**Why Australia Should be a Global Leader in Climate Action**

**Richard Mathews**

*Talk for the AIIA NSW Branch, 15 February 2022*

On 8th December 2021, our group, Diplomats for Climate Action Now, published a full-page advertisement in The Australian newspaper titled, A Climate-Focused Foreign Policy for Australia, publicly supported by over 90 former Australian Ambassadors, High Commissioners, Consuls-General, diplomats, trade and development officers.

This document called on Australia to adopt a new foreign, trade and development policy to meet the challenge of climate change. It expressed our grave concerns about the urgent need to reduce our CO2 emissions and highlighted how our current low-level of action on climate change is harming Australia’s international credibility, harming our long-term national security interests, and undermining our future economic prosperity. Our advertisement also emphasised that if we take positive action now and raise our ambitions on decarbonising the economy, it will “open significant economic and employment opportunities for Australians to provide the world with low-carbon commodity and manufactured exports” and “secure our reputation as a forward-leaning, reliable international partner with our major allies as well as our neighbours in Asia and the Indo-Pacific”.

The paper then provided a menu of over twenty key elements that we saw as important parts of a climate-focused foreign policy for Australia.

These elements included a call for Australia to:

- affirm in legislation a commitment to achieving net-zero emissions at the latest by 2050

- commit to strong nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement, at least halving emissions by 2030

- ban new fossil-fuel projects; end coal-fired electricity generation and coal mining by 2035; phase out the use of fossil-fuels and transition the economy to renewables as soon as possible

- join global efforts to reduce methane, nitrous oxide and other GHG emissions (as well as CO2)

- affirm in legislation the commitment to end deforestation by 2030, to strengthen nature-positive policies and programs, and support nature-based GHG abatement; and

- support developing country partners in Southeast Asia and the Pacific to also reduce GHG emissions and transition their economies.

We also said that during 2022 Australia should double its allocation of green climate finance and recommit to the UN Green Climate Fund; and Australia should champion the interests of small-island states via the Green Climate Fund. Australia should also commit to supporting vulnerable Pacific Island nations with a safe-refuge resettlement program for affected populations if or when their homelands become no longer habitable due to sea-level rise or other effects of climate change.

These are all highly aspirational demands of course, but with the right will and leadership they are not impossible to achieve. For those of us who are deeply concerned about climate change, these are core requirements for Australia’s contribution towards ensuring we have a world that is still habitable by our grandchildren. Our group, Diplomats for Climate Action Now, regard these commitments as the bare minimum required to repair Australia’s international reputation in global climate negotiations.

\*\*\*

***A pathway to climate activism***

I have no background in DFAT as a climate negotiator, nor have I worked on climate issues in Canberra. In fact, like many DFAT officers in the 1990s I worked diligently and loyally to promote Australia’s exports of “clean coal” especially to our fast-developing Asian partners. Later in the 2000’s, when I was posted to Taipei, I promoted exports of our bountiful “clean gas”, believing that at least our gas and coal were cleaner than that exported by some of our competitors. We were doing the right thing, right?

But in the 2000s and 2010s I also began to realise that climate change was a real issue, one that threatened the continued habitability of the planet. From 2016 during my posting as the first Consul-General in Makassar covering eastern Indonesia, I saw how climate change was threatening the futures of tens of millions of people living just to Australia’s north.

Makassar was a dream posting as I got to travel around some of the world’s most beautiful tropical islands, studying cultures that had been prospering for thousands of years, and observing a part of the natural world famous for its biodiversity.

Indonesia sits across the equator, connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans, and I realised that the islands of eastern Indonesia faced the same threats as the islands of the Pacific Ocean. Since the 1990s many Pacific nations have expressed great concern about climate change, fearing that sea-level rise and extreme weather events will increasingly threaten their very existence.

During my posting I also witnessed how uncontrolled and unsustainable development was threatening the beautiful islands of eastern Indonesia. Marine plastic pollution is a major problem – Indonesia is second only to China as a source of marine plastic waste. These island communities were also struggling with unreliable electricity, supplied from generators running on expensive and polluting diesel fuel.

In 2016 at the start of my posting very few political leaders in Indonesia were talking about these problems.

Indonesia however, is rich in renewable energy resources. Renewable energy power systems could eliminate the costs of importing expensive diesel fuel into isolated island communities. But there was no Indonesian government support for regional or community renewable energy programs, nor did any component of Australia’s development assistance program to Indonesia focus on renewables.

I decided to focus my Consul-General’s small development assistance program on supporting renewable energy for island communities and promoting activities such as sustainable tourism in these islands. Disappointingly, but not surprisingly, I got no support for my programs from our department in Canberra, and limited help from the Embassy in Jakarta. But, at least they left me alone. I organised a renewable energy seminar in Makassar in 2019; a renewable energy training course under the Australia Awards program; and local seminars and activities to promote biogas projects for farmers, novel ways to harness solar energy for local needs, and programs to reduce plastic pollution.

