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Climate security and economic security: The limits to climate change action in Australia?

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Abstract In 2007, Kevin Rudd was elected Prime Minister of Australia with the promise of pursuing strong action on global climate change. Less than 3 years later, he was deposed as leader of his party after walking away from proposed climate legislation. One important part of this puzzle concerns the nature of political debate in Australia about climate action, with this debate orienting around the economic costs of climate action. This can be read as a competition between discourses of security: one focused on securing Australia and vulnerable others from the long-term threat posed by climate change, the other on securing Australia and Australians from the short-term threat climate change action posed to continued economic growth. Over time, the latter came to dominate contestation over climate change. This article maps these competing discourses, reflecting on what this case tells us about the politics of climate change in Australia and beyond. *International Politics* (2015) **52**, 484–501. doi:10.1057/ip.2015.5; published online 20 March 2015

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Introduction

When federal climate change policy faltered and collapsed in Australia in 2009–2010, this seemed a familiar – if depressing – story. Australia has never, at least not since the earliest days of the climate change regime in the late 1980s, been at the forefront of global action to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, and has at times been actively obstructionist of attempts to secure international agreement (McDonald, 2005). For some, making sense of this reluctance to act on climate change is a simple exercise. Australia's material economic interests in the fossil fuel economy, particularly through its status as one of the world's largest exporters of



coal, has created powerful financial disincentives to commit to strong action (domestically or internationally) on climate change (see Pearse, 2009). Consistent with such an account, the notion that economic considerations should be given primacy over environmental ones has been a consistent theme in Australian public debate regarding environmental change (see Bulkeley, 2001).

And yet there are profound puzzles associated with this story. Australia is vulnerable to manifestations of climate change (to changing rainfall patterns and extreme weather events in particular) and has a well-established environmental movement. It has also traditionally been an active 'middle power' in international relations engaging with the key norms and institutions of international society. More directly, when Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was elected to office in 2007, it was with a mandate to act on climate change on the back of strong public support for such action. The ratification of the Kyoto Protocol was also widely endorsed and became Rudd's first act of Government, and by the time of the 2007 election both major political parties had committed to pursuing some form of carbon pricing scheme. And while Australia's export profile created financial disincentives for Australia to act on climate change, other states (most prominently Norway) have demonstrated some degree of leadership in acting on climate change and pushing international agreement despite apparent economic interests in the continued expansion of a global carbon economy (for example, Eckersley, 2013). Shifting policy priorities over time, and different approaches in different countries with similar export profiles, ultimately suggest the possibility for a different approach to climate politics rather than one concerned exclusively with short-term economic issues. Material economic considerations clearly matter, but are ultimately mediated through institutions (both national and international) and discourses that serve to condition the meaning given to such considerations in the broader context of the 'national interest'.

This article explores the puzzle of the politics of climate change in Australia through the lens of competing discourses of security. A discourse is defined here, following Hajer (1995, p. 44), as 'a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities'. In the Australian case, different political actors emphasized alternative frameworks for interpreting and approaching climate change, embedded in alternative ideas of who was in need of securing, from what threats and by what means. In the process, these different frameworks or discourses competed to inform political responses to climate change on behalf of Australia, variously emphasizing immediate economic considerations and long-term commitments to the most vulnerable as central to Australia's national interests.

An approach that identifies and explores competition between alternative discourses does not deny the relevance of material economic considerations, institutional arrangements, ideology, public opinion or international norms, all of which are clearly relevant to the politics of climate change in Australia. What it does suggest,

however, is that discourses can serve to provide interpretive dispositions that mediate between empirical realities and policy outcomes, and can even provide the lens through which issues such as climate change are debated, understood and approached. And in the context of this analysis, different discourses are central to competing policy responses to climate change, and competing conceptions of the relevance of economic considerations to those responses.

While a range of analyses have pointed to the significance and function of competing environmental discourses (for example, Hajer, 1995; Dryzek, 2004; Feindt and Oels, 2005), including in the Australian context (for example, Bulkeley, 2001), here I make a case for viewing approaches to climate change in terms of *security* discourses. Specifically, I suggest that a climate security discourse that emphasizes the threat posed by climate change itself to both global society and to Australians has been marginalized relative to an economic security discourse which emphasizes the (immediate) threat that mitigation action poses to the wealth of Australians and continued growth of the Australian economy. The power of this discourse over time was such that even attempts to justify strong action on climate change seemed to require engagement with (largely short term) economic interests and considerations.

