite sad that we need to see the suffering of high-emitting countries and developed countries before we actually bring these issues to the fore. It's an excellent step towards the right direction that Biden is holding the summit. But one wonders, how does this actually contribute to that Net Zero target that we all want? And how does it, where do we go from here in terms of concrete

actions by Australia, and the US moving forward? And I think it's really important to know that at the end of the day, it's domestic policy that really needs... Australia and the US need to up their game on domestic policy in order to meet their global targets. And to meet their obligations to small island states, like Tuvalu, like Tokelau, like RMI, and so many who have been suffering first and worst, and yet, we've done so little to be, to suffer the repercussions of climate change. And, you know, in climate circles, they call what I just did just now, a Cry Me a River speech. But I feel like we always need to bring it back to that. We need to bring it back to the fact that there are actually people who are suffering as a result of inaction by both Australia and New Zealand. I just saw someone in the comments say, "Hey, I'm sorry, your children have to hear this." And yeah, I'm sorry too that we have to have these discussions in order for Australia and the US to up their game.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 46:38

Richie or Alden, did you want to comment on that?

Alden Meyer, Senior Associate at E3G and Lagipoiva 46:41

Yeah, I will say I agree with Cherelle. We should be striving to get to Net Zero earlier if we can. But I would also say that Net Zero by 2050, because of the dithering we've done over the last 30 years is not, by no means easy. It's going to take a massive effort to get there. And just to put it in perspective, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change says we need to get to Net Negative Emissions in the second half of the century, which means we basically have to eliminate emissions from fossil fuels and we have to ramp up the potential for agriculture, wetlands, forests, mangroves, other natural systems to absorb more carbon to get us in that negative. So this is really an unprecedented mobilisation of society we're talking about over the next several decades. And we should approach it with some humility, but also with resolve and try to do it as early as we can. Because as Sherelle said, the impacts are real, they're going to increase every year from now on for the next several decades, and every 10th of a degree that we can reduce temperature increases by 2100 matters. So this is something that our kids and our grandchildren will be dealing with the rest of their lives, and we have responsibility to do everything we can to get away from a business as usual mentality.

Richie Merzian, Climate & Energy Program director, the Australia Institute 48:00

Audrey, just to add to that. Last night on the 7.30 Report, which is a popular news broadcast in Australia, there was footage and commentary from a young, a young person who was involved in the Black Summer Bushfires and had their communities evacuated, because of the surrounding fires, and the choking smoke and everything else. And it just brought to bear something that we've been finding in our research and the Climate Of The Nation that we publish every year, the increasing number of Australians who say that climate change is happening now. It's not something for the future, the impacts are happening now. And it's sad that it requires that felt experience by us here in Australia, in a relatively privileged position, to actually bring that issue to the fore when so many of our neighbours, the Pacific Family, as the Prime Minister likes to say, have been suffering it for so long. And so that is one thing that we want to see communicated into actual policy impact. And you'll know that politicians won't deny climate, they won't call for pulling out of the Paris Agreement. Instead, they'll come up with other ways to delay climate action. And that's the real culprit right now. It won't be pushing back on the science. It'll be pushing back on the scale of action required. It'll be slogans like, Oh, we support technology, not taxes, not targets. We just want to get

on with the job and that's what we're going to add more money to our fossil fuel friends, and they can hopefully bury their emissions and keep on status quo. Those are the things we have to watch out for. It's delaying serious climate action. It's avoiding taking action and targets where they can be held to account. And that's really why we all have to be vigilant and we have to push for more, especially when these opportunities come up like the one tomorrow that President Biden is organising. And good on John Kerry, the Special Envoy, for calling out fossil fuels in particular and saying that developed countries need to lead the way by phasing out coal. It is essential - coal and fossil fuels are the main reason why we're suffering climate change. It's the main form of pollution. And there's no way that we can get around it. We do need to phase out coal. It won't happen overnight. But the first thing we can do, as Alden says, is stop digging. Let's stop and put a moratorium on new coal mines and new gas fields.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 50:31

And Alden. Nick asks, "Do you think the Biden Administration can survive the pressure from the fossil fuel lobby and Republicans?"

Alden Meyer, Senior Associate at E3G and Lagipoiva 50:40

Well, I think they can. The politics in the US has been shifting. You actually see a majority of Republicans supporting clean energy solutions. They like solar cells, they like electric vehicles, they like energy efficiency. There still is a divide in the Republican Party about climate change itself and how urgent a problem that is, but that's shifting as well, and the Republican Party gets this - that they're on the wrong side of history when it comes to younger voters, when it comes to Hispanics, when it comes to millennials, independence, women... The smarter minds are knowing they have to shift away from their head in the sand approach, saying the problem isn't real, to contributing to constructive solutions. The fossil fuel industry is tough. It's a major player in the US. After the Rio Summit in 1992, they targeted the US to try to increase division, polarise the issue and block the US from ratifying the Kyoto Protocol. I remember Lee Raymond, who was the chairman of Exxon Mobil at the time going to forums in Asia and telling China and India and Indonesia and others not to take on commitments to reduce their emissions, because it would hurt their economies. And then coming back and financing a massive TV campaign in the US saying the US shouldn't ratify Kyoto, because China and India weren't acting. I mean, just the height of cynicism and duplicity you've seen from this industry. And my former organisation that I worked for, the Union of Concerned Scientists, has documented the disinformation campaign over decades, sort of torn from the tobacco industry's playbook of manufacturing lies and spreading them through scientific-sounding front groups and individuals. So this is a very cynical industry, they know what's at stake for them. This is a death row for them. They're gonna fight to the finish. But the reality is more and more Americans are waking up and becoming quite concerned about this problem and they're standing up to the fossil fuel industry and demanding action from their politicians. And eventually, that's going to start to affect even some of the Republicans in Congress that have been staunch allies of the industry for many years.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 52:51

