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Pollies cold on climate, despite hype

Despite a global push for more action on climate change, momentum has drained away.

By [Graham Lloyd](#)



Swedish environment activist Greta Thunberg speaks at a climate protest outside the White House in Washington, DC last week.

- From [Inquirer](#)
September 17, 2019
- 9 minute read

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This month was supposed to be the one in which a global push for higher ambition on climate change took flight.

Child prophet Greta Thunberg set sail for New York by luxury yacht to save petrol, a climate emergency was declared around the world, and workers were given permission to join students in a climate strike.

Despite this, momentum behind real action by government has been steadily drained away.

In Australia, the Labor Party's proposal to dump the targets that cost it dearly at the federal election effectively has let the Morrison government off the hook.

Few world leaders are lining up to deliver what UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres had in mind when he called them together for a New York conference to boost ambition. The New York meeting, scheduled for September 23, was conceived as a show of global defiance at US President Donald Trump's decision to ditch the Paris Agreement.

Rather than a competition for more robust action, as was intended, the New York agenda looks deflated.

Key world leaders, including Chinese President Xi Jinping, will not be attending. Instead China will send a lower-ranking official, and there are mixed signals about whether the world's biggest carbon dioxide emissions nation will offer to do more.

As things stand China, which is responsible for 26.83 per cent of global emissions, has pledged to keep increasing them until about 2030.

The EU has been unable to agree on a uniform position for 2050, with a split between the coal-dependent east and more progressive west.

A pushback is building in Germany against higher energy prices and the impact of strict new emissions regulations on a struggling car industry. Renewable energy investment across much of Europe has stalled.

The EU admits it is not on track to meet its 2030 target of a 40 per cent emissions cut on 1990 levels.

Relations with Brazil have fractured following the election of development-focused President Jair Bolsonaro and a resurgence of clearing in the Amazon.

The US, with 14 per cent of global emissions, is showing no signs of pulling back from its threat to quit the Paris Agreement next year despite achieving greenhouse gas emissions cuts from a switch from coal to gas.

In Australia there is little mood politically for greater action.

The federal opposition has all but surrendered its pre-election target to cut carbon dioxide emissions by 45 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030.

As it takes stock of its unexpected election loss, Labor looks likely instead to focus on a 2050 target of being carbon neutral.



Bill Shorten says he thinks Australians want action on climate change. Picture: Kym Smith



Anthony Albanese announcing a national plan for cycling. Picture: Cameron Richardson

The backdown was first mooted by opposition assistant climate change spokesman Pat Conroy in *The Australian* last week when he said a net zero target by 2050 had to be “the overriding objective”.

Anthony Albanese said Labor “will examine our short and medium and long-term commitments on where we go on climate change but we won’t re-examine our principles. We want to work towards zero emissions by the middle of this century.”

Climate change spokesman Mark Butler could not be specific.

“What medium-term targets numerically are, whether it’s 2030 or 2035, given the passage of time, is something we’ll engage over in the next couple of years,” Butler said.

Labor’s backdown followed a stinging appraisal from its green wing, the Labor Environmental Action Network, which highlighted that the party had been unable to put a price on its climate change action plan during the election.

“It couldn’t say how much it would cost, where the money was coming from or what economic dividend it would deliver or save,” LEAN said.

“It is basic Australian politics — how much, who pays, what does it save? We had no answers.”

Former leader Bill Shorten told Sky News on Monday he agreed that Labor’s climate policies had cost it votes at the election in May and said he supported a review of the position.

“I do think Australians want to see action on climate change so I am confident that will be Labor’s position”, Shorten said. “But as for a specific (2030 target) number, I will allow the reviews and the reconsiderations of policies to take their course.”

Ironically, the 45 per cent target being abandoned by Labor is what Guterres has been calling for in New York from all nations.



Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg, left, meets with UN General Assembly President Maria Fernanda Espinosa Garces.

Labor's capitulation has given the Morrison government a free pass on what could otherwise have been an uncomfortable time. The Prime Minister will not be attending the New York climate conference despite being in Washington for a state reception with Trump.

Instead Australia will be represented by Foreign Minister Marise Payne and climate change ambassador Patrick Suckling.

Australia is not expected to speak at the conference or offer anything above the existing Paris Agreement pledge of cutting carbon dioxide emissions by 26 per cent to 28 per cent below 2005 levels by 2030. The federal government has yet to make a call on whether to join the growing global push to declare a target to become "carbon neutral" by 2050.

How exactly the carbon neutrality will be calculated remains a vital question for Australia which, by some measures, may have achieved the target already.

It's hard to know.

A 2013 paper in the journal *Biogeosciences* found the year-to-year variation in the amount of carbon dioxide absorbed by natural processes is bigger than Australia's total annual greenhouse gas emissions from burning fossil fuels.

Research published in the journal *Nature* in 2014 found that record-breaking rains had triggered so much new growth across Australia that the continent turned into a giant green carbon sink to rival tropical rainforests including the Amazon.

The study found that vegetation worldwide had soaked up 4.1 billion tonnes of carbon in 2011 — the equivalent of more than 40 per cent of emissions from burning fossil fuels that year.

