

## The Nationals have changed their leader but kept the same climate story

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

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After Barnaby Joyce's [demise as Deputy Prime Minister and Nationals leader](#) , and his [replacement by Michael McCormack](#) , we might wonder what the junior Coalition partner's leadership change means for Australia's climate policy.

Perhaps the answer is “not a great deal”, given the apparent similarity between the two men's outlooks. But then again, confident predictions about the future of Australian climate policy are a mug's game.

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Joyce joined the Senate back in July 2005, as part of the tranche that gave the Liberal and National Coalition absolute control. At the time, another new senator, the Greens' Christine Milne, was ready to talk with the likes of Joyce, arguing that both of their parties should share common concerns about climate change, drought, salinity, loss of native vegetation, and more.

Joyce evidently didn't see it that way. When federal Liberals Brendan Nelson and Alexander Downer tried to get a debate going about the purported climate benefits of nuclear power, Joyce joined with Queensland's Labor Premier Peter Beattie in arguing that nuclear power should not be on the agenda while Australia's coal resources remained plentiful (although he opted against echoing Beattie's “clean coal” push).

A year later, however, Joyce was more attuned to Milne's concerns. In the context of the seemingly never-ending [Millennium drought](#) , and with Nationals leader Mark Vaile urging his cabinet colleagues to spend at least another A\$750 million on drought relief, Joyce fearfully noted that:

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The drought really has to be seen to be believed. It's a case of creeks that haven't run for months, sometimes years, (and) bores that are going dry. There is a real concern amongst a lot that maybe there is a final change in the climate. That's really starting to worry people.

Six months later, with the "[first climate change election](#)" looming, Joyce used some leaping logic to describe proposed rail spending as a climate measure:

We can go up to every mother and father and ask them if they can drive their tree to work and see how they go... I think that rail is greenhouse friendly. It is going to be taking all prime-movers off the road.

### Roast boast

Of course, this support for rural industry didn't mean that Joyce supported any form of emissions trading put forward by either Liberal or Labor. He instead [voiced fears](#) that Australia "could soon resemble communism" unless farmers are paid properly for the carbon stored in their land.

In [2011 Joyce voted against](#) Julia Gillard's voluntary [Carbon Farming Initiative](#), which in 2014 was [absorbed into Tony Abbott's Direct Action program](#). A [2017 report](#) argues that it is now helping farmers, but not reducing emissions.

Perhaps his most (in)famous claim came in 2009, as Kevin Rudd's Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme staggered towards its demise, bleeding credibility and support at every lobbyist-inspired softening. Joyce predicted that with the advent of carbon trading, the [Sunday roast would cost A\\$150](#) (a figure that was later downgraded to a far more measured and believable 100 bucks).

The same year, Joyce told political journalist Laurie Oakes:

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Everywhere there is a power point in your house, there is access to a new tax for the Labor Government – a new tax on ironing, a new tax on watching television, a new tax on vacuuming.

In November 2009, the Nationals told the Liberals that support for carbon pricing could lead to a split in the Coalition. The then Liberal leader Malcolm Turnbull was challenged by Joe Hockey and Tony Abbott, the latter winning by a single vote. The rest is history.

Joyce joined in the ultimately fatal attack on Gillard's carbon pricing scheme by upping the ante on his Sunday roast claims. Using some impressively creative reasoning, he argued that the A\$23-a-tonne carbon price could lead abattoirs to end up [being slugged A\\$575,000 for slaughtering a single cow](#)

### A party of one mind

Of course, Joyce is far from alone among Nationals for baiting the greenies. Fellow backbencher George Christensen's [dangerous and lamentable Facebook post](#) is just the latest in a long line of provocations.

Back in 1997 [Tim Fischer](#), then Deputy Prime Minister, [spoke](#) at a conference in Canberra organised by climate denialists called Countdown to Kyoto. Years later, at about the same time that Joyce first entered the Senate, his party colleague Julian McGauran reportedly flipped the bird at Greens leader Bob Brown after the Coalition voted down a Senate motion criticising the government on climate change.

More recently still, the Nationals have joined in [many Liberals's hatred of renewable energy](#), despite the fact that it would make a lot of money for farmers.

### Will anything change except the climate?

Joyce is gone, but the Nationals don't exactly have hordes of tree-huggers waiting in the wings. The efforts of [Farmers for Climate Action](#) to influence the Nationals' leadership succession seems to have amounted to nothing.

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Michael McCormack (who was [interviewed by Michelle Grattan for the Conversation](#) ) is already under [Twitter scrutiny](#) over his maiden speech in 2010, when he said:

When it does not rain for years on end, it does not mean it will not rain again. It does not mean we all need to listen to a government grant-seeking academic sprouting doom and gloom about climate changing irreversibly.

The journalist Paddy Manning has [given an overview of his positions since then](#) . It seems that the more things change, the more they stay the same (unlike the climate).

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**Read more:** [\*\*Under McCormack, the Nationals need to accept they are a minority and preserve their independence\*\*](#)

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It is impossible to predict how and when the Nationals' policies might change, especially in places where One Nation is waiting with open arms for any wavering voters.

But as ever, it is the voters who hold the key. If enough of Barnaby's "weatherboard and iron" rural base decide that climate change is a serious, vote-deciding issue, that will be the day when the Nationals finally give up their cast-iron opposition to climate action.

*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 their academic appointment.*

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