

A fair COP31

The 2026 UN Climate Conference

The Australian Government has proposed that Australia host the 2026 UN Climate Conference, in “partnership” with Pacific nations.

Australia cannot be considered a credible host for COP31 while it continues to subsidise and approve fossil fuel expansion. Nor can Australia be considered a credible co-host if it ignores the requests of its prospective Pacific partners.

Awarding Australia hosting rights to COP31 in anticipation of it changing its ways risks rewarding it for decades of recalcitrance. Instead, Australia must change its ways first.

Tom Hawking
Polly Hemming

June 2023

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...Australia wanted to frame [COP31] as the Pacific COP, and it is in that light that we have expressed our expectation that we would only agree to the notion of framing [it] as a Pacific COP if Australia were to come on board and support the priorities of the Pacific on climate change.

And this is inclusive of fossil fuels. So, the discussion we've been having [is] about doing away with subsidies; [stopping] issuing a new licensing for further fossil fuel production, coal mines and so forth; and [making] a commitment over time to reduce the consumption of coal and other fossil fuels in line with the 1.5°C trajectory pathway.

...and then the second dimension is in terms of capacity technology transfer... we would like to see Australia really beefing up its commitment to supporting the Pacific Island nations to transition away from fossil fuel to renewables.

So those are the two dimensions [on which] we certainly would like Australia to make firm commitments that would enable us, the Pacific, to really support the COP in Australia and be able to see [it] being a Pacific COP.

— Hon. Seve Paeniu
Minister of Finance and Economic
Development, Tuvalu
1 June 2023

Summary

On the eve of the 2022 United Nations (UN) climate conference, Chris Bowen—Australia’s Minister for Climate Change and Energy—announced that Australia was bidding to co-host the 31st UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP31) in 2026. The announcement included the news that the bid was being made in conjunction with “Pacific nations”.

In Australia, supporters of the government’s proposal have declared that this is an “Olympic moment” for the country. It has been suggested that a successful bid for the COP is the critical catalyst for the climate action the world needs to see from Australia. The Australian Government has said that “Co-hosting COP31 will help restore Australia’s reputation”.

But domestic support alone will not secure the hosting rights to COP31. Australia needs the support of the international community: including the support of the relevant regional grouping (Western Europe and others grouping) to nominate it, and of course the support of the Pacific region as a prospective co-host.

While Germany and Switzerland have expressed support for Australia’s bid, it remains to be seen whether Pacific nations will follow through with their in-principle support.

Australia’s COP31 bid is a positive development in two respects: it invites international scrutiny of Australia’s climate ambition, and it presents the world — including Pacific nations — with an opportunity to demand that Australia face up to its responsibilities as a major per-capita emitter of greenhouse gases and the world’s third largest exporter of gas and coal.

Australia’s history of evasion and inaction on climate change has left its Pacific neighbours distrustful of its intentions and created strained diplomatic relations throughout the region. Pacific Island nations have been some of the most vocal advocates for an end to fossil fuel production—unsurprisingly, given the existential threat that rising sea levels and increasing extreme weather events pose to their communities. Australia, meanwhile, has fought consistently to water down climate-related agreements, manipulated international emissions accounting to meet its climate targets, and used foreign policy to secure ongoing demand for its fossil fuel exports.

Australia’s climate obfuscation is an open secret among the international community, a fact that suggests a solo bid for the COP may be unlikely to win support. The fact that

the COP31 bid has been presented as being a joint effort between Australia and Pacific countries already appears to have proven crucial to its success—Switzerland, for example, withdrew its own bid on the basis that “these countries are particularly hard hit by the effects of climate change, so [their] candidacy would have good chances.”

While it is clear how Australia’s reputation would benefit from hosting the world’s largest climate conference, the benefits to Pacific countries are less obvious (if they exist at all). Pacific nations have expressed in-principle support for Australia’s bid, but have also been clear from the outset: Australia can only be a credible partner if it truly demonstrates that it is supporting the priorities of the Pacific on climate change.

The governments of Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Tonga, Fiji, Niue, and the Solomon Islands have recently issued a joint resolution—the *Port Vila Call for a Just Transition to a Fossil Fuel Free Pacific* (abbreviated hereafter as “the Port Vila Resolution”)—calling for a number of urgent actions to address climate change.

The Resolution calls unambiguously for an end to fossil fuel expansion, an equitable phase-out of fossil fuel usage, and a globally just energy transition. It also sets out a detailed checklist of actions for achieving these goals. So far, Australia has checked off very few of the items on that list.

The current Labor Government’s stated climate ambition may be an improvement over that of the previous government, but its legislated climate target of a 43 per cent reduction in emissions by 2030 is not consistent with 1.5°C or 2°C of global warming, and its support for fossil fuel expansion is just as enthusiastic as its predecessor. Australian governments collectively provide \$11 billion a year in fossil fuel subsidies, making the \$700 million Australia has committed to climate finance in the Pacific over four years look particularly meagre.

Australian Government data projects coal exports to increase through to 2028 and LNG exports to maintain steady. Domestically, the Australian Government has a stated goal of 82 per cent renewable energy in the electricity grid by 2030, but it has committed to no meaningful policies to address significant emissions from stationary energy, manufacturing, transport, agriculture or other areas of the economy. Under the government’s key climate policy, the Safeguard Mechanism, heavy industry can purchase unlimited government-certified carbon offsets as an alternative to reducing their carbon pollution.

It should not be incumbent on Australia’s Pacific neighbours—the countries that have made the smallest contribution to the climate crisis—to force Australia into acting like a responsible global citizen. However, the urgency and scale of the existential threat

climate change poses to Pacific nations means they may have little choice than to leverage opportunities like COP31 to secure more climate action from Australia.

COP31 may well be an “Olympic moment” for Australia. However, the Olympic metaphor should serve as a warning not an inspiration. The Olympics have frequently arrived in countries with questionable hosting credentials on a wave of rhetoric about inspiring change only for no change to occur once a bid is secure.

The bids for the 2014 Russian Winter Olympics, the Beijing Olympics in 2008 and Beijing Winter Olympics in 2022 are particularly notorious examples of sportswashing significant environmental damage and human rights abuses. Australia’s desire to host the COP seems another attempt at greenwashing its appalling track record on climate.

Awarding Australia hosting rights to COP in anticipation of it changing its ways would be, at best, a case of putting the cart before the horse, and at worst, a case of rewarding a country for decades of recalcitrance. It would further undermine the credibility of the COP process - already tenuous given that COP27 and COP28 hosting rights have been awarded to major fossil fuel producers Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

Introduction

In June 2022, Chris Bowen, Australia’s newly appointed Minister for Climate Change and Energy, made a speech to the Investor Group on Climate Change. “Australia,” he proclaimed proudly, “is under new management”.¹ Bowen acknowledged that Australia “has wasted a decade” in addressing climate change, and expressed a desire to “end the climate wars”.

