

Why the ACT should adopt a 40 per cent carbon emissions reduction target for 2020 - Tony Kevin, 24 June 2010

NOTE:

This talk was drafted before the dramatic change of Prime Ministership to Julia Gillard on 24 June. I believe that the incoming Prime Minister's statements on climate change

(see my Eureka Street essay of 24 June, "Goodbye Kevin, Hello Julia"

<http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=22101>)

open up exciting new possibilities for policy change at federal level away from the failed emissions trading scheme approach, to a simple carbon pricing mechanism through a carbon emissions tax on fossil fuels. However, I also believe that the arguments set out here in favour of the ACT LoveForty campaign remain as strong as ever.

I am honoured to be invited to speak tonight at this first of three community fora organised by the Love Forty campaign. I am the author of *Crunch Time*, a book aimed at general readers, published last September, which reviews in depth Australia's worsening climate crisis, and advocates new ideas for addressing it.

This is undoubtedly the most urgent public policy issue facing us today. I continue to write and speak on it whenever I can: last month I spoke at the Sydney Writers Festival.

Tonight, because I am speaking to a well-informed and committed audience, I can compress my main propositions. No serious person now doubts that Australia, along with many other parts of the world, has started to experience disruptive climate change effects. I refer to the authoritative CSIRO and Bureau of Meteorology 2010 report, 'State of the Climate'. The United States Environmental Protection Agency has recently published a similar report focussed on climate change indicators in the USA. Indeed, one only has to read daily news to see how extreme weather events like major windstorms and rainstorms, flash floods, extended droughts, and catastrophic bushfires are now happening more and more often. Australia's inland river hydrology is changing dramatically. Our regional bushfire danger indexes have gone off the scale. We are now even experiencing tornadoes on the NSW north coast.

Nor can there be any doubt now that the science of climate change is in, and it is strong. Man-made greenhouse gas emissions, accumulating in the atmosphere over the past 300 years since mankind began burning fossil fuels in exponentially growing amounts, are the main cause of the global climate changes we now see underway. Positive feedbacks in these processes will in a few years reach dangerous tipping points, after which global warming will be self-sustaining and unstoppable.

The world has only a few years left to return global atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration to a safe maximum of 350 parts per million. This figure now

stands at 390-odd ppm, and it is rising. The only way to get atmospheric CO₂ down to safe levels is by changing the sources of the world's energy usage: for humanity to stop burning coal and oil, by moving to generate our energy in ways that do not produce carbon dioxide.

I do not succumb to the pessimistic view that this task of decarbonisation is now beyond our species' capacity: that collectively we are too short-sighted, too stupid, to see that our present path of economic growth based on mining and burning ever-increasing quantities of fossil fuels is species-suicidal. If we go on as we are, within just two or three generations humanity will experience ecological catastrophes in all countries on a scale which will destroy much of our civilisation and cause the deaths of billions of people.

There is still time for homo sapiens to save our environment and ourselves, if we act with intelligence and very quickly.

The UN Climate Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009 taught a crucial lesson that we will not find internationally agreed, market-trading pathways to emissions reduction in time. To rely on an impossible dream of such treaty solutions will lead only to a collective paralysis of action until it is too late. The profit-driven global market model, the belief we can trade our way out of this huge problem, is just not adequate to the task. The developing countries led by China and India simply do not trust this model. Nor do they trust the rich West, and indeed why should they?

The West is going to have to set the example of rapid decarbonisation in practice, in the hope that others will emulate its example. There is no other way now.

The world now needs to draw on other kinds of wisdom than the market rationalist economic growth model, which still dominates Australia's national policy responses to the climate crisis.

Actually these better kinds of wisdom are already at hand: in our remembered national experience of dealing with public emergencies like the Great Depression, and of emergency rearmament for the war against fascism; and in our forefathers' resolute determination to set aside large public revenues and national resources for agreed urgent public needs like clean water and sanitation, safe roads and hospitals, adequate police and national defence resources.

It is ludicrous to suggest that the present national climate crisis does not demand a similar major public expenditure response, reaching well beyond reliance on market signals and instruments - yet this is the agreed major parties' conventional wisdom. Only the Greens show any deeper wisdom.

The failure of vision in conventional national politics staggers on, in the face of all the evidence. It is being sustained by various kinds of public and political corruption, moral cowardice, and cognitive disorders. I won't go into these matters tonight – they are explored in depth in my book *Crunch Time*, and in my series of news commentary articles in the website magazine *Eureka Street*.

So what can responsible citizens do now? First, we must responsibly inform ourselves on what the climate science says, and communicate this knowledge persuasively to those with whom we are in contact.

Then, we must identify effective forms of climate policy action which we can support as citizens. More and more, it is clear that local and territory/state levels of government are likely to be the most effective agents of climate policy change. Why?

First, because the federal level of government is too remote from voters' concerns and too vulnerable to the lobbying abilities and deep pockets of the big end of town - Big Energy, Big Coal, Big Oil. Major party leaders no longer try to stand up to such forces – they routinely accommodate to them, and the rest of us are then spun well-crafted storylines. Climate change policy becomes essentially a manipulative exercise in co-opting or placating key interest groups and political constituencies, in order to maintain the politically comfortable status quo.