While the focus here is on broader conceptions of the values, interests or communities in need of being protected from the threat posed by climate change or attempts to respond to it, security has also been directly invoked regarding climate change and the threat associated with either manifestations of it or attempts to respond to it (McDonald, 2012a). Here, contestation has focused on whether Australians, vulnerable outsiders and future generations need protection from long-term changes in rainfall patterns or severe weather events, for example, or whether Australians need protection from short term and unnecessary privations associated with climate mitigation action, action that will have limited effect on the pace or scope of global emissions. And if security can be understood as the preservation or advancement of a group's core values (see McDonald, 2012b), then we can in turn recognize that political actors are constantly engaged in attempts to define the composition of those values, the nature of threats to them, and the means through which they might most effectively be realized.

This article proceeds in three parts. The first section provides a brief account of dynamics of political contestation over climate change in Australia since 2007. The second section maps this contestation through competing discourses of climate security and economic security outlining the contours of these discourses in political debate. The final section points to the ultimate primacy of a particular discourse of economic security. It also suggests that unless short term and atavistic discourses of economic security (founded on unrestricted liberal conceptions of 'growth') are trumped by cosmopolitan-oriented discourses of climate security, an effective political response to climate change is difficult to imagine, both within Australia and beyond.



Contesting Climate Change in Australia

Climate change policy has had a relatively short but tumultuous history in Australian politics. As climate change emerged as an international political issue in the late 1980s, the Australian government was at the forefront of international climate action. In 1988 the Labor Government of Prime Minister Bob Hawke committed to an interim planning target of a 20 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 1988 levels by 2000, one of the strongest commitments of any state at that time. The government subsequently expressed disappointment that the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), brought into being at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (the Rio 'Earth Summit'), had not entailed an initial binding target for emissions reductions by developed states. This approach to climate change not only reflected the prominence of environmental issues for that Government (see Doyle, 2000), but also reflected a particular approach to its international diplomacy. For the Labor Government of the 1980s and 1990s, Australia's national interests would be served through being, and being seen to be, a 'good international citizen': an active participant in international society, helping to shape a global order and accruing reputational benefits in the process (Evans, 1990; Evans and Grant, 1995).

By the mid-1990s, as agenda-setting gave way to the need for international action, the Australian Government had remained engaged with the climate change regime but was steadily rolling back the extent of its commitment to domestic political action to reduce greenhouse emissions. Guided by the so-called 'no regrets' principle, the Labor Government of Prime Minister Paul Keating committed only to climate action that did not have any adverse effects on Australia's economic competitiveness and continued economic growth (Doyle, 2000; Bulkeley, 2001).

When conservative Prime Minister John Howard was elected to office in 1996, it signalled a major shift in Australia's climate diplomacy, even if the commitment to economic growth over environmental concerns remained very much in place. At negotiations for the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, the Howard Government took what some described as an obstructionist position (Oberthur and Ott, 1999), demanding a significant increase in emissions targets and the controversial inclusion of a land-clearing clause that would mean targets could be met without mitigation policy in return for agreeing to the Protocol. While developed states committed to an average 5.2 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 1990 levels by 2008–2012, Australia secured an increase of 8 per cent in the same period. And when American President George W. Bush subsequently signalled the US' unwillingness to ratify the Kyoto Protocol in 2001, Howard's Government did likewise. When Russia's ratification in 2005 brought the Protocol into effect, Australia was ultimately excluded from the central international instrument to respond to global climate change. Domestically, Australia reduced spending on climate research and renewable energy technology, and by some accounts had

allowed fossil fuel industry insiders undue influence over all dimensions of climate policy (see Hamilton, 2001; Pearse, 2007).

By the time the Kyoto Protocol entered into force, both domestic and international pressure to act on climate change was again growing. Internationally, a series of environmental disasters (from the 2004 Asian tsunami to Hurricane Katrina in 2005), had raised the profile of global climate change, as did the release of the popular films *The Day After Tomorrow* and Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*. Al Gore shared the Nobel Peace Prize with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, whose third integrated assessment report was released in 2007. This followed the release of the UK's Stern Review in 2006, which calculated that climate change could cost global GDP as much as 20 per cent. Within Australia, continued drought raised concerns about climate change, while the entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol suddenly positioned Australia outside the global effort to respond to climate change. The Howard Government responded by embracing the newly formed Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate as an alternative to the Kyoto Protocol, but the idea of this agreement as a genuine alternative to Kyoto was questioned even by the rest of its membership. With public support for climate action growing, the Howard Government committed itself to establishing a price on carbon by 2013. Yet perceptions of a continued unwillingness to support the international effort to respond to climate change was hurting the Government politically, with new Opposition Leader Rudd emphasizing Australia's commitment to return to a constructive and engaged position in the UNFCCC process in the lead up to the 2007 election.

