

## Eyes wide shut on the issue of the century



Illustration: *Michael Mucci*

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### **Climate change has even US conservatives worried, but here the hip pocket still rules, writes Elizabeth Farrelly.**

Australia is unusual among First World countries in combining a relatively educated populace, an extraordinarily fragile environment and a crude mining mentality. It's not a good mix. Indeed, as Jared Diamond pointed out in *Collapse*, our ruthless extension of the mining mind-set from minerals to renewable resources such as soil, fisheries and forests has only intensified our continental fragility.

Yet we go on exploiting our land rather than our intelligence, global warming or no, and choosing our leaders accordingly.

This is the mystery. Polls show we worry about climate change, but we vote from the hip pocket. John Howard, the polls tell us, makes us feel safe. But we blind ourselves to the yawning chasm between feeling safe and being safe. Ask the ostrich.

Howard is right to berate the states for their pathetic record on environmental initiatives, but wrong to attack their push for carbon trading (worth \$13 billion worldwide last year). He is right to suggest Australia could become an energy superpower but it is reprehensible of him to focus the strategy on grubby old non-renewables such as coal, oil and uranium. Right to press the climate-change button, however tentatively; wrong to offer the nuclear solution.

Climate change has become a moral issue. Maybe *the* moral issue. If, as is arguable, morality is no more (or less) than a herd survival code, we might reasonably see all wars as the discordant death rattles of opposing fundamentalisms, soon to be replaced by some clean new enviro-religion. This new faith will make sacraments of rainwater, commandments of cycling and recycling, and prophets of ... well, there's the rub.

In Australia, where governments quail before moral issues, the vacuum is filling with an unlikely alliance of business and philanthropic lobby groups. The Australian Business Roundtable on Climate Change argued in April that a 60 per cent cut in Australia's emissions is compatible with strong economic growth. Westpac's chief executive officer, David Morgan, known for lampooning emissions proposals as *Mein Kampf* and seeing carbon trading as a European conspiracy, notes that "the next president of the United States ... [is expected] to initiate urgent action on climate change".

Now at last, the Climate Institute of Australia, has launched its Top Ten Tipping Points on Climate Change. Headed by the Australia Institute's Clive Hamilton, the institute is intelligent, purposeful, well placed. Never mind that the best it can do in the profit, sorry, prophet department is Bob Carr, whom you will remember as the man who turned a decade-long opportunity to green NSW into a filthy enviro-mess.

Any church is more than the sum of its saints, and there are bigger issues at stake. As Tipping Point says, we are entering the "oh shit" phase of global warming. Pretty much everyone is taking it seriously except us.

Our colleagues in climate crime are vanishing faster than the ice caps. Britain may be underachieving on its emissions targets, but business there is pushing Tony Blair for stronger regulations. In the US, where the writer Elizabeth Kolbert argues the need for an "environmental Churchill", an obstructionist Bush White House is nevertheless ringed by cities, states, Congress and the courts, plus a few inner-Republican colleagues, determined to make change.

Last year, California's Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, launched a plan to cut state emissions by 80 per cent by 2050. "The debate is over," he said. "The science is in. The time to act is now." Right-wing evangelical leaders of 30 million people marched on Capitol Hill, urging leadership on climate change. Since then, 238 US mayors have pledged to "meet or beat" Kyoto; the House of Representatives Appropriations Committee has supported emissions caps and the Supreme Court has agreed to decide whether CO<sub>2</sub> regulation should be mandatory.

The climate-change climate is changing, fast, and Australia is being left out in the warm. Ostrichised. It's a leadership thing, and it is dangerous - politically, morally, existentially. More, it's bad finance, with renewables - in which Australia could so easily excel - reaping \$74 billion globally in 2005.

The US developer-turned-greenmeister and World Green Building Council president, David Gottfried, argued in Sydney earlier this year: "Green is the new black. All the big businesses are in the game, and it's for the benefit of everybody." Gottfried had one small goal in Australia: a tax credit for five-star green buildings. The Howard Government's *Sustainable Cities* report noted last August the "need for the Australian government to assume a leadership role". Yet the opposite is happening. Said Gottfried: "I don't see your Federal Government involved ... they're not at the table."

We've just had the hottest year on record. Atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> is at its highest for 650,000 years. The seas are rising, the ice melting. Most scientists believe we have underestimated the impact. Yet we do nothing. The clever country, if we ever were that, has succumbed to waste, greed and denial. This is not just laziness. It's officially required, as the ABC's *Four Corners* demonstrated in February, documenting government pressure on CSIRO scientists to zip up on climate.

Yet we in Australia no longer care if our politicians lie. We don't mind if they peddle influence at \$5000 a pop. In fact, we like it. At state and federal levels we consistently choose leaders who offer feelgood delusions and lugubrious denials over the truth of survival. Even David Attenborough, a long-time climate

sceptic, has finally come round. As ever, he goes to the heart: "How could I look my grandchildren in the eye and say I knew about this and I did nothing?"

**Elizabeth Farrelly writes on planning, architecture and aesthetics for the *Herald*.**

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