

Another prime minister, another endorsement for coal – but why?

Written by Marc Hudson, PhD Candidate, Sustainable Consumption Institute, University of Manchester

Here's a quick politics quiz. Who said this?

Australia has a major stake in the fossil fuel industries... Australia is the world's largest exporter of coal and the fifth largest exporter of LNG. We have just below one-tenth of the world's known coal reserves. Coal has been a major contributor to our nation's prosperity and that of many of our trading partners.

And who said this?

Coal is good for humanity, coal is good for prosperity, coal is an essential part of our economic future, here in Australia, and right around the world... Energy is what sustains our prosperity, and coal is the world's principal energy source and it will be for many decades to come.

And what about this?

Coal is going to be an important part of our energy mix, there is no question about that, for many, many, many decades to come, on any view.

If you answered [Kevin Rudd](#) , [Tony Abbott](#) and [Malcolm Turnbull](#) (in that order), give yourself top marks.

Since John Howard, all Australian prime ministers have faced major challenges regarding the gap between Australia's role as a major exporter of coal and its fluctuating ambitions to help tackle climate change.

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Turnbull has now shown himself to be no exception, with [yesterday's comments](#) about coal being important for decades to come marking a retreat from his [previous rhetoric of policy change](#)

. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given how bloody the past few years of Australian climate policy have been.

Howard's end

Howard spent the first decade of his prime ministership denying the urgency of the climate issue, blocking several proposals for emissions trading schemes (for the gory details see Guy Pearce's [High and Dry](#) and Clive Hamilton's [Scorcher](#)).

By late 2006, with the millennium drought and water restrictions affecting not just rural Australia but cities too, and with Al Gore driving a worldwide change in attitudes, Howard performed a spectacular U-turn, commissioning a high-profile [review of an emission trading scheme](#) . But it was too little, too late.

Rudd, using climate change to distinguish himself from Howard, memorably labelled the issue as the “ [great moral challenge of our generation](#) ” while still in opposition.

Kevin Rudd declaring climate change was “the great moral challenge of our generation”.

Later, he spoke of the “ [responsibility](#) ” that comes with mining fossil fuels. But when his 2009 legislation for a Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme was blocked twice, Rudd failed to call the expected double dissolution election, and the scheme was [notably missing from the 2010 budget](#)

. Within a month, a weakened Rudd saw his personal approval ratings plummet from 50% to 39%, amid a growing perception that he

[did not believe his own fine words about climate policy](#)

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His successor Julia Gillard found climate change just as tricky. Her problems began early in the 2010 federal election campaign, with the much-derided proposal for a [citizens' assembly](#) to discuss climate policy.

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Then came her infamous interview, three days before the election, featuring the immortal words “there will be no carbon tax under a government I lead”. (However she went on to say in the same interview that she would be “leading a national debate to reach a consensus about putting a cap on carbon pollution” – in other words, working towards an emissions trading scheme.)

Watch all of Julia’s Gillard famous pre-election ‘no carbon tax’ interview.

Gillard’s fate was effectively sealed by her decision in February 2011 not to challenge the characterisation of her new carbon pricing scheme as a “tax”. In her [memoir](#), Gillard describes this as “the worst political mistake I have ever made, and I paid dearly for it”.

Abbott had declared himself a “weather vane” on climate change, but in late 2009, appropriately enough in a town called Beaufort, he [found his new direction](#).

He challenged Turnbull for the Liberal leadership of the Liberal Party over the latter’s support for Rudd’s CPRS, and won by a single vote (one Liberal, never identified, had spoilt their ballot, with a simple “no”). He spent the next three years crusading against Labor’s “great big new tax on everything”, and [repealed it within a year of becoming prime minister](#).

At least he had remained consistent all along, so it was little surprise when Abbott later declared that “[coal is good for humanity](#)”.

Malcolm in the middle

Turnbull is perhaps the most interesting case of all. In October 2009, with pressure building in the wake of the [utegate scandal](#), he declared on talk radio that he would not lead a party that was not as committed to climate change action as him.

His party duly obliged him the following month. Days later, he branded Abbott’s “direct action” climate policy “[bullshit](#)”.

In mid-2010, while launching the 100% renewables plan for Beyond Zero Emissions, Turnbull [declared](#) that “concentrated solar thermal is a more proven technology than clean coal”.

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A very different Malcolm Turnbull on climate and energy in 2010.

While he never set expectations as high as Rudd, and Liberal voters are generally less concerned about climate change than Labor's, Turnbull's turnaround puts him in just as perilous a position.

As both Rudd and Gillard discovered, once voters start to think you don't mean what you say, your personal approval dips and trouble begins to brew. Fine words can land you in a fine mess if you don't stick to them.

Why does the coal rhetoric never change?

The gap between what the scientists tell us we need to do to have any hope of avoiding catastrophic warming and what is politically possible seems to be growing daily. One way of explaining that is by looking at the power of vested interests.

It's true that some resource industry advertising campaigns have [fallen flat and been mocked](#). It's also true that the climate denial lobby, while small, has recently gained some fresh power through the election of One Nation's

[Malcolm Roberts](#)

to the Senate and the appointment of

[Craig Kelly as chair of the federal environment and energy committee](#)

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But more important is the broader picture of policy failure and stasis globally. In truth, no country is doing a particularly good job on climate change, and climate change is hardly the only issue that has the gears of Australian governance grinding (along with the teeth of the populace).

Laura Tingle, in two recent Quarterly Essays, has looked at both the [contradictory expectations Australians have of their governments](#)

, and also what

[institutional memory](#)

exists within the bureaucracies, the political parties and the media. Her conclusions are alarming and depressing.

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Perhaps our best hope is that the amnesia deepens, so that in 30 years' time young people with pitchforks will not remember that we did not act when there was still a chance.

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

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