The sense that the time for action on climate change in Australia had come was supported by opinion polling. Over two-thirds of the Australian population supported action on climate change, even, significantly, if this required some degree of economic sacrifice (Hanson, 2011; Tranter, 2013). And as Rudd apparently sought to make himself a small political target in the 2007 elections (see van Onselen and Senior, 2008), climate change emerged as one of the few issues in which he sought to actively differentiate himself from Government policy in that election. Indeed by some accounts, Rudd's 2007 election could be viewed the 'world's first climate election' (Rootes, 2008). He quickly moved to ratify the Kyoto Protocol as the first act of his Government, began to outline the contours of the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS), and led a large delegation at the COP 13 UNFCCC meetings in Bali in December 2007. And he defined climate change as a threat to Australian national security in the 2008 National Security Statement to Parliament.

By 2009, as Prime Minister Rudd pursued the CPRS and its centerpiece, an emissions trading scheme, public support was beginning to fray. While both Rudd and Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull accepted the science of climate change and the need to act, Turnbull was struggling to convince members of his own party to support the Government's climate legislation, and Rudd twice attempted unsuccessfully to pass the CPRS. When climate sceptic Tony Abbott successfully challenged Malcolm Turnbull to become leader of the conservative Opposition it signalled a



major shift in climate politics, with a brief period of bipartisanship on climate change all but disappearing. Crucially, the failure of the Copenhagen talks in late 2009 and growing public concern regarding the cost of climate change action in the context of the 2007–2008 financial crisis undermined the Rudd Government's case for the CPRS. Rudd ultimately shelved the legislation in early 2010, and within months had been deposed as leader by Julia Gillard as his conviction to act on climate change had apparently been replaced by pragmatic concerns with his political survival (Kelly, 2010). While climate change had been an important factor in the 2007 election, the apparent failure to pursue climate action was also significant in his downfall.

By the 2010 election, public support for action on climate change had halved from its highpoint of 2006. In the lead up to the 2010 election, Gillard attempted to nullify growing opposition to strong domestic action on climate change by declaring that her Government would not move to implement an emissions trading scheme or a carbon tax in the next term of Government. The result of the election was a hung Parliament, with Gillard's reliance on support from the Greens necessitating a deal to pursue a carbon tax scheme after all. This was ultimately passed in November 2011. Paradoxically, then, significant climate legislation in Australia was finally enacted in spite of coinciding with a low-point of public concern, and despite an intense mobilization of political opposition. This legislation involved large subsidies for heavy polluters and individuals alike, and continued to exempt Australia's ever-expanding coal export from consideration. For political opponents, however, the carbon tax was the result of political deception, would cost Australians a disproportionate amount relative to others in the absence of an international agreement, and constituted a 'great big new tax' (see Manne, 2012).

Following from the above, a strong case could certainly be made for a detailed examination of the *institutional* context in which climate change politics operates in the Australian context. Such an examination might discuss the relationship between national, state and local government responses to climate change; the role and dynamics of party politics and Parliamentary deliberation in Australia; the role of the media in influencing public debate; the ways in which environmental organizations and/or industry groups have mobilized around climate change; and the dynamics of international cooperation through the UNFCCC process that has variously encouraged and (more recently) discouraged strong climate action. These factors are clearly important in making sense of the obstacles to progressive climate policy in Australia.¹

Similarly, and related to the theme of this special issue, a case could be made for simply pointing to the composition of the Australian economy as *the* determinant of inadequate climate change action. Such an account could identify the profound economic interests Australia has in a global fossil fuel economy and continued mining exports. Coal, along with iron ore and concentrates, accounted for almost one-third of Australia's exports in 2012–2013, and were by far Australia's largest export items (DFAT, 2013). For some analysts, the scale of the mining boom not only protected Australia from the worst effects of the financial crisis, but also papered



over more fundamental structural weaknesses in areas such as retail, housing and construction (Uren and Bitá, 2011). From this perspective, committing to significant domestic emissions reduction or pursuing a wide-ranging international agreement on climate change makes little economic sense for a country such as Australia. This is especially the case as sustained low levels of investment in renewable energy technology in Australia has made it difficult for Australian companies to capture more of the international market: an area in which Australia might be expected to have comparative advantage (solar energy, for example).

