REVISION

Climate Policy Networks in Australia: Dynamics of Failure and Possibility

Abstract

Many high-income countries are committed to effective climate policy, yet remain heavily dependent on fossil fuel extraction. The contradiction between an intensifying climate crisis and continued policy failure generates new political alignments, constituencies and agendas. A dialectical process of socio-ecological change opens-up, where the climate is 'socialised' and society is 'climatised'. Australia is a high-income, high-emitting fossil fuel 'superpower' with a thirty-year stretch of failing climate policy, and offers an exceptionally vivid illustration of this dynamic. The paper explores these themes through the rhetoric of participants in Australian climate policy networks. It is based on sustained involvement the field and a series of in-depth interviews with organizations that seek to influence Australian climate policy, across business associations, trade unions, environmental NGOs, government agencies and think-tanks. It finds extensive strategic reflection across these organisations, with moves to more collaboration and alliance-building to isolate the fossil fuel lobby, and efforts at creating new constituencies to advance decarbonisation 'on the ground'.

Keywords

Climate change; Extractivism; Australia; Energy transition; Climate dialectic

Introduction

Global climate policies have signally failed to rise to the challenge of climate change. In 2018 the annual 'Emissions Gap Report' produced by the United Nations Environment Program estimated that emissions reduction commitments globally would have to triple if global warming is to be kept to 2 degrees centigrade (DegC); keeping warming below 1.5 DegC would require a five-fold increase (UNEP 2018). In this context of ineffective measures and growing climate disruption, climate policy is becoming increasingly politicised, generating new and more far-reaching initiatives and proposals (Newman and Head 2015). We characterise this as a dialectical process that arises from the collision between capitalist interests in 'fossil capital' and climate stability. We find a shift from market models to more interventionist state-led transitions, and a move from

technological over-optimism to a rethink of growth dynamics and their consequences. We trace this process in Australia, discussing interviews conducted with players in Australian climate policy networks. We highlight how the on-going failure of climate policy creates new social agendas and forms of social agency, and produces new social and political 'transitions'. Australia is a vivid illustration of the failures of climate policy and, we argue, offers particularly revealing insights into the process of generating alternative responses.

Australian federal climate policy is characterised by the failure to achieve emissions reduction objectives, and also by the perception of unfair outcomes and weak electoral support (Newman and Head 2015). From the early 1990s Australian federal climate policy was characterised by avoidance and minimalism, even by its most ardent advocates. With climate change rising up the political agenda in the mid-2000's, populist attacks on climate science and climate policy became a rich political resource. From the early 2010's there was a dramatic slide into dynamics of denialism and uncertainty (Crowley 2017). At the same time, with growing and at times shocking evidence of climate change on the ground there has been a widening public call for more effective climate policy. This is linked to a strong rejection of fossil fuels, especially in communities affected by coal mining and gas drilling, by coal-fired power plants, and by the export trade (Pearse 2016). In 2020 national-level climate and energy policies remain in a state of "paralysis" (see Ali et al. 2020), with a direct contradiction between the government's emissions reduction targets on the one hand, and its energy and resources policies, centred on expanded coal and gas extraction, on the other. The contradiction has produced radical instability: policy at Federal level repeatedly swings from less to more effective climate policy and back again, within governing political parties as well as between them.

In these 'climate wars' the fossil fuel sector exerts considerable influence over energy policy, delegitimising climate NGOs and discrediting renewable energy (Hall and Taplin 2007; Muenstermann 2012). The coal sector is able to exert a direct influence on Federal Members of Parliament to ensure the policy deadlock on climate is maintained: they may be fighting a 'doomed rearguard action' but they have proved highly effective (Hudson 2019: 131). The discourse that the Australian economy relies on fossil fuels is central to this continued influence (Christoff 2013). Appeals to climate science have had insufficient leverage and the policy landscape has only begun to respond as the 'business case…about the economic and social advantages of clean energy innovation' gains ground (Tangney 2019). Reflecting this there is a rapid expansion of renewable energy at the State level, with institutional investors spurred by an upsurge in climate litigation centred on economic responsibilities (Peel et al 2020). With these developments there are

