

John Howard, environmentalist

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The story of John Howard the environmentalist is a story of deference to professed expertise. Prime Minister John Howard sought the advice of high profile scientists and activists on environmental issues. Many of these advisors had impressive qualifications, and he listened to them mostly uncritically. In response, he tried to do the right thing.

As a result, the Howard government oversaw the introduction of legislation that banned broad-scale tree clearing in western Queensland and fishing over large areas of the Great Barrier Reef. In a deal with the Australian Democrats to get the GST through the Senate, his government introduced the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act*, now considered the centrepiece of federal environmental legislation. His government also planned to buy back large volumes of water as environmental flow for the Murray River.

But John Howard may simply be remembered as the prime minister who failed to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.

It was in January 1996 that Mr Howard made his first major announcement on the environment. He was Opposition Leader and he spoke of the proposed establishment of a \$1 billion fund from the privatisation of Telstra to restore the national estate, including programmes to arrest soil degradation. The policy was initially applauded by the environmental lobby, with the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) saying that it represented the most important environmental statement ever made by the Coalition.

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Mr Howard won the 1996 election and, true to his promise, sold part of Telstra, with \$1 billion going to the establishment of the Natural Heritage Trust which focused on salinity in particular.

The proposed 10 per cent Goods and Services Tax (GST) was the centrepiece of John Howard's 1998 election campaign. Again he won the election, but the Australian Democrats held the balance of power in the Senate and he needed their support to get the GST through Parliament. They negotiated the passage of the *Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Bill* (EPBC) in return for passage of the GST legislation.

Any person may nominate a plant or animal species for protection under the EPBC Act and nominations have become an integral part of many environmental campaigns. Successful nominations normally secure significant government funding for the development of 'Recovery Plans'. Species can be listed under the Act if there has been a substantial reduction in numbers and geographic distribution, even if this reduction occurred decades ago with populations now stable or increasing. The EPBC Act has been used to stop, delay or limit activities as diverse as dam-building, whaling and the growing of sugarcane. Most recently it was used to prolong the approval process for the controversial Bell Bay pulp mill in Tasmania.

In the lead-up to the 2001 federal election, the National Farmers Federation (NFF) and the Australian Conservation Foundation joined forces to lobby the Howard government for \$65 billion on the premise that vast areas of farmland were in ruin and salinity was spreading. This campaign was based on a report which quoted the national land and water resources audit which had been funded by the Howard government's Natural Heritage Trust from the sale of part of Telstra.

A few months later, the National Action Plan for Salinity and Water Quality was announced by Senator Robert Hill, then Environment Minister, with the promise of \$1.4 billion in further funding. This Action Plan generated more plans requiring more government funding. Much of the planning, including that for the likely extent of the spread of salinity, was based on computer

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modelling that has not stood the test of time. Indeed, head of the Murray–Darling Basin Commission, Wendy Craik, acknowledged on national television in 2005 that flawed models had been used to talk up the salinity threat in 2001.

Also in 2001, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) was pleading for money to save the Great Barrier Reef. The subsequent fishing bans, while initially estimated to cost about \$1.5 million in compensation to commercial fisherman, have since blown out to nearly \$200 million. Furthermore, many argue that there has been no environmental benefit, with fishing pressure simply transferred to already more heavily fished regions of south-east Asia.

The banning of broad-scale tree clearing was a campaign issue for the Wilderness Society in 2001. Subsequent bans mean that Australia is on track to meet its target under the Kyoto Protocol but that campaign was about more than saving trees or Kyoto. A report entitled 'Rethinking deliberative governance: dissecting the Queensland land-clearing campaign' by the Queensland Conservation Council explains that the new legislation established a framework for the regulation of land use on freehold land representing a significant departure from 'dominant ideologies that accept private landowners retain sovereignty over land management'. Furthermore, all 'carbon credits' have accrued to the government, not the individual landholders.

In 2004, logging in Tasmania dominated the election campaign. It initially appeared that both Labor and the Coalition would seek to outbid each other in terms of how much Tasmanian forest they could save. Then, after opposition Labor leader Mark Latham announced his forestry policy, the Howard government changed tack and was very publicly applauded by timber workers for promising to save their industry. This further cemented John Howard's alliance with blue-collar workers across Australia and he won that election.