Four months later, Minister Bowen doubled down on the “new management” rhetoric, announcing that not only would Australia be taking climate change seriously, it would be bidding to host a Conference of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). “This ... remind[s] the world that we’re back,” Bowen told reporters. “We’re back at the international table.”²

This announcement certainly marked a notable shift in Australia’s approach to COPs: former Prime Minister Scott Morrison could barely rouse himself to attend such events, let alone host them. (Morrison’s attendance at COP26 in Glasgow came only after sustained pressure from a number of sources, from the late Queen Elizabeth II to an Australia-wide wave of striking high school students.³) Even previous federal Labor governments showed relatively little interest in the UNFCCC: in the Convention’s 30-year history, Australia has not put in a single bid to host a COP event.

Bowen’s announcement also came with the news that “[Australia] will seek to co-host the bid with the Pacific”. In a joint media release by Minister Bowen, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Penny Wong, and the Minister for International Development and the Pacific, Pat Conroy, it was claimed that “co-hosting COP31 will help restore Australia’s reputation”.⁴

¹ The Hon Chris Bowen MP (2022) *Address to the IGCC 2022 Climate Change Investment and Finance Summit*, <https://www.minister.industry.gov.au/ministers/bowen/speeches/address-igcc-2022-climate-change-investment-and-finance-summit>

² Qui (2022) “Australia, Pacific nations to bid to co-host 2026 U.N. climate summit”, Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/business/cop/australia-pacific-nations-bid-co-host-2026-un-climate-summit-2022-11-05/>

³ Razik (2021) “The Queen slams ‘irritating’ world leaders over refusal to attend COP26”, SBS, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/the-queen-slams-irritating-world-leaders-over-refusal-to-attend-cop26/qheyqx7o4>

⁴ Minister for Foreign Affairs (2022) *Media release: Australia’s International Climate Engagement*, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/media-release/australias-international-climate-engagement>

Pacific nations have welcomed Australia's proposal in theory.

Whether any Pacific nation will support the bid in practice , however, remains to be seen. Without rapid and meaningful action on fossil fuels, it is quite feasible that Australia may again be left as the odd one out in its home region.

Climate change and the Pacific

Given the threat that rising sea levels and increasing natural disasters present to many Pacific Island nations, it is not surprising that these countries have taken a dim view of Australia's history of climate inaction. This means that in recent years, Australia's relationships with Pacific neighbours have been strained, at best; at worst, they have been openly adversarial.

In the lead-up to COP21 in Paris, for example, the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS)—a global intergovernmental group of low-lying island nations—called for a global moratorium on the construction of new coal mines.⁵ Australia, unsurprisingly, refused to support the call. At a subsequent meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF), Anote Tong—at the time the President of Kiribati—grew so frustrated with then Prime Minister Tony Abbott's attempts to block any reference to a goal of restricting global warming to 1.5°C that he “suggested that Australia should leave the [Pacific Islands] Forum if Canberra would not back island positions in the global climate talks.”⁶

Similarly, Australian insistence on avoiding emissions reductions undermined Scott Morrison's attendance at the PIF leaders' meeting in 2019. At the time, Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama appealed for Australia to do “everything possible to achieve a rapid transition [away] from coal”, describing coal as “an existential threat” to his country and to other Pacific islands.⁷ Bainimarama has made multiple similar statements since, including an observation in December 2021 that Australia “had a dangerous addiction to coal”.⁸

Bainimarama has a point—a key objective of Australian foreign policy has long been increasing, not decreasing, the export of fossil fuels. The result is that today, Australia is the world's largest exporter of both liquified natural gas (LNG) and metallurgical coal

⁵ Tlozek (2015) “Pacific leaders call for coal mining to be shut down to save island nations from effects of climate change”, ABC News, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-08/pacific-island-nations-want-to-shut-down-coal-mining/6756958>

⁶ Morgan (2021) “Ripple effect: How climate inaction jeopardises our Pacific standing”, *Australian Foreign Affairs*, Issue 12, <https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/essay/2021/07/feeling-the-heat>

⁷ Lyons (2019) “Australia coal use is ‘existential threat’ to Pacific islands, says Fiji PM”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/12/australia-coal-use-is-existential-threat-to-pacific-islands-says-fiji-pm>

⁸ SBS (2022) “‘Crucial moment’: Pacific Islands Forum to ramp up climate pressure on Australia”, SBS, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/crucial-moment-pacific-islands-forum-to-ramp-up-climate-pressure-on-australia/ljqwjah8i>

and the second-largest exporter of thermal coal.⁹ In July 2022, coal surpassed iron ore as Australia’s most lucrative export.¹⁰ Even before the UNFCCC process began, successive Australian governments have used the full range of foreign policy levers to significantly reduce global commitments to cut emissions.¹¹

In this context, then, it is perhaps surprising that Australia would place itself in a position of having to rely on the goodwill of Pacific nations to support its COP bid. Minister Bowen explained the decision for a joint bid as a “an opportunity to work closely with our Pacific family, and ... to help elevate the case of the Pacific for more climate action.”¹²

While that may be true, another benefit of the joint bid became clear in November 2022, when Switzerland withdrew its bid on the basis that “Australia has already announced great interest in organising the conference in cooperation with Pacific island states... [which are] particularly hard hit by the effects of climate change, so a candidacy would have good chances.”¹³ Clearly, the inclusion of “[Australia’s] Pacific family” has provided the bid with a measure of legitimacy.

AN OLYMPIC MOMENT?

Given Australia’s history of prioritising fossil fuel industry interests over enactment of climate policy, its continuing refusal to commit to phasing out new fossil fuel projects, its head-in-the-sand approach to the consequences of coal exports, and its attitude to previous COPs, any credentials that it can claim for being a worthy host for a climate focused-event are very tenuous indeed. It would be entirely fair—and not incorrect—to suggest that awarding Australia hosting rights to COP in anticipation of it changing its ways would be, at best, a case of putting the cart before the horse, and at worst, a case of rewarding a country for decades of recalcitrance.

⁹ Saunders and Campbell (2022) *From Russia with love: Coal profits from war in Ukraine*, The Australia Institute, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/From-Russia-with-love-coal-windfall-gains-WEB.pdf>

¹⁰ Toscano (2022) “Glencore ‘proud’ as coal surpasses iron ore as nation’s biggest export”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/glencore-proud-as-coal-surpasses-iron-ore-as-nation-s-biggest-export-20220708-p5b07a.html>

¹¹ Denniss and Behm (2021) “Double game: How Australian diplomacy protects fossil fuels”, *Australian Foreign Affairs*, Issue 12, <https://www.australianforeignaffairs.com/essay/2021/07/feeling-the-heat>

¹² Reuters, op. cit

¹³ O’Malley (2022) “Australia’s ‘advanced’ plan to host COP prompts bidders to pull out”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/world/africa/australia-s-plan-to-host-cop-prompts-bidders-to-pull-out-20221119-p5bzky.html>

This is a genuine concern. As the COP31 bid gains momentum, it is attracting some unlikely supporters: for example, Dermot O’Gorman—the Australian CEO of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)—wrote in November 2022 that “winning the bid for COP31 ... will help catalyse climate action in Australia and around the world, reviving [Australia’s] global reputation”.¹⁴ O’Gorman’s piece goes on to describe hosting as “an Olympic moment—a huge opportunity to host a nation-building global conference”.¹⁵

Skeptics might argue that an Olympic moment is not necessarily something to which Australia should aspire. After all, the Olympic Games have frequently arrived in countries with questionable hosting credentials on a wave of rhetoric about inspiring change, and departed with that change conspicuous by its absence. The most notorious example remains the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, but a more recent—and instructive—Olympiad is Beijing 2008.

