

## Ideas for Australia: A six-point plan for getting climate policy back on track

Written by The Conversation USA

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*The Conversation has asked 20 academics to examine the big ideas facing Australia for the 2016 federal election and beyond. The 20-piece series) will examine, among others, the state of democracy, health, education, environment, equality, freedom of speech, federation and economic reform.*

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The past two years have been the hottest on record globally, yet Australian climate policy is frozen in the past. Might this election campaign see real competition about how to tackle global warming? So far, the signs aren't good.

Questions about Malcolm Turnbull's leadership on climate [first arose last year](#) . In opposition, he was an articulate and forceful counterpoint to Tony Abbott's climate policies.

"Sooner, rather than later, we must have a price on carbon," said Turnbull in 2010.

But, as prime minister, Turnbull then barely budged from the Abbott narrative until his [belated rescue](#) of the Clean Energy Finance Corporation and Australian Renewable Energy Agency, which faced the axe until late last month.

Turnbull's best chance to reshape Australia's course came at the [United Nations climate conference in Paris](#) . He could have announced tough new national targets and substantial financial pledges. Instead, he [spoke in the abstract about innovation](#) .

Observers puzzle about his motives. What hold do the Coalition's sceptics have over him? Is he waiting for an electoral mandate, or for next year's scheduled climate policy review? Or is there simply no deeply felt agenda to be revealed?

### Playing catch-up

Having failed to take the initiative, Turnbull is now on the back foot, trapped between the

demands of the [Paris Agreement](#), pressure from Labor and the Greens, and the dragging rump of his own party. Here are six suggestions that, together, would make Australian climate policy relevant to the challenges this nation faces.

### 1. An end to wedge politics

Those countries with successful climate policies and strong track records on cutting emissions – such as Germany – also have deeply ingrained cross-party support on this issue. By contrast, Abbott used climate change as an ideological wedge, creating policy turbulence, public dismay and [investor confusion](#).

When he took the top job, Turnbull promised to foster a more civilised political culture. Nowhere is this more needed than in talking about climate policy. It would be a game-changing departure for Turnbull to use his authority as prime minister to take the heat out of Australian climate politics by calling for only respectful and constructive debate on this issue, with any bitter divisions to be left to other parts of the electoral agenda.

### 2. A climate target with teeth

The Paris Agreement requires all countries to [ratchet up their climate targets](#) and mitigation efforts every five years. It emphasises the [gap between countries' current pledges](#) and the emissions reductions needed to hold global warming well below 2°C and close to 1.5°C, as the agreement demands. It calls on wealthy developed countries to help vulnerable states resist the intensifying impacts of global warming.

Australia's [current 2030 target of 26-28% below 2005 levels](#) is among the weakest of all developed countries (only Canada and New Zealand are comparable). Moreover, our actions are heading in the other direction. As the independent policy review group [Climate Action Tracker](#)

has

[noted](#)

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With currently implemented policy measures, Australia's emissions are set to increase substantially to more than 27% above 2005 levels by 2030, which is equivalent to an increase of around 61% above 1990 levels.

The Climate Change Authority, Australia's independent advisory body, [recommended a 2030 target of 40-60% below 2005 levels](#)

. It was ignored. Acknowledging this recommendation now as a baseline for the 2017 climate policy review would underscore the intention to make a credible contribution to global mitigation efforts after the election. It would also close the policy gap on Labor's

[pledge to cut emissions by 45% by 2030](#)

, and on the lower end of the Greens' call for [reductions of 60-80%](#)

At the same time, Australia's 2020 renewable energy target (RET) must be restored and enhanced. Its [downgrading](#) from 41,000 GWh to 33,000 GWh [spooked investors](#) and made rapid emissions reductions much harder to deliver.

### 3. End the carbon price phobia

The lead weight of Abbott's carbon tax scare campaign must be cut loose. This is a tough ask for the Coalition, but an unavoidable one. Effective rapid mitigation, adaptation and our contributions to global climate finance will all require greater public funding.

While it existed, Australia's modest carbon price [raised A\\$6.6 billion during 2012-13](#) . It cut emissions effectively and had no significant negative economic impact. Its proven performance makes it a palatable political sell.

Carbon pricing could be part of a national emissions trading scheme. That's a policy that Turnbull supported in 2009 and which will be deployed in more than 40 countries, [including China](#) , by

2020. Or emissions could be taxed directly to fund an expanded version of the

[Direct Action Plan](#)

, redesigned to require the participation of major emitters.

### **4. A federal approach to cutting emissions**

One of the clear failures of the Australian emissions trading scheme – even before it failed to appear – was the way it encouraged the states and territories to abdicate their mitigation responsibilities to Canberra. A new approach is required to mobilise effort in a federal system in which major emissions sources are geographically dispersed, and the impacts of shutting mines and power plants are felt locally.

Substantial Commonwealth funding to the states should be a prominent part of a national climate policy. But its delivery should be contingent on them meeting tough sub-national emissions targets, through measures such as ending land clearing, reforestation, enhancing carbon farming and retiring dirty power stations. It would create an incentive for state governments to embrace aggressive climate policies and reward the best-performing states, while fiscal penalties could be applied if targets were not met.

### **5. Unite climate and energy policies**

Australia's climate and energy policies have been developed in isolation and are largely estranged from one another. National and state governments have pursued fossil energy as if climate change didn't exist – as the recent approval of the Carmichael mine in Queensland attests. Yet production of coal and gas exports is a growing source of domestic (and embodied) emissions. Australia's climate policy has also ignored the huge emissions from our exported fossil fuels.

The two policy domains must be harmonised – with mitigation as the overarching goal. A moratorium on new coal and gas export projects, and a levy on existing ones, should be announced immediately, with a planned national approach to withdrawing from fossil fuel extraction scheduled to avoid the economic chaos associated with the collapse of investment in “unburnable” carbon.

### **6. Play up the positives**

So far, this discussion has been about political pain. The Paris climate conference showed that a new [positive narrative](#) can (and must) predominate. The main message coming from Paris was that the Age of Carbon is over: the transition to an economically attractive post-carbon future has begun.

Cutting emissions and boosting Australia's climate resilience will deliver many direct and indirect benefits. Europe's experience shows how the switch to renewable energy creates new and enduring sources of employment, while tackling global warming has significant health co-benefits.

Ironically enough, the Paris climate summit showed that the issue is less and less the preserve of national governments. Climate policy is being shaped and driven by a wide range of actors – including investors in the banking, insurance, construction and transport industries, as well as sub-national and local governments.

Inclusive, creative and positive discussions about climate change have been all too rare in Australia. A national climate summit, involving federal, state, territory and local governments, key industry sectors and civil society representatives, is a necessary part of the preparation for Australia's [2017 climate policy review](#) .

This summit would help deepen public understanding of the social and economic positives of a post-carbon Australian economy. As the culmination of structured national discussions and accompanied by concrete promises of funded outcomes, it would further turn the tide of Australian climate politics from cynical opposition to rapid action.

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You can read other articles in the series [here](#) .

*Peter Christoff does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.*

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