During the same year, campaigning to return environmental water to the Murray River created much angst within farming communities. It was feared that if Labor won the election, a Latham government would take up to 1,500 gegalitres of irrigation water for environmental flows, while John Howard said he would take only 500 gegalitres. But, in January 2007, under the Howard government's \$10 billion National Plan for Water Security, it was suggested that about 2,700 gegalitres—almost double what the Labor leader had proposed—be returned as environmental flow. Incredibly, farmers weren't up in arms. This was in part because the government assured them that there would be no compulsory acquisition and that the water would be purchased at market price. The price of water skyrocketed and the government has not even purchased 500 gegalitres.

Each year when the International Whaling Commission (IWC) meets, Australian environmental ministers court the associated media with their rhetoric condemning whaling. For example, in the lead-up to the meeting in Ulsan in 2005, Australia's Environment Minister, Ian Campbell, denounced the killing of whales with grenade-tipped harpoons in Norway and said that he was both shocked and saddened by broadcast images of whale-cooking classes in Japan. Meanwhile, the Howard government turned a blind eye to the slaughter of dugongs by indigenous hunters using spears and speed boats in northern Australia. Dugongs, like whales, are long-lived marine mammals. The Howard government accepted that about 1,000 dugongs are killed each year by indigenous communities and that this is probably ten times the estimated sustainable harvest.

In advance of the 2007 election, Mr Howard set up a 'taskforce' which recommended 25 nuclear power stations be built—mostly along the east coast of Australia. Despite nuclear power being the only proven source of greenhouse-neutral base-load power, environmental groups condemned the proposal. So unpopular was the issue that the Labor party featured Mr Howard's support for nuclear power in some of its 2007 campaign brochures and Mr Howard went quiet on the issue.

During the 2007 campaign the Labor party focused on Mr Howard's refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol. The issue resonated. Al Gore had already painted the Australian government as a villain in his award-winning documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* for refusing to sign Kyoto—for refusing to do what Mr Gore considered morally right. Al Gore went on to win the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize.

Many advocates for action on climate change readily admitted that, even if fully implemented, the Kyoto Protocol will do virtually nothing to reduce rates of global warming because developing nations, including India



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and China, do not have to meet any targets. Nevertheless, they insisted that Kyoto is an important symbolic ‘first step’. Mr Howard correctly claimed that the exclusion of developing nations would put Australia at a competitive disadvantage, and perhaps he thought that global warming would eventually fade as an issue. To the very end of his term as prime minister, Mr Howard refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, even though his government was on track to meet its Kyoto targets and even though the political pressure to ratify was intense—including from within his own Cabinet.

The environmental lobby doesn’t work from a set of principles that accord with liberal values; rather it is philosophically anti-development and anti-industry. They met regularly to plan strategies and divvy up issues and they had John Howard hopping from one campaign to the next—always pushing his government harder and harder to meet the next moving target. According to a recent Liberal Party report, the Howard government had \$4.3 billion in its 2007–08 budget for the environment compared with less than \$500 million in Labor’s last year of office.

If the prime minister had had his own plan, his own vision and ideas for the environment, his government may have been able to better prioritise issues and better able to consider expenditure in terms of its opportunity cost. But in the end, it seems his legacy would perhaps still be the prime minister who refused to ratify Kyoto and ‘save the world from global warming’.

Lord Nigel Lawson, a former Chancellor of the Exchequer in the British parliament, recently commented that despite Kyoto and innumerable international gatherings of the great and the good, little in practice has been done to reduce global carbon dioxide emissions. They continue to rise and the reason for this, of course, is that fine words are cheap, whereas the 70 per cent reduction in global carbon dioxide emissions which would be required to stabilise carbon dioxide concentrations in the earth’s atmosphere would be very costly indeed.

The environment, and in particular ‘stopping climate change’, has emerged as an ideal in which seemingly well-educated people often search for the grand gesture as much as real actions likely to result in practical, lasting solutions. The situation is unlikely to change in the short to medium term, whether global temperatures continue to increase or cool. But what the next Liberal Party leader needs to attempt, at the very least, is to force a consideration of various policy options for Australia, including alternatives, costs and benefits, and global implications.

Environmentalism has been aptly described as the new religion of choice for urban atheists. It is belief-driven. But, hopefully, Australians have not lost all sense of reason—hopefully, Australians are just waiting to be dragged back to reality. After all, facts do not cease to exist just because they are ignored.

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