When the decision was taken in 2001 to award the Games to China, the concerns raised by organisations like Amnesty International about the country’s human rights record were met with airy optimism from the International Olympic Committee and vague promises from the Chinese government. Yuan Weimin, China’s then Minister for Sport, conceded that “like all countries, China has certain areas where something is left to be desired”, but argued that the Games—and their attendant economic benefits—would “bring along advances in culture, health, education, sport and, not least of all, corresponding progress in human rights.”¹⁶

In the 15 years since the Olympics roadshow left Beijing, that “corresponding progress in human rights” has proven non-existent,¹⁷ a fact that did not prevent the 2022 Winter Olympics being awarded to China. That decision was again accompanied by calls for the Games to catalyse human rights improvements,¹⁸ and again, by very little in the way of actual progress. The result is that China has been provided with two open goals to sportswash its international image.

¹⁴ O’Gorman (2022) “Australians should rally behind bid to host COP31”, WWF, <https://wwf.org.au/blogs/australians-should-rally-behind-bid-to-host-cop31/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Longman (2001) “Olympics; Beijing wins bid for 2008 Olympic Games”, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/14/sports/olympics-beijing-wins-bid-for-2008-olympic-games.html>

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch (2008) “China: Olympic promises are not being kept”, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2008/01/31/china-olympic-promises-are-not-being-kept>

¹⁸ Amnesty International (2022) “China: World must use Winter Olympics to demand human rights improvements”, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/01/china-world-must-use-winter-olympics-to-demand-human-rights-improvements>

Similarly, Russia's bid for the 2014 Winter Olympics promised the "greenest Olympics ever".¹⁹ Russian Officials claimed that all effort would be made to ensure damage to ecosystems in Sochi would be minimised (the location for the event), and that any damage would be compensated for. The event was also pitched as "zero waste".

Russia's bid was successful, though it was ultimately found that it had not fulfilled any of its green promises. Media reports revealed that waste from construction was found hidden in illegal landfills and thousands of hectares of forest were cut down in protected areas.^{20 21} Human Rights watch also raised a number of concerns about human rights abuses including worker exploitation and intimidation of environmental activists and journalists.²²²³

In the same way that state-sponsored sportswashing is an increasingly common tactic for countries looking to improve their international images, so too is state-sponsored greenwashing. It is therefore imperative that if COP31 is to be an Olympic moment, it must be Sydney 2000, not Beijing 2008. The primary condition for any support for Australia's COP31 bid must be that the bid be accompanied by Australia making genuine, binding, quantifiable commitments to change its ways.

CO-HOSTING AS A DRIVER OF CLIMATE ACTION

While Australia has consistently indicated that its COP bid is in conjunction with the Pacific as a whole, the COP process does not lend itself to multi-party governance, which means that ultimately, the COP will likely be a partnership with a single Pacific country. A shared Presidency presents enough significant challenges on its own without drawing in an entire region.

In addition, it seems inevitable that the COP will be physically hosted in Australia. There are few Pacific countries that can support an influx of up to 35,000 people in the timeframes required. Indeed, the most recent COP awarded to a Pacific nation—COP23 in 2017, "presided over" by Fiji—was held in the German city of Bonn because

¹⁹ Chance (2009) "Russia plans 'green' winter Olympics",
<http://edition.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/europe/12/11/winter.olympics.russia.2014/index.html>

²⁰ Antonova (2013) "Olympics: Illegal dump tarnishes 'green' Sochi Games",
<https://phys.org/news/2013-02-olympics-illegal-dump-tarnishes-green.html>

²¹ Chestin (2014) "Sochi Olympics have left a trail of environmental destruction",
<https://theconversation.com/sochi-olympics-have-left-a-trail-of-environmental-destruction-23112>

²² Human Rights Watch (2013) "Russia: Olympic Sponsors Muted on Sochi Abuses",
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/18/russia-olympic-sponsors-muted-sochi-abuses>

²³ Human Rights Watch (2013) "Russia: Silencing Activists, Journalists ahead of Sochi Games",
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/07/russia-silencing-activists-journalists-ahead-sochi-games>

the logistical challenges of holding the event locally proved insurmountable (not least because of the impact of Cyclone Winston, which hit the island the year before).

Given all this, it is worth asking why any Pacific nation would agree to be the notional “co-host” for an event that would be staged in Australia and would allow Australia to polish (or distract from) its reputation as the world’s third-largest fossil fuel exporter. Put simply: what’s in it for them?

As discussed above, the fact that Australia is presenting the bid as being “in partnership with our Pacific family” is proving a key aspect of the bid’s attractiveness, despite the fact that no formal support from that family has yet been granted.

Historically, such opportunities have been rare: disparities in size and economic power have often allowed Australia and other Western countries to ignore Pacific countries’ views. However, this situation appears to be changing. The ongoing power struggle between China and the United States has seen a war of influence being waged across the Pacific. Australia will be keen to reassert its traditional influence in the region, but Pacific nations are increasingly making it clear that their foreign policy alignment cannot be taken for granted.

In May 2023, the Pacific Island Elders Voice group—comprising the former leaders of Kiribati, Tuvalu and the Marshall Islands—issued a statement making it clear that “Australia’s ... clear desire to deepen its engagement in the Pacific and give meaning to the narrative of a regional ‘family’ ... cannot happen with responding to our greatest threat—the climate crisis.” The statement also suggested that Australia’s security ties with its neighbours were contingent on genuine climate action, noting that the Albanese government’s plans to counter China’s interests in the region made Pacific Island nations feel “less like players and more like the chessboard”, and suggesting that “perhaps it is time for the Pacific ... to upend the chessboard entirely.”²⁴

It is clear that as sea levels continue to rise, Pacific nations’ patience with Australia’s fossil fuel expansion, and its inadequate support for mitigation and adaptation, is running very low.

THE PORT VILA RESOLUTION

The most significant expression of the Pacific’s waning patience with Australian inaction on climate change came in March 2023, when the governments of Vanuatu,

²⁴ Foley (2023) “Pacific pressure: Island leaders say security ties at risk unless Australia does more to cut emissions”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/pacific-pressure-island-leaders-say-security-ties-at-risk-unless-australia-does-more-to-cut-emissions-20230518-p5d9d2.html>

Tuvalu, Tonga, Fiji, Niue, and the Solomon Islands met at the Second Pacific Ministerial Dialogue on Pathways for the Global Just Transition. The body subsequently issued a joint resolution—the *Port Vila Call for a Just Transition to a Fossil Fuel Free Pacific* (“the Port Vila Resolution”)—calling for a number of urgent actions to address climate change.²⁵

The Port Vila Resolution begins with “the [appalling] fossil-fuel driven consequences of the unprecedented two Category 4 cyclones striking Vanuatu within four days”, describing the storms as “just the most recent example of the extensive and ongoing fossil fuel-induced loss and damage suffered by... the Pacific Islands.” The Resolution states categorically that “the Pacific will no longer accept the fossil fuel lie”, and sets out the signatories’ intentions: “We have the power and responsibility to lead, and we will”.

