

A brief history of Al Gore's climate missions to Australia

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

Al Gore has been [visiting Australia this week](#) – partly because he has a [new film to promote](#), but also because he and Australian climate policy have had a surprisingly long entanglement. Given that this year [is likely to be a bloody one](#) as far as climate policy goes, don't be surprised if he's back again before 2017 is out.

Gore has a long and honourable record on climate change, although ironically his weakest period on climate coincided with the peak of his political power, as US Vice President.

As he says in his 2006 documentary [An Inconvenient Truth](#), he was first alerted to climate change by [Roger Revelle](#), who can justly be called the (American) father of climate science. On becoming a Congressman, Gore was part of the move by Democrats to sustain momentum on climate policy that had stalled with the arrival of Ronald Reagan as President.

Gore organised [Congressional hearings in 1981](#), and 1982 (NASA climatologist James Hansen's [first congressional testimony](#)).

Even back then, the familiar political narrative around climate change had already formed, as journalism academic David Sachsman [recalls](#):

The CBS Evening News for March 25, 1982, included a two minute and 50 second story by David Culhane on the greenhouse effect. Chemist Melvin Calvin raised the threat of global warming, Representative Al Gore called for further research, and James Kane of the Energy Department said there was no need for haste.

This report from the following year tells a similar tale, noting the political difficulty of solving the climate problem:

A youthful Gore in 1983.

A brief history of Al Gore's climate missions to Australia

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

By the time of the seminal [Villach conference of October 1985](#), Gore was a Senator, and helped to organise the first Senate hearings since 1979. Gore's colleague, Republican Senator David Durenberger remarked that "grappling with this problem [of climate change] is going to be just about as easy as nailing Jello to the wall".

The following year, as Joshua Howe notes in his excellent book on the politics and science of climate change, [Behind the Curve](#) (2014), the then Senator Joe Biden introduced an initiative mandating that the president commission an executive-level task force to devise a strategy for responding to global warming – a strategy the president was meant to deliver to Congress within one year.

Gore scored another political victory on May 8, 1989, when Hansen testified that George H. W. Bush's administration had [ordered him to change the conclusions in written testimony regarding the seriousness of global warming](#)

From Vice President to movie star

However, as Vice President to Bill Clinton, Gore disappointed environmentalists. An energy tax was [defeated by industry lobbyists in 1993](#), and the Clinton administration (perhaps wisely) opted not to try and pass the Kyoto Protocol through a [defiant Senate](#).

After leaving the West Wing he embraced Hollywood, where his budding movie career attracted derision in some quarters, despite the hefty policy achievements earlier in Gore's career.

Besides an Inconvenient Truth (see [here](#) for an account of its impact in Australia), Gore "starred" in another movie, the 1990 philosophy-based talkie [Mindwalk](#), starring Sam Waterston as Senator Jack Edwards, a thinly veiled version of Gore.

Former Australian industry minister Ian Macfarlane certainly considered Gore more entertainer than policymaker when [speculating on his reasons for visiting in 2006](#) :

A brief history of Al Gore's climate missions to Australia

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

Well, Al Gore's here to sell tickets to a movie, and no one can begrudge him that. It's just entertainment, and really that's all it is.

Gore and Australia

Gore has been on these shores many times. During his May 2003 visit Gore [urged the then Prime Minister John Howard to ratify the Kyoto Protocol](#). He met with the then New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, and also with former Liberal leader and current climate hawk John Hewson. He spoke at an [event co-hosted by the Business Council of Australia](#) to advocate sustainable development.

After a controversial visit in 2005, Gore visited twice in 2006. As Joan Staples [notes in her PhD](#), he teamed up with the Australian Conservation Foundation to launch his Climate Project:

Having reached out to the wider NGO sector, to doctors, unions, and the corporate sector, this initiative then moved ACF's efforts towards influencing individual citizens. Gore's organisation aimed to harness the power of mass mobilisation by expanding the message of his film *An Inconvenient Truth*.

Gore returned in 2007 and spoke at a A\$1,000-a-plate event on the [Sustainability and Cleantech Investment Market](#), with Carr introducing him while clutching a copy of Gore's 1992 book [Earth in the Balance](#).

He had his share of Australian critics too. On a frosty morning in July 2009 Gore's launch speech of the [Safe Climate Australia](#) initiative attracted around 30 members of the newly formed Climate Sceptics Party, who handed out leaflets and wore t-shirts bearing their slogan: "Carbon Really Ain't Pollution – CRAP".

Gore also [offered an opinion](#) on Kevin Rudd's proposed climate legislation:

A brief history of Al Gore's climate missions to Australia

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

It's not what I would have written, I would have written it as a stronger bill, but I'm realistic about what can be accomplished in the political system as it is.

Gore seems to have (wisely) eschewed direct involvement during the tumultuous Julia Gillard years, but [pitched in](#) in October 2013 when the new Prime Minister Tony Abbott refused to link bushfires with climate change.

The Palmer moment

Perhaps the most bizarre, rub-my-eyes-did-that-just-happen moment came in June 2014, when Gore [stood alongside Clive Palmer](#) in a [deal to save some of Gillard's carbon policy package from Tony Abbott's axe](#)

In July 2015, with the Paris climate conference approaching, Gore visited on a [whistlestop tour](#) that included meetings with senior business figures (BHP, National Australia Bank, Qantas, and Victorian state government ministers) to try and build momentum ahead of the crucial summit.

Looking into the crystal ball

Despite his [Nobel Prize shared with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), [not everyone is a fan](#), with Canadian journalism academic Chris Russill arguing that Gore's approach "[narrows our understanding of climate change discourse](#)"

And just because some climate sceptics think he's a very naughty boy – and can [change the weather by his mere presence](#) – that doesn't mean he's [the messiah](#)

Ultimately, we all need to find new and better ways of exerting more sustained pressure, not only on policymakers but also other institutions and norm-makers in our society, to change the trajectory we're currently on.

A brief history of Al Gore's climate missions to Australia

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

Gore will keep banging on about climate change. He will turn up to give speeches, and will be both praised and derided. What matters is not what he does the same, but what we all do differently.

Authors: Marc Hudson, PhD Candidate, Sustainable Consumption Institute, University of Manchester

Read more <http://theconversation.com/a-brief-history-of-al-gores-climate-missions-to-australia-81023>