Almost 60 per cent of the higher than normal carbon uptake that year, or 840 million tonnes, happened in Australia.

Subsequent research has shown that much of the additional carbon store was lost in following years because of fire and drought.



Protesters stop traffic on Swanston Street to raise awareness about climate change.

But a full understanding of the carbon cycle is still in its infancy.

Pep Canadell, from the CSIRO, says there is as yet no robust information on whether Australia is a net carbon sink or emitter when all natural processes are taken into account.

Canadell is leading a big international assessment under the Global Carbon Project to investigate but says results are still a couple of years away.

He says the global experience has been that most of the benefits from the natural carbon sinks are more than offset by human emissions of non-CO₂ gases, mainly methane and nitrous oxide.

Scientists, however, are only starting to understand the bigger picture. Nature is able to lock away about half of the additional carbon dioxide load from human activity and it has shown itself to be very resilient to increasing human emissions.

A paper published in April found that global land and ocean sinks had largely kept pace with rising carbon dioxide emissions since 1958 and were still absorbing about 50 per cent of atmospheric CO₂.

Canadell says the results are remarkable because of their unseen, and often unacknowledged, benefits.

“The CO₂ sinks are like a 50 per cent discount on climate change,” Canadell says.

“If it wasn’t for the sinks, we would have double the accumulation of CO₂ in the atmosphere, and a doubling of the impacts due to global warming.”

How these sinks will be accounted nationally puts a fresh perspective on what carbon neutrality at a national level may eventually mean. It highlights also the folly of discussions being hijacked by negative extremes.



Child prophet Greta Thunberg has the wind in her sails. Picture: AFP

The latest, and unexpected, shot against fearmongering was issued by World Meteorological Organisation secretary-general Petteri Taalas to Finnish newspaper Talouselama.

Taalas told the paper while climate scepticism had become less of an issue, the challenge was now coming from “doomsters and extremists”.

“Climate experts have been attacked by these people and they claim that we should be much more radical,” Taalas said.

He said the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports had been “read in a similar way to the Bible: you try to find certain pieces or sections from which you try to justify your extreme views”.

“This resembles religious extremism,” Taalas told Talouselama.

Following publication of his comments, Taalas issued a clarifying statement that he was not questioning the need for robust action.

“In my interview, I made clear that a science-based approach underpins climate action and that our best science shows the climate is changing, driven in large part by human action.

“However, I pointed out that the science-based approach is undermined when facts are taken out of context to justify extreme measures in the name of climate action,” he said.

“Action should be based on a balanced view of the science available to us and not on a biased reading of reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, of which WMO is one of the parent organisations.”

Taalas said the challenges were immense.

The lesson from Labor in Australia and the UN in New York is that the political challenges remain equally large.



Climate activists protest near the UN headquarters in New York.

Green energy is killing by kindness

The boom in renewable energy has spawned a serious unintended consequence with the release of large quantities of the world's most potent greenhouse gas into the atmosphere.

Sulphur hexafluoride (SF₆) is 23,500 times more warming than carbon dioxide and is widely used to make wind turbines, solar panels and the switching gear needed to run more complex electricity systems.

Research has shown leakage of the little-known gas across Europe in 2017 was the emissions equivalent of putting an extra 1.3 million cars on the road.

The warming potential of SF₆ was identified in 2008 by Scripps Institution of Oceanography, which said what had been hailed as an environmental success story could turn out to be a public relations disaster for solar.

Scripps says SF₆ is difficult to break down and roughly 60 per cent of what goes into a switch's vacuum chamber ends up in the atmosphere.

The latest research from Britain is that levels of SF₆ in the atmosphere are rising as an unintended consequence of the green energy boom.

According to the BBC, just 1kg of SF₆ warms the Earth to the same extent as 24 people flying London to New York return. It also persists in the atmosphere for a long time, warming the Earth for at least 1000 years.

The increase in SF₆ in the atmosphere reflects the way electricity production is changing around the world.

Mixed energy sources including wind, solar and gas have resulted in the use of many more connections to the electricity grid.

The increased number of electricity switches to prevent serious accidents has resulted in the use of more SF₆ gas to stop short circuits and quench arcs, making electrical circuits safe.

Carbon copies

A loose coalition of countries has made the pledge to go “carbon-neutral” by 2050 but they do not include any of the major emissions nations and it remains unclear exactly what the term means.

Countries that have signed up

Canada, Costa Rica, Colombia, Denmark, Ethiopia, France, Finland, Germany, Iceland, Luxembourg, Marshall Islands, Mexico, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

A collection of cities also has made the pledge

Austin, Accra, Barcelona, Berlin, Boston, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Caracas, Copenhagen, Durban, London, Los Angeles, Melbourne, Mexico City, Milan, New York City, Oslo, Paris, Philadelphia, Portland, Quito, Rio de Janeiro, Salvador, San Francisco, Santiago, Seattle, Stockholm, Sydney, Toronto, Vancouver, Washington and Yokohama.

GRAHAM LLOYD