

Labor's climate and resources spokesmen at odds over future policy

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

Opposition resources spokesman Joel Fitzgibbon has had his proposal to bring Labor's climate change target into line with the government's immediately torpedoed by the party's climate spokesman Mark Butler.

In a speech to the Sydney Institute made public ahead of its Wednesday evening delivery Fitzgibbon suggested the ALP offer "a political and policy settlement" to match the higher end of the government's 26-28% target for reducing emissions on 2005 levels by 2030.

Labor's controversial election policy was for an ambitious 45% reduction.

Fitzgibbon said the change he advocated would mean "the focus would then be all about actual outcomes, and the government would finally be held to account and forced to act.

"A political settlement would also restore investment confidence and for the first time in six years, we could have some downward pressure on energy prices," Fitzgibbon said.

But Butler rejected the proposal saying the government's target "is fundamentally inconsistent with the Paris agreement and would lead to global warming of 3°.

"Labor remains committed to implementing the principles of the Paris Agreement, which are to keep global warming well below 2° and pursue efforts around 1.5°," he said.

"Labor's commitment to action on climate change is unshakeable. We will have a 2050 target of net zero emissions and medium-term targets which are consistent with the agreement," Butler said.

Despite dismissing Fitzgibbon's idea, Butler has acknowledged that Labor's climate change policy must be up for grabs in the party's review of all its policies between now and the 2022

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election.

But revising the climate policy will be one of its major challenges, because the party is caught between its inner city progressive constituency and its traditional blue collar voters. Its ambivalent position on the planned Adani coal mine cost it votes in Queensland at the election.

Apart from the politics, the 45% target for 2030 would be more unrealistic at the next election because emissions at the moment are increasing, meaning ground is being lost.

Fitzgibbon, who takes a more pro-coal attitude than many of his colleagues, had a big swing against him in his NSW coal seat of Hunter.

He said in his speech that a 28% reduction would be a “meaningful achievement” and could be built on later. He also pointed out bluntly that Labor couldn’t achieve anything if perpetually in opposition.

“If we could get to 28% by 2030, and also demonstrate that we could do so without destroying blue collar jobs or damaging the economy, then we would have a great foundation from which to argue the case for being more ambitious on the road to 2050,” he said.

Shadow treasurer Jim Chalmers, who is from Queensland, refused to be pinned down when pressed on Fitzgibbon’s proposal.

“My view is we can take real action on climate change without abandoning our traditional strengths, including in regional Queensland,” he said.

The Victorian minister for energy, environment and climate change, Lily D'Ambrosio, asked at the Australian Financial Review’s national energy summit about Fitzgibbon’s comments, said she wasn’t much interested in what a federal opposition did.

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"We have a very strong and ambitious policy and we took that to the last state election, and we all know the result of that election, so we will continue to implement our policies and get them done," she said.

Federal energy minister Angus Taylor pointed to the divisions in the opposition but welcomed that there were "people in Labor who are making sensible suggestions about dropping their policies from the last election.

"What we saw happen there was Labor went to the election with policies - 45% emissions reduction target, 50% renewable energy target - where they weren't able to or willing to detail the costs and impacts of those policies," he said.

Michelle Grattan 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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