To this effect, the Resolution makes four major proposals:

- A fossil fuel-free Pacific and a global, just and equitable phase-out of coal, oil and gas;
- New Pacific-tailored development pathways based on 100% renewable energy;
- Expanded public and private finance for the just transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy; and
- Redoubled efforts to reaffirm, strengthen and codify legal obligations with respect to the global phase-out of fossil fuels.

Each of the above proposals is accompanied by a detailed list of the steps required for them to be put into practice. This means that as well as being a powerful, eloquent expression of its signatories’ frustration with larger countries’ continued inaction on climate change, the Port Vila Resolution is also a highly detailed plan for those countries to follow in turning that inaction into (belated) action.

If Australia is genuine about a respectful relationship with its Pacific family, and a COP “partnership” it seems clear that the following steps should be priorities:

- Making a genuine commitment to a just and equitable phase-out of coal, oil and gas production, in line with the Paris Agreement’s goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C or below. Australia should commit to this goal at the UN Secretary General’s climate summit in September 2023, at COP28 in November/December 2023, and beyond. This commitment should include:

²⁵ 2nd Ministerial Dialogue on Pathways for the Global Just Transition Away from Fossil Fuels (2023), *Port Vila Call for a Just Transition to a Fossil Fuel Free Pacific*, https://www.pican.org/_files/ugd/923d4b_fba70d14c89945dc929763429ca62344.pdf

- Avoiding the use of terms like “unabated” or “inefficient”, which create loopholes for fossil fuel producers and polluters;
 - Committing to making transparent disclosure of fossil fuel investment and projects, and demanding that all other governments do the same (including through the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and the Global Registry of Fossil Fuels);
 - Referencing this fossil fuel phase-out explicitly in the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) and Long-Term Low-Emission Development Strategies (LT-LEDS);
 - Developing national just transition plans, including through existing multilateral platforms;
 - Halting all new licensing rounds for fossil fuel projects; and
 - Setting a Paris-aligned end date for fossil fuel production.
- Joining the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance, and urging major oil and gas producers to do the same;
 - Developing a regional strategy for carbon-free maritime transport in collaboration with initiatives such as the Pacific Blue Shipping Partnership;
 - Using grant-based financing and direct investments to assist the region as a whole to transition away from fossil fuels, with the goal of ensuring that the transition can take place in a just, fair and equitable way;
 - Assisting in and advocating for the reform of international financial institutions and climate finance mechanisms to shift to comprehensive, country-wide programming, so as to enable scaled-up, timely and easily accessible funding for this transition;
 - Supporting, and calling for all other nations to support, the Commission of Small Island States on Climate Change and International Law in seeking an advisory opinion from the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea on international law concerning climate change, rising sea levels, and states’ obligations to protect and preserve the marine environment; and
 - Endorsing the Port Vila Resolution’s call for the establishment of a Pacific Energy Commissioner for a Just Transition to a Fossil Fuel Free Pacific, funded by allies, with senior experienced leadership supported by leading technical experts and a regional taskforce.

The Port Vila Resolution provides a very clear, and very detailed, explanation of what Pacific Island nations want from Australia (and from other large contributors to climate change).

Similarly, regarding COP31 specifically, Seve Paeniu—the Tuvalu Minister of Finance and Economic Development—has stated unequivocally, “We have expressed our

expectation that we would only agree to the notion of framing [it] as a Pacific COP if Australia were to come on board and support the priorities of the Pacific on climate change”.²⁶

Despite these unambiguous conditions, Australian civil society and government—through a recently-established “COP31 Collaborative Committee”—has decided to look into the formulation of “a series of recommendations on how the Australian Government in partnership with the Pacific can deliver climate leadership in the context of COP31”.²⁷ It is unclear whether there are any representatives from Pacific Island nations on the Committee. It is also unclear how this Committee is better-qualified to speak on behalf of the Pacific than Pacific countries themselves.

²⁶ Paeniu (2023) Regional Climate Diplomacy Forum, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/event/pacific-regional-climate-diplomacy-forum-2023/>

²⁷ Purcell (2023) “COP31 Collaborative Committee Inaugural Meeting 17 May 2023”, LinkedIn, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/marc-purcell-a20893a6_cop31-collaborative-committee-inaugural-activity-7064940101801312256-DELx

COP31: practicalities and credibility

THE BIDDING PROCESS

When the Australian Government really wants something on the international diplomacy circuit, it tends to get its way, regardless of the price tag. Recent examples include securing support in the OECD for the appointment of former Finance Minister Mathias Cormann as the organisation’s Secretary-General,²⁸ and convincing the UN World Heritage Committee not to list the Great Barrier Reef as being “in danger”.²⁹

With that said, securing the hosting rights to a UN climate conference is not straightforward. Australia doesn’t just need the support of Pacific nations, it needs to convince the international community to support it.

COP hosting rights are rotated annually through the UN’s five regional groups. Australia belongs to the “Western Europe and Others” regional group (often referred to as simply “Western countries”), which hosted COP26 in Glasgow in 2021. This grouping is comprised of 28 member states that include Western Europe, Nordic countries, Canada and New Zealand.³⁰

The next opportunity for a Western country to host a COP is therefore 2026.

To secure the 2026 hosting rights, Australia must win the support of nations within its regional grouping. In 2023 or 2024 Australia will find out if its lobbying efforts have been successful when the grouping decides whether to officially nominate it.

At present, Australia’s major competition appears to be Türkiye. While Türkiye would certainly command support from its allies, the increasingly authoritarian nature of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s government—which recently won re-election, meaning that it

²⁸ Readfearn (2021) “‘Not a suitable candidate’: climate groups urge OECD not to appoint Mathias Cormann as next head”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/mar/05/not-a-suitable-candidate-climate-groups-urge-oecd-not-to-appoint-mathias-cormann-as-next-head>

²⁹ Readfearn (2021) “World Heritage Committee agrees not to place Great Barrier Reef on ‘in danger’ list”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/jul/23/world-heritage-committee-agrees-not-to-place-great-barrier-reef-on-in-danger-list>

³⁰ United Nations (2023) Regional groups of Member States, <https://www.un.org/dgacm/en/content/regional-groups>

will be in power in 2026—may well make its bid unpopular with many other Western countries. This fact, along with the previously discussed boost that the participation of the Pacific would give to the credibility of Australia’s bid, may well see Australia emerge as the favourite to make the successful bid.

SMOOTH DELIVERY OF A COP

The most important element of planning for a COP is the Host Country Agreement (HCA). This is a legally binding agreement between the UN Secretariat and the host country that outlines the respective responsibilities of each party in regard to the preparation and organisation of the conference. This includes matters around finance, security, participation, and staffing.