After I retired in Feb 2021, I felt free to focus on my concerns about climate change and the urgency of transitioning to a renewable energy-based economy. I went through a phase that many of us go through once we make the commitment to work for a better climate future: at our home in Canberra, I replaced our old gas heating system with a modern, efficient reverse-cycle electrical system. Then I installed solar panels on my roof and bought a home battery. Now I don’ have to buy electricity from the grid. We have yet to buy an electric car, but it’s in our plan for the future….

More importantly, I established our group, **Diplomats for Climate Action No**w.

It began in September 2021 when I decided to write a letter to the PM and senior cabinet ministers calling for Australia to commit to net-zero emissions before 2050, and stronger emissions reduction commitments before 2030, in advance of the Glasgow COP26 meeting in November. I put out a call for support from other former diplomats via LinkedIn, and soon I had a dozen or so committed supporters; then a week later another twenty had contacted me to say they would sign the letter; then on the weekend when the National Party held their conflab to decide on NZE by 2050, we had 70 former diplomats signed on and I released the letter. The timing was perfect. Media interest was high, and I was interviewed by Channel Seven, WinTV, and reports of our letter were picked up by all the major papers.

I was somewhat taken aback and certainly very pleased, by the level of support from my former colleagues. I had tapped into a growing sense of unease amongst many of our former colleagues that for too long Australia has sat back and ignored this problem. Indeed, many would argue that Australia has been a climate laggard since the start of global climate negotiations in the 1990s.

\*\*\*

Our former diplomats group now has a website and a Standing Committee and over 100 members. We have four streams of work:

- we are seeking meetings with leaders from both major parties, and the independents to promote our Climate-Focused Foreign Policy for Australia

- we are working with like-minded groups - for example the Emergency Leaders for Climate Action – to develop joint actions on climate in the lead-up to the election

- we are encouraging all our members to write to their local MPs and Senators to demand stronger action on climate change and to adopt our Climate-Focused Foreign policy principles

- and a sub-group of former Pacific HOMs and diplomats are developing a paper on the importance of Australia taking serious action to support our Pacific Family in the face of rising sea levels and more extreme weather events.

We are a diverse group with members from all political leanings. We have tried studiously to not criticise the government, rather to point out what we see as urgent policy directions. We have urged change in our foreign policy and called for Australia to take a leadership role on climate action. This has appealed to many of our older members, who remember a time when Australia’s diplomats were admired for their activism on the world stage, on issues from the Law of the Sea to Chemical Weapons, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to APEC, to the Antarctic Treaty.

All of us in **Diplomats** **for Climate Action Now** very much wish to see Australia regain its role as a respected middle-power, a force for good in international affairs. And we could do that if we seriously tackled the key existential threat facing humanity in the 21st century: climate change.

But sadly, no Australian government has covered itself in glory on climate action since the Rio meeting of 1992.

\*\*\*

***How Can we Become a Global Leader on Climate Action?***

The first step in regaining our international credibility as a middle power, is to get our domestic climate policies in order. We cannot expect to be taken seriously in the world if we refuse to get onboard with the unstoppable global trend to eliminating GHG emissions and decarbonising our economies.

It’s not as if we do not know what we need to do to face up to climate change. The science is robust and accepted by all the world’s scientists, by almost all governments. We all know that if we do not reduce our emissions of greenhouse gases, especially of CO2, global warming will accelerate and by the end of this century make life on earth a whole lot worse than it is now.

Every new IPCC report simply serves to strengthen the data and increase our sense of urgency, yet as a global community we are still moving very slowly to wean ourselves off fossil fuels and to transition our economies to renewables.

In Australia we know what we need to do. Every state and territory government has a climate change plan and is rapidly promoting and supporting the development of renewable energy sources. All of them have accepted the urgency of achieving NZE by 2050, and most have committed to reducing emissions by 50 per cent by 2030. Almost all banks and financial institutions (including most of our superannuation funds) have begun to implement sustainability and responsible investment plans: shareholders are demanding an exit from investments in fossil fuels and a rapid move into investing in renewables.

So, much of the private sector, and all our state governments are onboard. Only our federal leaders have lost the plot on this issue. Why?

\*\*\*

The answer is to do with electoral politics at the federal level, and political donations.

Firstly, jobs are at stake as the energy transition takes hold. Some 40,000 people are directly employed in the coal sector, mostly in key federal electorates in rural NSW, Queensland and Western Australia. Coal and gas are also major exports for Australia, and to wean ourselves of this dependency will require significant planning and government resources.