While it may be superficially attractive to conclude that material economic considerations straightforwardly dictate (or overwhelm) climate policy this fails to take us very far in understanding the politics of climate change in Australia. It would not allow us to make sense of changes in Australia's position over time; climate change action by states with similar interests in the continuation of a global carbon economy; defensive public campaigns by Australian industry groups to emphasize their contributions in terms of wealth and job creation; and the broader dynamics of contestation associated with climate policy. Rather, it is important to recognize the importance of the *meaning given* to these material considerations, and the ways in which particular frameworks of meaning (discourses) have emerged, been articulated, contested and even become institutionalized. The focus here, therefore, is on discursive competition over the nature of Australian interests over climate change. In particular, I suggest the possibility of reading such contestation as a contest between long-term concerns with a range of impacts (environmental, health, economic) of climate change for both Australians and other vulnerable populations on one hand, and short-term concerns with economic growth for Australia and Australians on the other.

Climate Security and Economic Security

The above account of contestation over climate change in Australia does not necessarily suggest that this debate hinged on competing conceptions of *security*. For a range of accounts of security, concerns with climate change would of course have a limited relevance to global dynamics associated with the threat and use of force (for example, Walt, 1991; Lynn-Jones, 1992). This is particularly the case given significant analytical uncertainty over the nature (or reality) of links between climate change and the traditional focus of security studies: conflict (for example, Gleditsch and Nordas, 2007). Yet climate change has been recognized or discussed as an international security threat – a ‘threat multiplier’ – by international organizations (for example, UN Security Council, UNEP), a range of states (for example, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia) and a range of public-policy think tanks (for example, CNA, 2007; WGBU, 2007).² Perhaps more importantly, a restrictive approach to security associated with the threat and use of force does not sufficiently capture the range of dynamics that serve to define how



communities come to understand their values in need of protection; the nature of threats to those values; and the means through which they may be protected or advanced. This is central to the construction of security, and also points to the importance of (discursive) competition over what security itself means for particular political communities.

If security can be understood in multiple different ways and is itself a site of contestation, it also follows that the *way* security is understood with regard to a particular issue and in a particular context is significant for influencing the types of responses to that issue. This idea is familiar to those interested in the relationship between security and environmental change. While most accept the mobilizing power of pronouncements of security or threat regarding such issues (see Harris, 2012; Oels, 2012), there is nonetheless recognition that the *manner* of this linkage matters a great deal. While some suggest increased aid budgets to developing states to help them provide human security for populations vulnerable to even minor climatic changes, a national security orientation might encourage a focus on securing the territorial borders of the state from unwanted 'environmental refugees' (see McDonald, 2013). Exploring competing discourses linking climate change and security is therefore important, and such an approach provides a fruitful lens for exploring contestation over climate change in the Australian context. At heart, these are precisely debates about who we are, what we value, and how those values might be secured.

While the role of security was ethereal in political contestation over climate change in Australia at times, notions of security and threat were certainly invoked by political leaders. The suggestion that climate change constituted a security issue was clearly articulated by Prime Minister Rudd (2008), who suggested in his 2008 National Security Statement that climate change posed a 'most fundamental national security challenge for the long term future'. This claim was reiterated in 2008–2009 by the Attorney-General and Environment Ministers (see McDonald, 2012a), and in the 2012 National Security Strategy, Prime Minister Gillard (2012) defined climate change as 'a broader global challenge with national security implications'.

The Labor Government's particular conception of the threats posed by climate change largely built on this loose notion of climate change as a threat multiplier with implications for both regional and national security. The Government emphasized the importance of working closely with others and helping to develop adaptive capacity in developing states, for example, and defined Australian values as consistent with advancing a cooperative and constructive approach to addressing this global problem. Ultimately, however, the Government consistently emphasized the idea that climate change posed a *national* security threat that necessitated its integration into existing national security planning (Rudd, 2008; Gillard, 2012). In the process, the particular emphasis was placed on the threat climate change posed to Australia's long-term economic growth and general economic welfare. Such a concern was consistent with the findings of the Government's Garnaut (2008) review on the costs

of climate change, commissioned while in Opposition, but was also to provide the key axis of contestation regarding climate change in Australia from 2008–2009.

While the Labor Government emphasized the threat climate change posed to Australia's economic growth and well-being, and noted the longer term pain associated with a failure to plan the Australian economy for a low-carbon future (Rudd in CPA, 2009a), the Opposition also invoked a concern with economics in underscoring its objection to climate change action. Leader of the Opposition Tony Abbott had expressed scepticism about the science of climate change, memorably claiming in 2010 that it was hotter in 'the time of Julius Caesar and Jesus of Nazareth' (in Morton, 2010). And his election as Leader of the Opposition had owed much to his position that the conservative Opposition should block any Government legislation on climate change. His mobilization against climate change action was not a surprise, therefore, neither was the focus on the prohibitive economic costs of climate change action.