One important element of the HCA is facilitating visas for participants from all countries around the world. Under the HCA, “the visa process should be expedited, and visas provided free of charge”.³¹ The Secretariat further notes that “if certain delegations would not be able to participate in the conference due to visa restrictions of the potential host country, [that country] may not be approved to host the conference”.³²

As such, Australia would need to work closely with the relevant authorities to ensure smooth entry for all delegations. The Australian Government will need to streamline its visa capability significantly to allow for the influx of delegates that hosting a COP will bring.

The federal government has already allocated funding to secure the COP bid. In the October Budget, \$45.8 million was allocated to “restore Australia’s reputation and increase international engagement on climate change and energy transformation issues.”³³ Before COP27, the government re-instated the position of Ambassador for Climate Change.³⁴ These are good places to start. However, the government will need to spend more on a well-resourced Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade and Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water.

³¹ UNFCCC (2020) *How to COP*, p 13, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/How-to-COP_2020.pdf

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Australian Government (2022) *Budget Paper No. 2*, page 56, <https://budget.gov.au/2022-23-october/content/documents.htm>

³⁴ DFAT (2022) *Australia’s new Ambassador for Climate Change, Ms Kristin Tilley*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/themes/climate-change>

CARBON FOOTPRINT

COPs usually attract between 20,000 and 30,000 participants, a number that has been increasing steadily in recent years: COP26 in Glasgow topped 40,000 participants,³⁵ and COP27 in Sharm El-Sheikh recorded 45,000.³⁶ Hosting a COP will thus likely involve a significant state and federal government expenditure. In return, conferences of this size bring significant benefits including to a host city's hospitality and tourism sectors, two of the sectors hit hardest by the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, the fact that the COP will result in such a large number of people traveling across the world also raises the question of whether holding the event in Australia—a great distance from the most heavily populated parts of the globe—is particularly desirable. Evaluations of the carbon footprints of previous COPs have found that international travel—and, in particular, aviation—has been by far the greatest contributor to those events' emissions. As an example, 84 per cent of COP26's total emissions came from international travel,³⁷ and the majority of attendees will have to fly much further to get to Australia than they did to get to Scotland.

COP PRESIDENT

The COP host is required to appoint a COP President. Much of the President's role is procedural,³⁸ but unofficially, they are largely seen as being responsible for the diplomatic outcomes of the COP. Core responsibilities that are seen to fall to the Presidency include:

- Leading preparations for the COP, smoothing the “landing zone” for its diplomatic outcome and ensuring the success of initiatives that surround it; and
- Leading Government action in the lead-up to and during the COP, including special committees for organisation (likely a joint federal and state environment and climate committee to “back in” climate leadership).

³⁵ United Nations (2021) *COP26: Together for our planet*, <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/cop26>

³⁶ UNFCCC (2022) *COP27 Reaches Breakthrough Agreement on New “Loss and Damage” Fund for Vulnerable Countries*, <https://unfccc.int/news/cop27-reaches-breakthrough-agreement-on-new-loss-and-damage-fund-for-vulnerable-countries>

³⁷ Arup (2022) *COP26 Carbon Management Plan: PAS 2060 Qualifying Explanatory Statement*, p15, <https://www.arup.com/perspectives/publications/research/section/cop26-carbon-management-plan>

³⁸ UNFCCC (1996) *Adoption of the rules of Procedure*, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/02_0.pdf

The role of the President is diplomatically and politically important and allows for significant personal capacity to shape the international conversation on climate change. This includes delivering key regional, bilateral and international agreements that sit alongside the UNFCCC agreements.

The Presidency can bring long-term international benefits. Past influential COP Presidents have gone on to exert soft power and diplomatic weight in environmental and justice negotiations globally. Patricia Espinosa—the President of COP16, hosted by Mexico, which resulted in the influential Cancun Agreements—has gone on to a role as the UNFCCC Executive Secretary, as well as leading a number of climate initiatives internationally. Similarly, Laurence Taubiana—President for the Paris Agreement at COP21—engages globally on climate issues to this day and heads the European Climate Foundation, a position of considerable ongoing influence.

It is unclear whether the COP31 Presidency would be held dually by Australia and its Pacific partner or whether Australia has offered the COP Presidency to a Pacific nation (as opposed to claiming it for itself)

DELIVERING THE UNFCCC AGENDA FOR COP31

To host a COP in Australia in good faith, it would be fitting for the federal government to demonstrate how it is fulfilling the requests of the Pacific as well as demonstrating to the international community how its climate target and fossil fuel expansion plans are consistent with the Paris Agreement.

It would also be fitting to demonstrate how it is progressing under the pledges it made at COP26 and 27. These include the Global Coal to Clean Power Transition, the Beyond Oil and Gas Alliance and the COP26 declaration on accelerating the transition to 100% zero emission cars and vans, along with the pledges on methane emissions and deforestation signed at COP27.

The Australian government re-joining (and replenishing with a new financial commitment to) the UN's Green Climate Fund (GCF) would also be a significant demonstration of its sincerity.³⁹ Australia was instrumental in setting up GCF, was the longest serving Co-Chair of the GCF Board, focused heavily on ensuring the Pacific was supported by the GCF, and even had a former Australian Government Special Envoy for Climate Change appointed as the head of the GCF Secretariat.

³⁹ Oxfam, Climate Action Network Australia, ActionAid Australia, Climate Council, The Australia Institute, Edmund Rice Centre and Greenpeace (2021) *Fairer Futures: Financing Global Climate Solutions*, <https://www.oxfam.org.au/2021/11/climate-justice-climate-finance/>

Australia also co-hosted a GCF Board meeting with Samoa in the Pacific in 2016—an example of the sort of partnership it could bring to COP31. At the time, Ewen McDonald—formerly Australia’s GCF Board Member, and eventually Co-Chair of the GCF Board, and now the Head of the Office of the Pacific in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)—said:

“In Samoa, I was privileged to be re-elected developed country Co-Chair for 2017—the first time any country will lead in consecutive terms. This reflected the Board’s confidence in Australia’s leadership. Australia now has an important opportunity to consolidate last year’s progress and continue to draw attention—and resources—to the Pacific.”⁴⁰

In 2018, however, Australia’s progress in climate finance leadership was derailed when Prime Minister Scott Morrison stated in an interview with radio station 2GB that he would not be refinancing “that big climate fund”.⁴¹ Senate Estimates confirmed that the decision not to fund the GCF was made by the Prime Minister, not the Foreign Minister or through the advice of DFAT.⁴²

Today, Australia has \$2 billion committed in climate finance to developing countries through to 2025. According to the Australian Government, around \$700 million of this is for Pacific climate and disaster finance.⁴³ This is significantly less than the \$11 billion the Australian Government provides in fossil fuel subsidies every year. It is also half of the amount that the Australian Government committed over the next four years to defence and law enforcement “to build Pacific peace and security” in the latest budget.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2016) *The Green Climate Fund in 2016: a successful year of Australian leadership*,

<http://web.archive.org/web/20210228032051/https://blog.dfat.gov.au/2017/02/10/the-green-climate-fund-in-2016-a-successful-year-of-australian-leadership/>

