

Australia and the Woes of Climate Change States

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Australia's tattered, incumbent government with new PM, the increasingly oafish and amateurish Scott Morrison, trundled into its post-climate phase. States which see their existence as dependent on the cutting of carbon emissions have been more than a touch concerned. Reality for the States remains divorced from the paper clip conspiracies of Canberra and the energy cliques distraction policy of cutting prices rather than dealing with climate change impact.

Morrison's ascension to power was yet another, existentially imposed headache in the aftermath of US President Donald J. Trump's announcement that the United States would be making a dash from any obligations and aspirations associated with the Paris Climate Agreement. Pacific Island states were starting to write up their wills.

When the decision by Trump was made in the middle of last year, such states as Samoa and Fiji felt a shudder.

"His decision," came the press release from an assortment of Pacific Island Civil Society Organisations, "is a clear sign of his continued support of the fossil fuel industry which directly threatens the lives of communities living in the Pacific Islands."

The Australian response, ever mindful of the wishes of its obese cousin and all powerful defender, has reflected a certain bipolar conditioning on matters ecological and climatic. Canberra takes the position, when convenient to its neighbours, that climate change is genuine, dangerous and in need of serious consideration. When necessary, amnesia takes hold.

In the aftermath of Morrison's replacement of sitting Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Fiji's Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama sent a salutary reminder to the new Australian leader couched in a disarming note of congratulation.

"I look forward to working with you across a broad front, including the global campaign for action on climate change, the greatest threat facing Australia and all of your neighbours in the Pacific."

This, to a man who had coarsely brandished a lump of coal in the Australian parliament in February last year, supplied by the good offices of the Minerals Council of Australia. "This is coal," he guffawed to his opponents, caressing the inert item in his hand with a fetishist's resolve. "Don't be afraid; don't be scared."

Morrison ought to be suffering jitters from such figures as Samoa's Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele, who has made it clear how climate change laggards should be treated.

"We all know the problem, we all know the solutions," he explained to the Lowy Institute at the end of last month, "and all that is left would be some political courage, some political guts, to tell people of your country there is a certainty of disaster."

Then came the delicious blow, landed between the gizzards. "So any leader of any country who believes that there is no climate change, I think he ought to be taken to mental confinement. He is utterly stupid. And I say the same thing to any leader here.

Despite such cataclysmic promises, Australia's politicians remain resilient before the inconveniences of reality, and warm to the enticements of stupidity. The big god coal, and associate demigod fossil fuels, call the tune.

The new Foreign Minister, Marise Payne, made the necessary, paternalistic adjustments for her audience earlier this month ahead of the Pacific Islands Forum in Nauru. This line waxes and wanes along the issue of aid, the condescending drip aid designed to influence more than change. The angle on Australian generosity was pushed (daddy with deep pockets cares), as much to counter the phantom of Chinese influence in the region as anything else. "The largest development assistance in the region is overwhelmingly coming from Australia; in fact it will hit the largest contribution ever during 2018-19 at \$1.3 billion."

Payne also busied herself bribing regional neighbours with such reassurances as employment, a tribute to an old legacy of enticing black labour to an economy short of staffing. Samoa, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, she said with soothing corruption, would be added to Australia's Pacific Labour Scheme, nothing less than a traditional, extracting incentive for the Australian economy. As ever, the benefit would be for Australia more than anybody else: citizens from those countries would be able to fill the necessary jobs in rural and regional Australia. (Well and good - they might, in time, have no country to return to.)

Despite the issue of climate change making its inevitable appearance on the agenda, Payne preferred to see it as one of the items for discussion, rather than the main show. "We really recognise that our Pacific Island neighbours are particularly vulnerable to climate change." Australia had been purportedly "working hard" towards climate change commitments, though Payne failed to spell out any coherent steps of late.

The internal politics of the governing coalition in Australia remains intimately related to the fossil fuel industries and climate change sceptics. The schismatic Tony Abbott remains convinced that Australia should go the way of Trump, and more than a sprinkling of his colleagues think the same. Central to this is not environmental degradation so much as cheaper energy prices, which has become the holy of holies, the El Dorado of policy makers. Such is the thinking that accompanies the short term aspirations of shop keeping types even as it dooms island states to watery oblivion.

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