Second, because citizens are more empowered at territory/state and local government levels, than at the more remote federal level of politics. There is an immediacy about local politics that compels a greater policy realism and integrity. People are directly affected, for example, by local government building regulation, land use and transport planning policies. They have the direct local knowledge to test data and arguments put to them. Local politicians' reputations are earned, or lost, on real issues. Put simply, state and local politics is closer to people's day-to-day concerns, and thus more real.

To give just one example - here in Canberra and in Tasmania the Greens are being treated with respect by the governing Labor Party, with which they are in supportive policy cooperation or coalition. At Federal level, the Greens are ignored, despite their high showing of 12% or more in national opinion polls. The healthy Labor/Greens cooperation in ACT and Tasmania reflects political reality. Labor's disdain for the Greens at federal level is a kind of denialism, based on a false vision of reality.

My third reason to hope for more effective climate action at state/territory and local government levels I have noted already – that decisions made at these levels really matter a lot, in terms of decarbonisation of public regulatory and infrastructure systems. We have to address all these public systems if we are to decarbonise our country's energy supply and usage; there is no single magic

bullet solution. A lot of these systems are subject to state/territory or local government regulatory, revenue collection, or expenditure authority.

This involves a wide range of issues which are for a state or territory government to decide. For example: in city planning, block sizes and street layouts to maximise building orientation towards North and to maintain access to winter sunlight; building codes for houses and multistorey buildings to insulate well, give thermal mass, and thus save on heating and cooling energy costs; suburban design to support effective user-friendly public transport and cycle-ways; tax or utility price incentives to encourage installations of home solar heating and electricity generation. Then there is support for expanding local food-growing capacities; support for local sustainability and resilience in employment and education; social services to help sustain forms of social capital which can help keep families and local communities strong and environmentally resilient; building and maintaining public assets, like the ACT's inspirational Arboretum and its good public parks, sporting and recreational facilities; motor taxation policies to encourage less car use, smaller cars, and electric plug-in cars.

In all these kinds of ways, the ACT already has quite a proud record of vision and achievement. But of course, we can and must do better. The 'better' goal, as proposed by the LoveFortyPercent community campaign, is represented and quantified by the aspirational goal to reduce the ACT's total carbon dioxide emissions 40 per cent by 2020, from a 1990 base level.

The ACT could probably achieve a 20 per cent reduction by 2020, without too much strengthening of present policies and emerging community values in the ACT. But we will not get the extra 20 per cent reduction to 40 per cent without major innovative government policy action and leadership, supported by an informed and committed ACT electorate. Setting the bar this high will almost certainly involve a real public discussion of sensitive issues, like how much more population growth, and what kinds of economic growth, Canberra's people want to see in Australia's largest inland city. How can we best secure our children's future in a sustainable Canberra? We need to have this discussion, and it must involve all of us, and not just those who stand to profit most immediately and directly from continued growth, as growth is presently defined.

To get to 40 per cent emissions reduction, we will need dramatic advances in the ACT's electricity generation and public transport systems and land use planning. We will also have to learn how better to balance local Nimby-ism against legitimate wider community goals. At the same time, we are going to need good bulldust-detectors in public discourse, the better to distinguish between legitimate public objectives, and sectional profit-driven objectives. Put simply, a growth-driven ACT growth model is unsustainable: we have to start planning for a stable sustainable ACT economy.

We should aim for a lot more wind and solar power generation in or around the ACT, to seriously reduce our present almost total reliance on imported electricity from the Eastern Grid. By 2030, I hope we won't still be buying power from a coal-based grid that is poisoning kids' lungs and digging up vast acreages of prime foodgrowing farmland in the Hunter Valley. The ACT cannot tell NSW how to generate its electricity, but we can set a good example of clean electricity generation right here, in and around the ACT.

We are well-off enough here to afford to build a large solar thermal or photovoltaic power station, and to build wind-farm arrays on our hills, and to build supporting energy storage capabilities to balance energy supply through the daily and weekly cycles. We have sufficient scientific and engineering expertise here in the ACT to plan and build all these things. An ACT government should not have to rely on politically unreliable Commonwealth funding to finance such local public energy infrastructure. It should be able, perhaps in a form of public-private partnership, to raise the necessary funds itself from the private sector, as ACT-guaranteed Renewable Energy Investment Bonds.

Here in the ACT, we could make 40 per cent greenhouse gas emissions reduction by 2020 a reality, and set a wonderful example to the rest of our nation, if only we can marshal the public vision and courage to adopt these goals and work systematically towards them.

We should reject arguments that it can't be done. Of course it can!

Tony Kevin, a former Australian career diplomat, is a Visiting Fellow at the ANU's Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies and an ANU Emeritus Fellow. He is the author of two ACT Book of the Year award-winning books, 'A Certain Maritime Incident: the Sinking of SIEV X' (2005) and 'Walking the Camino' (2007). His latest book 'Crunch Time: using and abusing Keynes to fight the twin crises of our era' (Scribe, 2009) offers policy ideas for tackling Australia's climate crisis.