Second, both sides of federal politics are highly dependent on significant donations from the fossil-fuel sector. A recent ACF study found that the coal, oil and gas sector accounted for over half of all publicly acknowledged political donations to the major parties since 2015-16. However, some two-thirds of political donations are so-called “dark money”, money that does not need to be accounted for under our lax federal political donation laws. The ACF study also found that from 2015-2019 the major parties had close to $283 million in income from undisclosed sources.

Money buys influence and access in politics, and the fossil fuel sector has no problem with that.

But the irony is that Australia is incredibly rich in renewable energy sources. And the best sun and wind power centres are in the very conservative electorates that our major political parties are focused on. Barnaby Joyce’s electorate for example, is in the centre of what the NSW government has designated as the New England renewable energy zone. There are several REZs around the state, including in the Hunter Valley. Renewable energy zones are modern day power stations, coordinating solar, wind and other renewable energy sources with high voltage powerlines and battery storage. The New England REZ alone will supply up to 8 gigawatts of new power for the state.

And as Professor Ross Garnaut has demonstrated, Australia has the potential to become a regional renewable energy superpower, exporting significant quantities of renewable energy as electricity or green hydrogen or green ammonia. Indeed, two of Australia’s most innovative billionaires, Andrew Forrest and Mike Cannon-Brookes, have teamed up to build Sun Cable, a massive renewable energy project in northern Australia which aims to supply up to 15 percent of Singapore’s electricity needs by undersea cable, by 2027.

There is no doubt that Australia has the capacity to become a regional renewable energy superpower. We can make the transition to renewable energy and green industrial processes more easily than most nations, and this transition will result in many new and permanent jobs, and a strong 21st century economy.

\*\*\*

One of the facts of globalisation is that we cannot close our borders to climate change, nor can we ignore the fact that what we do in our own backyard today, matters to other nations. Therefore, we must get our domestic climate change policies right first if we are to repair our international standing on climate change. For too long we have been seen as a climate laggard, and our international credibility is in the balance. No matter how far we advance in developing our own renewable energy sector at the state government level, we will not be taken seriously in climate negotiations until our federal government shows a genuine commitment to reducing CO2 emissions as rapidly as possible and accepts publicly that Australia must phase out fossil fuels in the energy sector and progressively replace our coal, oil and gas mining sectors with clean, green energy and industrial processes.

Refusing to accept this reality will cost us seriously at the international level.

Failing to act decisively on climate change defers inevitable actions and imposes greater costs on future Australians. Failing to act will jeopardise our exports as other countries apply carbon border taxes or refuse to import our carbon intensive products. Failing to act will jeopardise foreign investment and the ability of Australian companies to secure international finance as investors and financial institutions refuse to take on the high risks of financing carbon intensive products and projects.

And failing to act will jeopardise our national security as allies and neighbours turn elsewhere for support in mitigating their own climate risk, and as our credibility as a negotiating partner diminishes.

However, if we take decisive action on climate change and show leadership in our bilateral and regional relationships and international fora, we have a lot to gain.

**Indonesia** for example, with a population of over 265 million just to our north, has a target of NZE by 2060, but says it will need international assistance to meet that goal. The country is heavily dependent on fossil fuels for its energy production. The national target of 23 percent of electricity production from renewables by 2025 looks hard to achieve, considering that as of April 2021 only 13.8 percent of its electricity came from renewables, and most of that from existing hydro and a small number of geothermal power plants. There are only two major commercial wind farms in operation and very few large-scale solar power plants. Rooftop solar PV is only now becoming available in the major cities in Java.

Back in February 2019 President Joko Widodo visited Australia and addressed a joint sitting of parliament. In his speech he invited Australia to help Indonesia to achieve its climate goals. He invited us “*to protect the environment, to achieve sustainable development and reforestation in forest and river upstream areas, to prevent forest and land fires, to commit to lowering carbon emissions and to develop renewable energy and other green technologies*”.

Unfortunately, within a few weeks this invitation was forgotten as both countries scrambled to respond to another existential threat – the emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic.

But here is a great opportunity for Australia to establish a more solid future basis for our relationship with this country, which will by 2050, be the fourth largest economy in the world. We should build a strong energy relationship with Indonesia, sharing renewable energy technologies and capabilities, developing joint industrial capacities in mining and processing of the minerals needed in the new decarbonised economies; working together to build electric vehicle and battery infrastructure. We can help Indonesia build renewable energy zones: our companies are already doing it across regional Australia. We can help Indonesia provide cheap, reliable renewable energy to isolated communities across the nation: our companies are already doing this across Australia. We should be encouraging our firms to see Indonesia as a great market for distributed renewable energy and micro-grid systems.

And we should refocus our development assistance programs with Indonesia to prioritise climate change adaptation and mitigation.