⁴¹ Jones (2018) “‘It’s not as though they’re painting it on there’: PM supports Opera House promotion”, 2GB, <https://www.2gb.com/its-not-as-though-theyre-painting-it-on-there-pm-supports-opera-house-promotion/>

⁴² Senate Estimates (2018) *Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Legislation Committee 25/10/2018*, <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;db=COMMITTEES;id=committees%2Festimate%2F726eefc8-0a12-4c57-8016-8d4e4fe45117%2F0002;query=Id%3A%22committees%2Festimate%2F726eefc8-0a12-4c57-8016-8d4e4fe45117%2F0000%22>

⁴³ Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (2023) *Development assistance in the Pacific*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/pacific/development-assistance/climate-change-and-resilience>

⁴⁴ Commonwealth of Australia (2023), *Budget Measures: Budget Paper No. 2*, https://budget.gov.au/content/bp2/download/bp2_2023-24.pdf

On the whole, climate finance is poorly understood. Australia’s climate finance is often simply existing aid money rebranded as climate finance, which makes it difficult to establish how much money is actually being given or loaned.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that carbon markets are increasingly being classified as climate finance.⁴⁵ The Labor Government has made much of its financial support for “blue carbon” and Australia has secured bilateral carbon trading deals with Fiji and Papua New Guinea.⁴⁶ ⁴⁷ These arrangements are framed altruistically as an opportunity to help these countries meet their own climate targets. The reality is that carbon offsets have historically been a way for those buying them to maintain and increase fossil fuel production.⁴⁸

When addressing the Pacific Islands Forum shortly after the 2022 election, Minister Penny Wong told Pacific leaders that Australia would be a partner “that won’t come with strings attached, nor impose unsustainable financial burdens”.⁴⁹ Pacific leaders have expressed a desire for adequate and obligation-free funding for mitigation and resilience for Pacific countries—both in general and in relation to COP31.⁵⁰

A FOSSIL-FUELLED IMAGE PROBLEM

The COP is the world’s largest trade show on climate action, but it has often been polluted by false solutions. In Australia’s case, this was evident at the COP26 Australian Pavilion, where the Australian Government showcased the fossil fuel industry with a demonstration of gas giant Santos’ carbon capture and storage project, including a

⁴⁵ Commonwealth of Australia 2022, *Australia’s 8th National Communication on Climate Change*, <https://unfccc.int/documents/624717>

⁴⁶ DCCEEW (2022) *Media Release: Big blue carbon boost to restore mangroves, seagrasses and tidal marshes*, <https://minister.dcceew.gov.au/plibersek/media-releases/big-blue-carbon-boost-restore-mangroves-seagrasses-and-tidal-marshes>

⁴⁷ DCCEEW (2023) *The International Partnership for Blue Carbon*, <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/climate-change/policy/ocean-sustainability/coastal-blue-carbon-ecosystems/ipbc>

⁴⁸ Hemming & Venketasubramanian (2022) *Hot air won’t stop global warming: Submission to the Climate Change Authority’s review of international offsets*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/hot-air-wont-stop-global-warming/>

⁴⁹ Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator the Hon Penny Wong (2022) *Speech to the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat*, <https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/penny-wong/speech/speech-pacific-islands-forum-secretariat>

⁵⁰ Paeniu (2023) *Regional Climate Diplomacy Forum*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/event/pacific-regional-climate-diplomacy-forum-2023/>

joint announcement with the company's CEO on a final investment decision for that project.⁵¹

At COP27, attendees included 636 fossil fuel lobbyists from around the world (200 of them on government badges). This was a record high number, and a 25 per cent increase from COP26.⁵² While the fossil fuel industry was absent from the COP27 Australian Pavilion, the industry's interests remained very much present in Australia's formal negotiations—especially in Australia's resistance to pressure to sign onto the Clean Energy Transition Partnership, which directs export credits and public finance away from fossil fuels toward clean energy.⁵³ Perhaps not coincidentally, one industry that *was* well represented in the Australian Pavilion was the carbon offset industry.^{54 55}

This continues a trend that has been evident since the earliest discussions of global action on climate: Australia prioritising the interests of the fossil fuel industry over effective environmental diplomacy and climate policy. When Australia first negotiated an emissions reduction target, then Treasurer Paul Keating insisted that the text contain the following caveat:

“...the Government will not proceed with measures that have net adverse economic impacts nationally or on Australia's trade competitiveness in the absence of similar action by major greenhouse-gas-producing countries.”⁵⁶

For decades, this insistence that climate action should not come with a cost has prevented Australia from effectively engaging in international climate diplomacy.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Morton (2021) “Australia puts fossil fuel company front and centre at COP26”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/nov/03/australia-puts-fossil-fuel-company-front-and-centre-at-cop26>

⁵² McGrath (2022) “COP27: Sharp rise in fossil fuel industry delegates at climate summit”, BBC <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-63571610>

⁵³ UK Government (2021) *Statement on international public support for the clean energy transition*, <https://ukcop26.org/statement-on-international-public-support-for-the-clean-energy-transition/>

⁵⁴ Business Council for Sustainable Development (2022) “BCSD Australia to lead Australian business delegation to COP27 in Egypt”, <https://www.bcsda.org.au/post/bcsd-australia-to-lead-australian-business-delegation-to-cop27-in-egypt>

⁵⁵ Carbon Market Institute (2022) “CMI's COP27 delegation”, <https://carbonmarketinstitute.org/cop-27-hub/>

⁵⁶ Hudson (2015) “25 years ago, the Australian government promised deep emission cuts, and yet here we still are”, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/25-years-ago-the-australian-government-promised-deep-emissions-cuts-and-yet-here-we-still-are-46805>

⁵⁷ Merzian and Cass (2021) “Our Common Climate Future”, in Campbell and Scott (eds) *The Nordic Edge*, Melbourne University Press, p 149

The economic power of the fossil fuel industry over policymaking in Australia is also evident in how Australians overestimate the size of the coal and gas industries. The Australia Institute's *Climate of the Nation 2022* survey found that Australians overestimate the size of coal mining employment by a factor of 33:⁵⁸ while respondents believed the coal mining industry makes up 10 per cent of the total workforce, in reality coal mining employs just 0.3 per cent of Australia's workforce. Australians also dramatically overestimated the economic value of the coal mining industry in terms of its contribution to GDP. On average, respondents believed that the coal industry accounts for 13 per cent of GDP; the actual figure is around 1.4 per cent.⁵⁹

Despite Australians continuing to overestimate the size of the coal and gas industries, *Climate of the Nation 2022* showed that many Australians want an end to new fossil fuel projects, a planned transition away from coal mining into other industries, and a windfall profits tax on the oil and gas industry.⁶⁰ With climate change impacts happening now, there is an appetite for Australia taking climate change seriously—and being seen to do so.

The first major obstacle for the Australian Government in its bid to be taken seriously on climate will be shedding the country's image as a fossil-fuelled villain.⁶¹ This will be particularly challenging, not just because Australia's reputation is so deeply entrenched, but also because COP27 and COP28 were hosted by countries that could also be described as fossil-fuelled "villains": Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. In other words, the simple act of hosting a COP does not—and should not—guarantee the acquisition of an image as a progressive nation that is concerned about climate change.