And Sherelle, a question to you from Wesley. "What does the Pacific want from Australia before COP26? Does Australia need to bring a new Paris target to the Pacific Islands Forum later this year?"



Cherelle Jackson, journalist and editor of the Pacific Environment Weekly 53:08

Sorry. Australia needs to rapidly scale up its efforts to bring emissions to well below half of the current levels. They need to do that soon. And they need to do that by COP26.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 53:25

Richie?

Richie Merzian, Climate & Energy Program director, the Australia Institute 53:28

Yeah, so much more is required. The issue here is, much like Alden was pointing out in the US, you have the fossil fuel industry that are well-ensconced in our government, and with the ear of our government. Like when a panel was pulled together to address the COVID-19 Commission, it was packed with fossil fuel executives, and they came back with a gas recovery plan. When the Climate Change Authority had its membership up for renewal, the Chair is a former executive for a gas company. Which I'm guessing is a climate change expert, because he's been involved in creating so much! Yeah, so it's this kind of a system that ill-informs our pathway. And what we need to do is we need to actually have an independent commission, much like the UK does, to recommend ambitious targets. It's why the UK is looking at 78% by 2035, as its cut. We don't have that in Australia. I know that Zali Steggall, the independent member who displaced Tony Abbott, has a bill, which hopefully Parliament will consider, that creates this new commission that mandates this advice. This kind of a legislative backbone is what's required if Australia is going to put itself on the right path.

Alden Meyer, Senior Associate at E3G and Lagipoiva 54:47

I would just add that one of the primary sources of disinformation in the US has been a TV outfit called Fox News, which I believed is owned by an Australian named Mr. Murdoch. So we have some common cause there between the US and Australia and having to stand up to the disinformation campaign by the Murdoch Empire.

Cherelle Jackson, journalist and editor of the Pacific Environment Weekly 55:10

Sorry, Richie. So Alden, this is so very interesting. I've been stuck in the US for a year now due to COVID and border closures, and have found myself very surprised by the lack of knowledge of the climate crisis by people that I meet in the US, in a way that I've never experienced in my own island or in my own region. You meet a lot of Pacific Islanders, you ask them about climate change, they know what it is, there's no denial about it. In the US, moving across the US - seven states in the past year - I've been absolutely shocked at the ignorance, at the sheer ignorance of Americans, you know, the impacts of climate change and the impact of what's happening in this country, as a result of the fossil fuels and the way that Americans have really not met the expectations globally to try and meet their targets under the Paris Agreement. So I just want to make a comment on that issue of information. How important it is that our countries in the Pacific are aware of the fact that Australia makes the right speeches on the ground, the US makes the right diplomatic interventions nationally within our own governments. But push comes to shove, this needs to actually translate into action leading up to COP26.

Alden Meyer, Senior Associate at E3G and Lagipoiva 56:43

I can't agree more. And Richie talked earlier about the need for incentives. The incentive that politicians and democracies respond to is voters, and how they're going to be perceived at the next election. And one of the things the US groups have been doing a much better job of in recent years, is taking this issue out to voters. It was a huge issue in the 2020 presidential campaign, and then a number of congressional races and Senate races. And I think that will continue to increase and that results in a lot of education going on during those campaigns. So you're totally right Sherelle, Americans are much less informed about this than they need to be, but that's starting to change. And it's starting to change from the youth frankly, the Friday's for the Future movement, the student strikes, the Sunrise movement and others that have really started to bring this home and make it a much more front-and-centre issue in their communities and with their parents, frankly.

Audrey Quicke, Australia Institute Researcher 57:35

Alden, I think that's quite a positive note to end on there. We will have to wrap it up. So a big thank you to Lagipoiva Sherelle Jackson, Alden Meyer, Richie Merzian and thank you everyone for your great questions. Please join us over the next few weeks for some more exciting webinars. Next Tuesday, former Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull will be talking about coal, climate change and conservative media with our chief economist Richard Denniss. We'll try to get to the bottom of why so many conservatives love coal, what that means for domestic climate policy, and how it's affecting Australia's relationship with its allies. I also recommend that you read Malcolm Turnbull and Kevin Rudd's Op Ed on climate action today too. And then next Thursday, we'll be joined by activist and author Eli Pariser, the Australia Institute Centre for Responsible Technology director Peter Lewis and Lizzy O'Shea from Digital Rights Watch to discuss "Reimagining the Public Square". Make sure you're subscribed to our podcast, Follow The Money. You can subscribe on iTunes or wherever you normally listen to podcasts. Thank you and see you next time.

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