Ultimately, Abbott and others in the Opposition focused on the damage to the Australian economy generally if action to limit carbon emissions was undertaken; the vulnerability of Australian jobs in the fossil fuel sector to movements towards carbon emission reductions; the rising costs of bills (electricity in particular) associated with any attempt to tax carbon emissions; and the lack of a driving (moral) need for such action because of the failure to arrive at an international agreement at Copenhagen. Indeed on the latter point, Abbott echoed his mentor Howard in suggesting that it would be unfair for Australians to take on additional burdens in the absence of concerted action in the rest of the world, and would have limited effect on global emissions given the size of emissions from the United States, China and India. The ferocity of this opposition to climate change action increased as public opinion swung towards Abbott and the conservative Opposition, and as the minority Government announced plans to pursue a tax on carbon emissions in the latter stages of 2010. For Abbott (2010), such a policy was based on a deceit to the electorate in the lead up to the 2010 election (given the ALP's earlier promises), but more importantly amounted to little more than a 'great big new tax' that would harm Australians disproportionately and contribute little to redressing the problem of global climate change.

It's the (Fossil Fuel) Economy, Stupid

While the carbon tax became legislation in Australia in 2011, the discourse of climate security, in which Australian values would be protected through contributing to a long-term management of a problem with both national and global implications, was trumped by a discourse of economic security, in which short-term economic well-being was in need of protection from action to limit greenhouse gas emissions. Ultimately, the power of this discourse was such that attempts to justify climate change action increasingly emphasized the economic threat of climate change and the



minimal economic dangers of preferred Government responses to it for Australia and Australians. This marginalized the climate security discourse, which had oriented around a long-term conception of threat of (manifestations of) climate change itself and the dangers posed to both Australian populations and the most vulnerable in global politics. This triumph of a discourse of economic security was evident at a range of levels: from the shifting public and political support for climate change action relative to economic considerations; from the manner in which the Government itself increasingly framed climate change and the nature of its response to it; from the level of economic concessions the Government gave to the fossil fuel industry and the fossil fuel economy; from the marginalization of climate change as a national political issue in the lead up to the 2013 election and trends since. This section will touch on each of these points in turn.

As noted, public support for action on climate change and political support dropped steadily and significantly from a high point in 2006, when over two-thirds of Australians supported action on climate change even if causing some short-term economic pain, to 2010, when only one-third of Australians supported that proposition (Hanson, 2011; Tranter, 2013). Certainly, the global financial crisis played a role in encouraging Australians to be more concerned about economic issues, but so too did the mobilization of Parliamentary forces against climate change action. In particular, Labor members began to express concern that the pursuit of climate change action was damaging their re-election chances, while the window of bipartisanship on Rudd's CPRS that seemed to open with the conservative leadership of Malcolm Turnbull closed with the elevation of Tony Abbott (Cassidy, 2010). To the extent that this leadership contest itself was viewed as a referendum on the conservative Coalition's approach to climate change, it should be no surprise that the prospect of internal dissent over the adoption of a highly adversarial approach to any proposed Government action on climate change was ultimately ruled out. This is particularly significant if, as Tranter (2013) and others (for example, Fielding *et al*, 2012) have argued, public opinion on environmental issues in Australia has traditionally been strongly determined by party affiliation. In this sense, conservative Parliamentary opposition to climate change action (and a broader discourse of climate security) both reflected and reinforced public concerns about the economic impacts of climate change mitigation action. Certainly, the development and hardening of public and political opposition to climate change action were mutually reinforcing dynamics that demonstrated the resonance and salience of a discourse of economic security over a climate security one.

As public and political opposition to climate change action grew from 2007, the Government increasingly emphasized the (long-term) economic imperatives of action, and noted that concerns of significant economic pain associated with a transition to an emissions trading scheme or a carbon tax were overblown. That said, the seeds for the triumph of an economic security discourse over a climate security one can be seen in the very manner in which the imperative for climate change action itself was framed. Aside from the historical resonance of an 'economy versus