At present, Australia remains a long way from being any such thing. In 2015, author Naomi Klein remarked that in Australia you cannot tell where the coal industry ends and the federal government begins.⁶² Nearly a decade later, Australia's actions continue to suggest that it is unwilling to break up this cosy relationship with the fossil fuel industry. Australia's rhetoric *has* changed: for example, Climate Change Minister

⁵⁸ Quicke and Venketasubramanian (2022) *Climate of the Nation 2022*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/climate-of-the-nation-2022/>

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Dewan (2021) *Australia is shaping up to be the villain of COP26 climate talks*, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/09/12/australia/australia-climate-cop26-cmd-intl/index.html>

⁶² Milman (2015) *Tony Abbott is a climate change 'villain', says Canadian author Naomi Klein*, <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/aug/17/tony-abbott-is-a-climate-change-villain-says-canadian-author-naomi-klein>

Chris Bowen has spoken of Australia becoming a “renewable energy export powerhouse”. However, this aspiration appears to be *in addition to* fossil fuel exports—not *instead of* them.⁶³

For a long time, Australia has worked hard to shape, and then hide behind, the UNFCCC accounting rules, which only require responsibility for territorial emissions. Both major political parties have adopted this tactic—for example, in 2019, while he was Shadow Assistant Minister for Climate Change, Pat Conroy claimed that scope 3 emissions from coal burned offshore were not Australia’s problem.⁶⁴ Such attitudes might be difficult to maintain if Australia is to host COP31.

Today, Conroy is Minister for the Pacific, and he is discovering that other countries do indeed hold Australia responsible for the burning of exported coal. And if Australia is to be taken seriously on climate change—and if it wishes to hope COP31—it needs to stop hiding behind claims that it couldn’t possibly know what other countries will do with the coal Australia sells them.

Ultimately, hosting a COP is about international credibility, not accounting semantics.

When it hosted COP26, the UK was criticised heavily for having one new coal project—the West Cumbria Mining metallurgical coal mine, earmarked to produce export coal for steel-making—in the pipeline.⁶⁵ In 2021, the same year as COP26, the UK Climate Change Committee told the government that coal for steel-making could not be used beyond 2035 if the UK was to meet its climate targets.⁶⁶ Two years later, the decision to approve or deny the Cumbria coal mine has been delayed three times due to issues with “the mine’s compatibility with national and international climate targets”.⁶⁷

The UK was criticised over its plans for one new coal project. As of March 2023, Australia has over 100 new coal and gas projects listed as “in development”, and recent government forecasts indicate that Australia’s coal exports will increase to

⁶³ Parliament of Australia (2022) *House of Representatives 22/11/2022 Hansard*, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard/Hansard_Display?bid=chamber/hansardr/25520/&sid=0000

⁶⁴ Conroy (2019) “Don’t blame Australia for coal burned offshore. Blame us for burning it here”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/aug/27/dont-blame-australia-for-coal-burned-offshore-blame-us-for-burning-it-here>

⁶⁵ BBC News (2021) “Cumbria coal mine: Would it threaten the UK’s climate targets?”, <https://www.bbc.com/news/explainers-56023895>

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Mace (2022) “Decision on Cumbria coal mine pushed back for a third time”, *Edie*, <https://www.edie.net/decision-on-cumbria-coal-mine-pushed-back-for-a-third-time/>

2028.^{68 69 70} Hosting a COP might well draw attention to this fact, but the world hardly needs reminding of the paucity of Australia’s climate credentials. What the world *does* need is a dramatic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, to which Australia could contribute if only it would stop exporting coal and then claiming that what is done with that coal isn’t Australia’s problem.

Of course, Australia could host a COP regardless and cement its reputation as a nation-sized project in coal apologism—like Poland, a country that chose to host its COP (COP24) in the coal mining town of Katowice.⁷¹ If that is to be the case, however, it is hard to see any Pacific nation choosing to participate and legitimise Australia’s state-sponsored greenwash.

DOMESTIC POLITICAL CONTEXT

While the Australian government will need more than domestic public support if its bid to host COP31 is to prove successful, it is worth noting that the proposal of hosting a COP is a popular one with Australians. The Australia Institute’s *Climate of the Nation 2022* survey found that more than two-thirds (71 per cent) of respondents supported Australia hosting this conference.⁷² It is easy to see why: playing host to a COP provides a chance for the country to revive its global reputation on climate. It also places Australia in the global spotlight: never in its history Australia has never hosted a UN meeting of this significance.

The most optimistic vision for COP31 is that it could provide a moment for Australians to come together in building a vision for both the country and its ongoing place in the international community. It could also provide a potential opportunity to shine the spotlight on Australia’s renewable energy capabilities. Positive initiatives include Queensland’s investment in renewable hydrogen production⁷³ and South Australia’s

⁶⁸ Campbell and Ogge (2023) *New fossil fuel projects in Australia, 2023*, The Australia Institute, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/new-fossil-fuel-projects-in-australia-2023/>

⁶⁹ Department of Industry, Science and Resources (2022) *Resources and energy major projects (REMP)*, <https://www.industry.gov.au/publications/resources-and-energy-major-projects-2022>

⁷⁰ Department of Industry, Science and Resources (2023) *Resources and energy quarterly: March 2023*, <https://www.industry.gov.au/publications/resources-and-energy-quarterly>

⁷¹ Tutton (2018) “COP24: Climate conference in the heart of Poland’s coal country”, CNN, <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/12/02/health/cop24-climate-conference-poland-coal/index.html>

⁷² Quicke and Venketasubramanian, op. cit.

⁷³ Queensland Government (2022) *Enabling Queensland’s Hydrogen production and export opportunities report*, <https://www.epw.qld.gov.au/about/initiatives/hydrogen/enabling-queenslands-hydrogen-production-and-export-opportunities>

leadership in energy storage.⁷⁴ There is also potential for more large-scale projects, all of which are possible before 2026 with sufficient political will. These include:

- Expanding Australia’s capacity to decarbonise high intensity industries;
- Scaling up the country’s materials and embodied carbon export market;
- Transforming its transport sector and infrastructure; and
- Delivering a just transition to fossil fuel reliant communities.

The proposition to host a COP will need bipartisan support, because the four years until COP31 will see a federal election take place, bringing with it the possibility of a change in government.