\*\*\*

All of us in Diplomats for Climate Action Now believe that Australia has a special relationship with our Pacific neighbours. There is mutual warmth and understanding between the people of Australia and the Pacific, and many Pacific islander communities have settled happily in Australia. But among Pacific Island governments there is also a good deal of disappointment and frustration with Australia. For far too long successive Australian governments have failed to seriously address the issue which poses the gravest existential threat to the future viability of the Pacific states. Australia still refuses to commit to stronger GHG emission reduction targets and to phasing out fossil-fuel industries. Our governments have consistently refused to endorse strong pro-climate language in Pacific regional meetings and communiques, and at international meetings such as the IPCC COPs. This has made Australian governments hard to like and hard to trust.

In the Pacific rising sea levels and increasing extreme weather events will add to the challenges of declining fisheries, coastal and reef ecosystems, making life in many small island states increasingly difficult to sustain.

The last thing that Pacific islanders want is to have to abandon their homelands. But in preparation for what may become inevitable, Australia should consider offering a safe-refuge resettlement program for affected populations if their island homes become no longer habitable due to sea-level rise or extreme weather events. It is surely preferable to begin considering arrangements that will permit Australia to manage emerging climate-driven population shifts in a timely, gradual, and cost-effective way. This – and getting or domestic climate policies in order - would do much to strengthen Australia’s regional leadership role and repair our international credibility.

\*\*\*

***Conclusion***

The more I have thought about climate change, the more I am convinced that not only can Australia become a global leader on climate action, but that it is essential we do so if we are to survive the climate crisis both as a nation and as a global community. If Australia takes a leadership role on global climate action it will help accelerate the pathway for other nations towards net zero emissions.

We could be the first major energy exporting nation to make serious emission reduction commitments and to implement them. We could be the first energy exporting nation to rapidly convert our economy to renewables. This would encourage other governments and communities to take seriously their commitments. Implementation of IPCC commitments is not going to be easy for anyone. But if Australia were to act fast, show it is possible and that it raises living standards (which it will), our example would have a significant mobilising and accelerating effect on global climate action.

The economic benefits that would flow to our economy, our workers and our businesses from a rapid transition to renewable energy and green industrial processes, would encourage other national efforts.

I am not alone in this: Saul Griffith, a former climate adviser to Joe Biden who recently moved back to Australia, argues that the right policy changes in Australia could help accelerate the world’s transition to renewables by 10 years.

This is because we can do it: we have the renewable resources, and the technological capacity, and the will. At least, among the general population there is a strong interest in converting to renewables. Almost one quarter of all residential households for example, have already installed rooftop solar PV. And a recent survey has shown that 67 percent of voters believe the federal government needs to do more to address climate change; 71 percent of voters do not believe that new coal or gas power stations should be a priority for the federal government.

So, at present the key step is for the federal government to change its policies. Commit to much greater emission reductions by 2030. Stop funding new fossil fuel projects. Remove fossil fuel sector subsidies and redirect them into renewables. Accelerate the transition to renewables and green industrial processes. Help regional fossil-fuel work forces transition to new renewable and other industries. Implement stronger nature protection laws. Reforest large parts of the country, adopt greener agricultural practices. Support our neighbours in Asia and the Pacific to decarbonise their economies and achieve their energy transitions. Export our plentiful solar and wind power as electricity, green hydrogen or green ammonia…. the list goes on.

As I have already said, we cannot close our borders to climate change, nor can we ignore the fact that what we do in our own backyard matters to others. We all want to leave behind a habitable planet for our children and grandchildren: to do this Australia must get its domestic climate policies in order and take a global leadership role on climate action.

\*\*\*

***References***

<https://togetherwecanmovement.org.au/poll/>
for recent poll results on climate change issues.

<https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/auscon/pages/17065/attachments/original/1605244960/>

Fossil\_fuel\_money\_distorting\_democracy.pdf?1605244960
ACF report on “Fossil Fuel Money Distorting Democracy”

<https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/news/economy/2022/02/05/the-joe-biden-adviser-living-wollongong/164397960013274>

<https://www.diplomatsforclimate.org/>
for our Climate-Focused Foreign Policy for Australia https://

[www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-indonesia-and-climate-change](http://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/australia-indonesia-and-climate-change)

<https://ilareporter.org.au/2022/01/>
the-glasgow-climate-change-conference-what-next-for-climate-finance-ruth-adler/

Forthcoming: Paper on Australia’s Climate Responsibilities Towards the Pacific States, Diplomats for Climate Action Now

<https://www.energy.nsw.gov.au/renewables/renewable-energy-zones>

<https://suncable.sg/>
website for the massive Sun Cable project proposed for northern Australia

<https://www.climateworksaustralia.org/resource/state-and-territory-climate-action-leading-policies-and-programs-in-australia/>