environment' framing in Australian public debate about environmental issues (see Doyle, 2000; Bulkeley, 2001), the Labor Government itself had originally attempted to position the imperative for climate change action in economic terms. As noted, the Garnaut Review, commissioned while the Labor Government was in Opposition, was tasked specifically with investigating the economic implications of climate change for Australia. And while much was made about Prime Minister Rudd (2009) suggestion of the moral imperative for action, the 'great moral challenge', in reality the central justification for action on climate change oriented around the economic costs of manifestations of climate change and the argument that the costs of adjusting the economy to a low carbon future would increase as time went on (see Christoff, 2013). Rudd argued that 'Australia's environment and economy will be among the hardest and fastest hit by climate change if we do not act now' (Rudd in CPA, 2009a). He reiterated this concern with economic growth as a rationale for strong climate action on a number of occasions (for example, Rudd in CPA, 2008a, b), a rationale echoed in Ministerial statements (for example, Wong in CPA, 2008b; Parkinson in CPA, 2009c) and publications from the Department of Climate Change (2008, p. 9). Here, the stated concern was with providing certainty to business and the economy by pricing carbon (on the recommendation of Treasury), and helping to protect Australia from the costs of climate change effects (see McDonald, 2012a).

If economic imperatives were seen as driving the need for climate change action, the prominence of an economic discourse was also reinforced by the emphasis on economic *mechanisms* by way of a policy response: an emissions trading scheme under Rudd's CPRS plan, and a carbon tax under Gillard's Clean Energy Package. A focus on such mechanisms is clearly not without merit, not least given the international precedent of economic action to respond to climate change. And as Dalby's (2015) contribution to this special issue notes, it is also a strategy compelled by the need to transition contemporary economies to a low or no-carbon future. And yet the emphasis on economic measures – to the extent that 'emissions trading' and the 'carbon tax' were seen as *the* instruments through which greenhouse gas emissions reductions would be achieved – constitutes a limited and partial response, one with significant political risks given that the imperatives of economic growth and environmental preservation had traditionally been viewed as mutually exclusive in the Australian context. And of course from a critical perspective, to the extent that climate change itself represents a market failure of epic historical proportions the reliance on market mechanisms to resolve the problem is questionable, serving to reinforce the centrality of a global economic system whose legitimacy should be called into question.

If economic imperatives were seen as driving the need for climate change action, and economic instruments were seen as *the* mechanisms for achieving a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, the primacy of an economic security discourse can also be seen in the pains the Government went to in pointing to the limited economic impact of these instruments once implemented. Indeed the Government celebrated the fact that some Australians would find themselves better off financially after the



implementation of the carbon tax because the scale of rebate they received was ultimately more significant than any rise in costs associated with the carbon tax (Gillard in AAP, 2011). The carbon tax also entailed generous financial subsidies to large fossil fuel industries, perversely leaving some brown coal producers better off financially than they would have been without the tax (Taylor and Wroe, 2012). Perhaps most importantly, Australia's commitment to climate change action wholly excluded any deeper consideration of Australia's role in contributing to global emissions through its role as the world's largest exporter of coal (see Pearse, 2009). Indeed approval for new or expanded mining projects (including coal mining) gained apace as the Government attempted to extend the mining boom that had propelled Australia to among the strongest economies in the world and had helped insulate it from the worst effects of the global financial crisis. Current commitment requirements under the UNFCCC climate change regime extend only to direct domestic emissions, excluding emissions through the export of fossil fuels subsequently burnt, or the import of products that involved the burning of fossil fuels in their production. Were such contributions to be included in Australia's emissions profile and in calculations of global contributions to climate change, Australia would be among the world's top 6 contributors to the problem (Green and Finighan, 2012, pp. 20–21; Christoff, 2013). In all of these senses, the Labor Government sought to downplay (even prevent) any adverse short-term economic implications of its climate action, in the process again prioritizing and reinforcing the centrality of an economic security discourse over a climate security one.

Finally, the dominance of an economic security discourse can be viewed in terms of the dynamics of debate about climate change in the lead-up to, and the aftermath of, the 2013 election. Having weathered significant protests and political challenges in pursuing the carbon tax, the Labor Government downplayed the possibility of expanding on current climate change legislation in the lead up to the Federal election in September 2013 (see, for example, Millman, 2013). It also refused to move beyond a baseline commitment to a 5 per cent emissions reduction target by 2020 from 2000 levels, despite this being decidedly minimal by international standards, and inconsistent with the scale of Australia's per capita emissions, its economic capacity to withstand short-term economic pain to achieve longer-term emissions reductions, or its sizeable renewable energy capacity (see Green and Finighan, 2012).

