

ANU Visiting Fellows' Dinner speech – 12 November

- Good evening everyone, and thank you to the organisers for inviting me to speak.
- Before I do, I wish to acknowledge and pay respect to the Ngunnawal people as the Traditional Owners and Elders of the unceded land on which we meet today, as well as the First Peoples of the lands on which I work and live, the Bunurong and Wurundjeri peoples. I am predominantly an environmental and climate politics researcher, with a particular interest in the climate justice movement, which, as those of you who are aware with concepts of climate justice will know, foreground Indigenous peoples, knowledges, practices and connection to the land (or to Country). In the Australian context, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, despite colonial legal and political systems failing to address the climate injustices they experience, have staunchly advocated for climate justice, effectively prosecuting the argument that climate justice is intertwined with the struggle for land rights and self-determination. And so I note the centrality of Indigenous resistance to the ongoing fight for climate justice here in Australia.
- A bit about myself – I am a Lecturer in Politics at Monash University in Melbourne who teaches subjects ranging from Australian politics, to political theory and public policy. I am also an ECR, having completed my PhD in comparative environmental politics only last year.
- I left a rainy Melbourne yesterday morning, travelling to the surprisingly far more pleasant cold of Canberra to commence my Visiting Fellowship with the Australian Studies Institute. While here, I am working with research collaborators at ANU on a project examining public climate statements made by Australia's top emitters and how these have changed over time. In line with the literature on clean energy transitions, it is expected that, as this transition accelerates, changes in the balance of relevant organised interests will be observed.
- This question of the power and influence of organised interests over climate and environmental policy frames the topic I will talk to today. Hopefully, this talk will spur further discussion among us over dinner.
- To start off, I want to pose a question. What might it take to turn the tide on Australian environmental and climate policy? It is well known, particularly on climate action, that despite the country's considerable wealth, capacity and – if we are talking about climate, historical responsibility – to address environmental and climate challenges, Australia is somewhat of a laggard internationally. I wrote about this, with a focus on Australian climate action (or inaction), in a book chapter with my co-author Robert Thomson, prior to the most recent federal election held in May this year. In that chapter, we set out several drivers of either greater climate action or further climate denial and delay.
- To begin with drivers applying pressure on the Australian Government to take bolder climate action, we spoke to climate change-fuelled disasters, such as the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires that made headlines around the world; shifts in public, business and interest group support, particularly the broad public consensus that exists on the seriousness of the climate crisis and support for increased action; international pressure through climate negotiations, or from Pacific Island neighbours who are heavily impacted, or our more climate-ambitious economic and strategic partners; and stronger action being taken at the subnational level, with state and territory leadership in Australia generally committing to more ambitious climate targets than their federal counterparts.
- On the other side, speaking to the drivers of further denial and delay, we discussed the fossil fuel industry, its lobbying efforts and favourable treatment by government, as well as climate dis- and mis- information – including both straight-up climate denial and more deceptive strategies utilised by influential figures and media, such as falsehoods that Australia produces cleaner coal or that carbon capture and storage will be a 'silver bullet' solution.
- If we were to identify such drivers for environmental policy more broadly, we would similarly identify groups such as those who advocate for greater environmental protection – for example campaigns for end to native forest logging – on the one side, and those who benefit from the

continued exploitation of the environment – say those elements of the timber industry that rely on native forest logging rather than plantations – on the other.

- While Australia, at least in terms of climate policy, is in a better place than it has been for some time, since the change of government in 2022, we are still far from the more positive path we were on just over a decade ago, where an effective price on carbon was – over the course of the brief two-year period it was in place – reducing emissions. This climate policy was the product of a minority government – a rarity in Australia’s majoritarian electoral system – where the governing Labor Party was guaranteed supply and confidence by the Greens (who have been the third force in Australia’s party system for some time now) and several independents.
- So I return to the question: What might it take to turn the tide on Australian environmental and climate policy? Can the balance of forces shift such that those encouraging improved environmental outcomes and greater climate action, overpower those seeking further exploitation of the environment and climate denial and delay? Do we need to wait for the continued fracturing of the major party vote to produce governments that are more likely or willing to pursue stronger environmental and climate policies? Or are we talking about the same things here, as these potential outcomes are intertwined?
- Some might have thought that the federal election outcome this year – where the Labor Party was returned to government with a significantly increased majority – might provide the impetus for government to do more, or might suggest a shift in the balance of forces that could enable bolder action.
- This, however, does not appear to be the case, with one of the first acts of the returned government being the extension of the life of Australia’s biggest gas project – the North West Shelf – out to 2070. Not only will the approval of this extension result in billions of tonnes of climate polluting emissions, but it also poses a potential risk to the nearby Murujuga rock art – an expansive site containing Indigenous rock engravings that are tens of thousands of years old – with some studies suggesting that emissions from nearby polluting industries are degrading this art.
- More recently, the government has sought to bring Australia’s national environmental laws into the 21st Century, with long-awaited reforms proposed to the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act of 1999. These laws are currently before parliament, but were drafted to not upset organised interests who wish to continue causing environmental harm, and to win over the support of the conservative opposition – rather than working with more progressive parties in the parliament such as the Greens – a strategy that appears to have backfired as it appears the opposition are now unlikely to support these reforms without far greater concessions.
- At the same time, the opposition are currently seriously considering dropping support for Australia’s net zero by 2050 commitment, a policy they initiated when they were last in government, and that is far from in line with the Paris Agreement aim to limit warming to 1.5 degrees – as the Climate Council has consistently stated, we would need to get to net zero a decade and a half earlier for that. They’re in a room right now – not too far away from here – nutting out this potential abandonment of net zero.
- In short, things have not improved substantially, and don’t look to be doing so any time soon.
- Now I don’t want to stand between you and your dinner, so I will stop talking, but if you can, please ponder and discuss this question of what might be required for Australia to get serious on environmental and climate issues over dinner. Perhaps we can solve this puzzle tonight? What do you reckon? For those who have travelled from elsewhere to be at ANU – perhaps there are insights or lessons from your contexts that you can bring to this discussion?
- So alright, that’s enough from me. Thank you for your time, and I look forward to meeting more of you, to hearing and participating in the discussion, and to seeing you around campus during my visit here.