As atmospheric carbon dioxide concentrations rise , so too does the number of books telling us what the consequences are, and what we can do. Two more have been released in the past few weeks – Anna Krien's brilliant Quarterly Essay
The Long Goodbye: Coal, Coral and Australia’s Climate Deadlock
, and the worthy
Climate Wars
by Labor's shadow environment minister Mark Butler. Both deserve a wide audience.

Krien, author of Into the Woods: The Battle for Tasmania’s Forests has a sharp eye for the right anecdote and a brilliant turn of phrase. Her reportage can be spoken of in the same breath as Elizabeth Kolbert's seminal
Field Notes from a Catastrophe
. She has read extensively (I for one was not familiar with the
Myxocene
– the age of slime) and in researching her latest essay has clocked up thousands of miles as she dives on the Great Barrier Reef and travels inland to areas that will be affected by the proposed coal mine developments in the Galilee Basin.

Krien offers valuable insights into issues such as coal firm Adani's negotiations with traditional owners, the battles over coal seam gas, and Port Augusta's rocky transition from coal to – possibly – renewables. She talks to "ordinary" people, weaving their perspectives into the story while not losing sight of the climate deadlock in her title – the ongoing fight within the Liberal and National parties over climate and energy policy.

In one of many telling phrases she writes of the "Stockholm syndrome built on donations, royalties, taxes and threats" that bedevils Australian politics, pointing out that the fate that befell Kevin Rudd still looms large in the collective political memory. In the end, she returns to the Great Barrier Reef, and her final paragraphs pack an emotional punch that will stay with the reader for a long time.

My only quibble with Krien's fastidious reporting is that, unlike previous Quarterly Essays, there are no footnotes. But maybe that's only really an issue for nerds like me.

This is Quarterly Essay 66. Number 33 was Guy Pearse's equally alarming Quarry Vision . In

years to come, perhaps Quarterly Essay 99 might explain how we continued not to take action, as the consequences of climate change piled ever higher around us. Or how – alongside unexpected technological breakthroughs – we began finally to race against our nemesis, our own hubris. Time will tell.

Mark Butler is aiming to do something else besides just telling us about climate politics: as a shadow minister he is setting out Labor's stall for the next federal election, whenever that might be.

Butler was climate minister in Rudd's second, brief, government. In 2015-16 he undertook extensive consultations with business, community groups, academics and other "stakeholders" (surely everyone in the world is a stakeholder when it comes to the climate?). His book is essentially an extended advert for that process and its outcomes.

Butler's prose is solid, and occasionally stolid, as he throws fact after report after statistic at the reader. However, he generally seeks to strike a constructive balance between "problem" and "solution". There are only a few short chapters on the climate policy mess, with the bulk of the book concentrating on what a future Labor government proposes to do about it.

Inevitably, Butler is more critical of his political rivals, the Liberals and the Greens, than of his own party. You wouldn't know from reading this book that it was Paul Keating's Labor government who first began to use economic modelling to argue against emissions reductions, or that it was a Labor government who, in 1995, refused to institute a small carbon tax that would fund renewable energy.

Butler is also, oddly, flat-out wrong when he writes that former Labor minister Graham Richardson persuaded Prime Minister Bob Hawke to agree a 20% emissions reduction target before the 1990 federal election. It was actually his colleague Ros Kelly, in October 1990 , and the "commitment" was carefully hedged.

These historical details matter, because we need to be able to hold politicians (and even ex-politicians) to account over their climate pledges. But many readers will nevertheless be more interested in what Butler says a Labor government will do, rather than what previous Labor governments didn't.

Butler obliges, giving us chapters on “Labor’s clean power plan”, “Manufacturing and mining in a low-carbon world”, and “Low-carbon communities”. Occasionally he raises thorny problems (refugees, the coal industry) without really grappling with them. Given the ugly history around these issues (and the political Stockholm Syndrome identified by Krien), this is perhaps unsurprising.

Curiously, both books make a similar omission: they contain very little on the failures of policymakers and social movement organisations in the period from 2006 to 2012. In 2015, at the Labor Party’s national conference, I asked panellists – Butler was one – what had gone wrong during this time, which encompassed Kevin Rudd’s first prime ministership – in light of the fact that we had known about climate change since the late 1980s.

The other panellists gave thoughtful, sometimes self-critical answers. Butler kept schtum. Yet the question is worth asking if we are to avoid history repeating itself, this time as farce. We need smart people – and Krien and Butler are among them – to be asking how citizens can exert sustained pressure on existing governments and to build capacity to keep holding governments’ feet to the fire until they really and truly take climate policy seriously instead of just using it to score points and kill careers.

Ultimately, anyone interested in the future of Australia – and the future of climate policy – should read both of these books carefully. While Krien’s has some immediate use, its greater function will be something we can pull out of a time capsule to explain to young people 20 years hence that we knew *exactly* what was coming and what we had to do. It will help them understand why we didn’t do it.

Butler’s book will serve well over the next five years, as citizens try to hold a putative Labor government to its fine (if still inadequate) promises on the great moral challenge of our generation.

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Read more http://theconversation.com/two-new-books-show-theres-still-no-goodbye-to-messy-climate-politics-80957