The election of the conservative Coalition Government, led by Tony Abbott, seemed to close off any immediate possibility of a climate security perspective gaining a foothold within Government itself. Within months his Government had moved to repeal carbon pricing legislation, refused to send a Minister to UNFCCC talks in Poland, scrapped the Climate Commission (responsible for communicating climate science to the Australian public), reduced Government funding for climate research, and was establishing the groundwork for walking away from both the 5 per cent emissions reduction target and the 20 per cent renewable energy target. And the primacy of short-term economic over long-term climate considerations

appeared to reach their apogee with the Environment Minister Greg Hunt consistently emphasizing the new Government's commitment to ensuring Australians paid less for electricity through repealing the carbon tax (see Hurst, 2014).

At all of these levels, the dominance of an economic security discourse – in which Australian values are ultimately to be protected or advanced through measures designed to ensure continued short-term, national economic growth – is clearly apparent. Certainly, it consistently trumps any suggestion that Australian values are to be protected or advanced through action to redress the global problem of climate change. This is even the case if emphasis is placed upon the potentially significant *national* implications of climate change for Australia's long-term economic future, much less if the focus is on the nature of Australia's obligations to vulnerable populations in the developing world, for instance.

Of course, in reading contestation over climate change in the Australian context as contestation over the meaning of security and how it might be achieved, it is important to note that there is nothing inevitable about a contestation between economic and environmental considerations. Rather, the particular dimensions of the economic security discourse as advanced and endorsed by Australia's political leaders, and which has framed institutional responses to climate change as well as broader contours of public debate, is focused on national, short-term economic growth that prioritises and protects Australia as it is currently constituted in economic terms. Even attempts to define action on climate change, as Labor Governments have, as consistent with securing Australia and its long-term national interests have been trumped by those emphasizing immediate costs, and emphasizing the possibility that outsiders may do less or benefit from Australia's willingness to take action.

The lesson here is not that concerns with economic growth necessarily win out over concerns with climate change. The example of Norway, noted earlier, is instructive here. While Norway's fossil fuel exports create significant short-term interests at the state level (in terms of GDP growth, for example) in the maintenance of a global carbon economy, the Norwegian government has nonetheless embraced a relatively progressive approach to climate policy. As Eckersley (2013) notes, since 2007 the Stoltenberg government in particular had embarked on an ambitious plan to position Norway as a world leader on climate change, committing unilaterally to a 30 per cent emissions reduction target by 2020 from 1990 levels and a goal of carbon neutrality by 2050. Such an approach, Eckersley suggests, is enabled by a particular discursive construction of Norwegian identity and values, combined with an institutional context (in particular Norway's sovereign wealth fund) in which wealth generated through fossil fuel exports is more evenly spread across the country. The point here is that while state level material economic concerns (in this instance in economic growth through the maintenance of a global carbon economy) clearly matter, they do not necessarily *determine* national interests. Rather, these material considerations are mediated – whether in Norway, Australia or elsewhere – by domestic and international institutional dynamics and arrangements, and by



discourses that serve to give meaning to ‘our’ values and the means through which they might be protected or advanced. In Australia, a particular short-term and nationalist discourse of economic security has gained hold to such a degree that it captures and defines even those attempts to justify climate change action, and does so in a way that limits the extent to which it is possible to imagine genuine and concerted action on climate change in Australia.

Conclusion

There are, of course, multiple ways of analysing the complex politics of climate change in Australia, including through a discursive lens. Theorists of environmental discourse have illustrated the utility of conceiving alternative approaches to environmental issues in terms of broader frameworks of meaning that condition the way those issues are viewed and approached (see Hajer, 1995; Dryzek, 2004; Feindt and Oels, 2005). There is much in Dryzek’s (2004) conception of economic rationalism as applied to environmental issues, for example, that is applicable to the predilection for economic means and instruments in the Australian context. There is also a broader story to be told about why ecological modernization, sustainable development and other attempts to reconcile economic and environmental considerations have had little apparent purchase in the Australian context, questions considered in more detail elsewhere (for example, Doyle, 1995; Bulkeley, 2001). Here I have suggested the utility of conceiving competing approaches to climate change in terms of discourses of security: frameworks of meaning that define particular values in need of protecting from particular threats by particular means.

The above account of contestation over climate change action in Australia as contestation between competing discourses of security has ultimately suggested that a particular (short-term and national) economic security discourse has won out over a climate security discourse, defining the possibilities (or lack thereof) for meaningful climate change action. This, in turn, has made the pursuit of significant action on climate change in Australia difficult for those in favour of such change, and an unimaginable abrogation of national responsibility for those opposed to it. In making sense of Australia’s prioritization of short-term national economic considerations over interests and obligations associated with climate change, then, we would do well to focus on the broader conception of security and in particular national values in which this prioritization is embedded.