During the 2022 election campaign, then Energy Minister Angus Taylor criticised Labor’s intention to bid for a COP, warning that “the hundreds of millions of dollars they’ll spend on hosting a conference like this would be better spent upgrading hospitals, schools and roads”.⁷⁵ Political antagonism like this threatens the stability of the COP bid in the event of a change in government. The worst case scenario is a repeat of the 2014 G20 Summit, which newly elected Prime Minister Tony Abbott spent complaining to world leaders about domestic issues.⁷⁶

To secure domestic support for the bid, the government will also need to engage independent MPs and the Greens. The latter have indicated support for the government’s COP bid, but party leader Adam Bandt has also warned that “it will be hard to justify bidding for a climate summit while opening new coal and gas [projects].”⁷⁷

If bipartisan support does not prove possible at the federal level, state level bipartisan support, as achieved in NSW and SA, will go a long way to support the COP bid. During almost a decade of climate inaction at the federal level, state and territory governments have played a pivotal role in progressing climate action by signing on to

⁷⁴ South Australian Government (2022) *Energy storage*, <https://www.energymining.sa.gov.au/industry/modern-energy/large-scale-generation-and-storage/energy-storage>

⁷⁵ Gleeson (2022) “Federal election 2022: Angus Taylor slams Labor for wanting to host United Nations climate summit”, *The Australian*, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/breaking-news/federal-election-2022-angus-taylor-slams-labor-for-wanting-to-host-united-nations-climate-summit/news-story/194c197a3f5d1d55fb81932377e67abd>

⁷⁶ Taylor and Hurst (2014) “G20: Tony Abbott 'whingeing' about domestic agenda on world stage”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/nov/15/g20-tony-abbott-whingeing-about-domestic-agenda-on-world-stage>

⁷⁷ Greber and Read (2022) Labor under pressure over PM’s COP out, *Australian Financial Review*, <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/labor-under-pressure-over-pm-s-cop-out-20221107-p5bw9v>

international pledges. One example is the Powering Past Coal Alliance. Despite the federal government not signing on, the ACT, Melbourne and Sydney are all sub-national members of the 166-member Alliance.⁷⁸

State and territory governments also signed a number of declarations at COP26 in Glasgow last year that the federal government did not sign. The ACT, NSW, SA and Victoria signed on to the COP26 declaration on accelerating the transition to 100% zero emission cars and vans.⁷⁹ The ACT also signed the COP26 Global Coal to Clean Power Transition Statement.⁸⁰

These show a strong commitment by state and territory governments to be active participants in international climate action. Members of several state governments and oppositions have already indicated support for the COP31 bid, albeit in the context of angling for their respective capitals to play host to the event. NSW Liberal Treasurer and Energy Minister Matt Kean has indicated his support for Australia's COP31 bid and has suggested Sydney as the host city.⁸¹ In South Australia, both Premier Peter Malinauskas and Opposition Leader David Speirs have outlined bipartisan support for Australia's bid, and for Adelaide hosting the COP.⁸²

City and local councils have also played a role in progressing international climate action. Melbourne and Sydney are members of C40 cities, a global network of mayors collaborating to deliver climate action where membership is earned through Paris Agreement aligned climate policies.⁸³ In addition, 24 local councils in Australia are members of the Local Governments for Sustainability (ICLEI) global network.⁸⁴

The Council of Australian Governments process was halted by Prime Minister Morrison in 2020, but its model could form the basis of an effective climate change ambition incubation mechanism. By re-energising the process, the Albanese Government can

⁷⁸ Powering Past Coal Alliance (2022) *Our Members*, <https://www.poweringpastcoal.org/members>

⁷⁹ UK Government (2022) *COP26 declaration on accelerating the transition to 100% zero emission cars and vans*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cop26-declaration-zero-emission-cars-and-vans/cop26-declaration-on-accelerating-the-transition-to-100-zero-emission-cars-and-vans#declaration>

⁸⁰ UK Government (2022) *Global Coal to Clean Power Transition Statement*, <https://ukcop26.org/global-coal-to-clean-power-transition-statement/>

⁸¹ Van Leeuwen (2022) "Matt Kean is the lonely Lib at world climate summit", *Australian Financial Review*, <https://www.afr.com/policy/energy-and-climate/matt-kean-is-the-lonely-lib-at-world-climate-summit-20221110-p5bwzn>

⁸² Richards (2022) *Speirs pushes for Adelaide COP conference*, <https://indaily.com.au/news/2022/06/14/speirs-pushes-for-adelaide-cop-conference/>

⁸³ C40 Cities (2022) *C40 Cities*, <https://www.c40.org/>

⁸⁴ ICLEI Oceania (2022) *ICLEI Oceania Members*, <https://www.icleioceania.org/oceania-members>

share initiatives, identify roadblocks and challenge the states to build ambition ahead of 2026.

While a single city will host the COP, this fact does not preclude a whole-of-nation approach—and, indeed, such an approach will be necessary to deliver the transformation required to host COP31. COP26 in Glasgow provides an example of how a COP can have effects beyond the host city. The UK Presidency supported a series of Regional Roadshows during the COP,⁸⁵ which provided the opportunity to showcase local activity and projects to the public, delegations, and investors. They also helped to motivate and inspire people to join the race to net-zero and cut their carbon emissions.

The roadshows provided:

- A range of events with thematic links to COP26 in Glasgow;
- Local support for promotional activities, such as press and communications; and
- Development of case studies for inclusion in the national collection.

Delivering a long-term program of climate consultations in the lead-up to 2026, with a focus on regions in transition, would give Australia the opportunity to build a national consensus on climate action and leadership prior to the COP.

CITY HOSTING RIGHTS

The next step for a successful COP bid is to secure city hosting rights. Adelaide has an early start as a potential host city for the conference, with bipartisan state party support for the prospect of hosting the COP in South Australia,⁸⁶ although the lack of direct flights would require international attendees to take an extra internal flight—something that appears at odds with the COP's entire *raison d'être*.

Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane are also possible host cities, given that they have all hosted many international events—including the Olympics, the G20 Summit and the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-Operation summit—and have the infrastructure to support the large number of visitors a COP would involve. The Australia Institute's *Climate of the Nation 2022* polling found that the majority of respondents supported Australia

⁸⁵ UK Government (2021) *COP26 legacy—inspiring action towards net zero*, <https://gscop26casestudies.org.uk/>

⁸⁶ Richards, op. cit.

hosting a COP in Victoria (74 per cent), NSW (70 per cent), SA (71 per cent) or Queensland (69 per cent).⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Quicke and Venketasubramanian, *op. cit*

Conclusion

There are genuine and entirely justifiable doubts about whether Australia—given its decades of intransigence in climate negotiations and its tendency to prioritise the future profitability of its fossil fuel exports over the future existence of its neighbours—is an acceptable candidate to host a COP. If the decision is taken to award the COP to Australia, that decision must be accompanied by a genuine commitment by Australia to finally change its ways.

The fact that Australia has chosen to tie its bid to the participation of its Pacific neighbours means that its desire to host a COP could provide those nations—and the world as a whole—with an opportunity to put pressure on Australia to make that change.

Regardless of whether Pacific nations ultimately support Australia's bid, they have been very clear about what is required in exchange for their support, and it is incumbent on government and civil society to show that Australia is listening.

The Australian community has a part to play in this process. Australians have been told that their country bears only a small share of responsibility for the climate crisis, and that they can somehow have it both ways—being both a renewable energy powerhouse and one of the world's biggest exporters of fossil fuels. They have been misled. The science is unambiguous, and has been for decades: mitigating global warming requires eliminating the use of fossil fuels.

The 2022 election shows that Australians support action on climate change. If Australia is to host COP31, the country as a whole needs to demand that the event be accompanied by genuine and meaningful climate action. With rising seas threatening the very existence of the countries Australia calls its Pacific family, anything less would be a profound betrayal of those countries—one for which no global climate jamboree could begin to make amends.