For some accounts, of course, explaining Australia’s reluctance to act on climate change is much simpler. Rationalist, material accounts of state behaviour in general, and inaction on climate change in particular, would have little trouble accepting or explaining Australia’s relative inactivity. Economic considerations associated with the continuation of a fossil fuel economy in general and coal exports in particular essentially underpin the politics of Australia’s response, for such accounts. This is particularly



relevant to concerns about the possibility that other states will make up any energy short fall from Australian coal (the so-called ‘carbon leakage’ argument). In this context it is only natural, such a rationalist account would suggest, that these concerns would be heightened in the context of a weak global climate change regime and historically unprecedented opportunities for propelling (continued) economic growth through the export of fossil fuels to rapidly growing economies such as that of China. Such considerations appear to be central to successive Australian governments’ conception of the ‘national interest’, while the preservation of short-term economic growth appears central to the dominant understanding of Australian security in this context.

And yet, such an explanation fails to take sufficient account of the *politics* of these choices and the means through which a particular short-term oriented discourse of economic security has come to capture the politics of climate change in Australia. Continued growth in emissions and continued expansion of coal exploration would suggest an overarching commitment to economic growth as the core driver of Australian climate considerations. Yet the question of the functions of this discourse, the processes through which it has become dominant and the ways in which alternative conceptions (of climate security, for example) have been marginalized is more relevant to making sense of the politics of climate change in Australia.

Hajer (1995, p. 60) suggests that a discourse becomes dominant to the extent that particular frameworks of meaning define terms of debate regarding particular issues, become incorporated into political institutions, and require actors seeking credibility to ‘draw on the ideas, concepts and categories’ of that discourse. This is precisely how an economic security discourse functions regarding climate policy in Australia, with climate policy defined in terms of economic tools and mechanisms; justifications for that policy defined principally in (narrow) economic terms; and ultimately successful contestation of policy orienting around economic considerations. This is not a simple story of the primacy of economic considerations. If it were, arguments about the economic costs of climate change itself and the increasing costs associated with adaptation (of the economy or infrastructure, for example) would have been more powerful. Nor is it a simple story of the moral primacy of national over global concerns. If it were, the support for climate change action witnessed in 2006–2007 would be difficult to explain. And of course, both of these accounts would struggle to come to terms with *global* climate action: with the willingness of other states to commit to action despite apparent immediate costs and relative lack of vulnerability to climate change (see Eckersley, 2013).

In this sense, this case does not illustrate the universal primacy of nationalism or economics for political considerations. Rather, it illustrates the function and power of a particular *discourse* of economic growth that has come to capture climate politics in Australia. If a commitment to short term, national economic growth is understood as a discourse rather than as a universal driver of interests, we allow ourselves to understand differences over time and across different social, cultural and political contexts. And most importantly, we allow ourselves to recognize that while powerful, the practices and pathologies such an approach encourages are not set in stone.



If discourses are inherently unstable and constantly in need of being reaffirmed, this suggests the possibility of alternatives being articulated and finding purchase, undermining the hegemony of a discourse of economic security.

There is, in short, nothing inevitable about the primacy of this discourse in underpinning conceptions of Australian interests and security regarding climate change. Alternative accounts of Australian identity linked to environmental stewardship, cosmopolitan concerns for the most vulnerable or internationalist engagement with global efforts to respond to climate change would encourage alternative perspectives and practices more consistent with progressive action on climate change. While current trends appear to be pushing in the opposite direction, increasing public support for carbon pricing, increasing public concerns about contemporary manifestations of climate change in Australia (see Hurst, 2014) and future momentum around the international climate change regime also clearly suggest themselves as avenues for creating support for alternative approaches. And given the traditionally (if paradoxically) inverse relationship between public concern about climate change and Government commitment to act on it, continued climate recalcitrance by the newly elected conservative Government may encourage the broader Australian public to demand a new approach to climate change not exclusively focused on immediate economic considerations.

This is not simply a pressing issue for Australian climate politics. Given the continued global growth in emissions, driven in large part by rapid industrialization in those states (principally China and India) similarly eager to embrace continued economic growth, the question of how short-term national economic considerations might be rendered secondary to long-term global environmental ones is central. Indeed given what we know about the scale, scope and likely effects of global climate change, this question is perhaps one of the defining questions of our age.

About the Author

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Notes

- 1 For a detailed examination of these dynamics, see Beeson and McDonald (2013).
- 2 On linkages drawn between climate change and security, see for example Brzoska (2008); McDonald (2013).

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