discernable shifts in the policy logjam. As we outline in this article and elsewhere (Ylä-Anttila et al 2020), climate policy networks play an important role in this. There is growing fluidity within these climate policy networks, leading to new more outward-looking alliances. There has been a more active process of creating new constituencies, in part overcoming previously identified inward-looking tendencies (McDonald 2016). This article tracks the efforts of major stakeholders to establish new platforms and trade-offs, to gain greater strategic leverage in the debate, and offers insights into the rhetoric and tactics deployed variously to minimise, manage and advance climate policy-making. Analysis centres on the interaction between intra- and cross-sector policy conflict and policy consensus in shaping outcomes such as on national and international carbon emission targets, renewable energy targets and the development of renewable energy.

We are interested especially in conflicts and alliances between sectors, and how these have developed over time. As such, our cross-sector analysis is set in a longer narrative of seeking to realise leverage in climate policy debates. The various issues of energy cost and reliability are correlated with issues of energy impacts, including on local environments as well as for greenhouse gas emissions, along with issues of climate equity and just transitions, in the process bringing climate change concerns into fields of concrete everyday life (see Klinsky et al. 2017). The research documents the emergence of alliances and practical action-based agendas for change as an emergent dynamic in Australian climate politics. We argue this can be partially attributed to a wide range of organisations, from energy-intensive manufacturing businesses to environmental NGOs to trade unions, seeking to overcome previously deadlocked positions (Ali et al. 2020). We find that the key driver of change is the lack of serious and consistent Federal Government action on climate change. Entrenched government inertia has brought a much-mentioned ‘uncertainty’ to all sectors, accentuated by the anticipated closure of much of Australia’s coal-fired power plants by 2030 as they become a danger to workers and too costly to repair or retrofit (Jotzo et al. 2018). Here, Australia’s privately-owned generating companies that have become the chief agents in forcing the debate on energy transition. To overcome the resulting uncertainty we find players seeking new forms of collaboration, across corporate, community and sectoral contexts.

At one level these counterpoints in climate policy-making can be seen as playing a functional and instrumental purpose of forcing more rational policy change, consistent with climate science for instance. Policy-making on climate can certainly be enhanced through a clearer ‘articulation of alternative governance mechanisms’ (Head et al. 2014: 191). Challenges from the policy networks can help operationalise the broad support for climate action and renewable energy, across public opinion, translating it into more effective governance (Pietsch and McAllister 2010). The process,

though, is not as smooth or as rational as perhaps may be desired. The problem of climate change is generated by contradictions in energy supply at the heart of the prevailing model of growth and accumulation that applies across all countries. As the Governor of the Bank of England has pointed out, the fossil fuel-intensive sector accounts for 'one third of global equity and fixed income assets' (Carney 2015: 11). Climate policy in all countries, without exception, has demonstrated the difficulty of overcoming the power of the fossil fuel bloc, that is grounded in this asset-base.

A 'rougher' understanding of decarbonisation attends to the conflictual logic of the process. With inadequate policy, climate change intensifies and climate-related political conflict spills across multiple sectors of society. To understand this process we draw on themes developed primarily among neo-Marxist interpretations that emphasise the antagonistic character of capitalist society and the process of ecological appropriation on which it depends. As with any contradiction in social life, the collision between climate stability and the dependence on fossil fuels for accumulation, what Malm calls 'Fossil Capital', cannot be resolved within its own terms (Malm 2016). There is an inverse and zero-sum relationship between climate stability and emissions: more emissions, less stability. The non-negotiable biophysical relationship of global warming, though, is driven by societal agency, and by the particular mode of capitalist society in which we live. It thereby expresses deep-seated socio-ecological contradictions that have a wide historical scope and spatial reach (Moore 2015).

Overcoming climate instability means overcoming the current forms of accumulation, and the vested interests that drive them. This no simple technical task - it is a social and political challenge, and one that only grows as the climate crisis intensifies. Climate change, and the policy failures that necessarily accompany it, have the effect of politicising new fields of threatened and disrupted social life, and take the form of a cascade of climate contention, that force new forms of climate agency into the frame (see Goodman 2017). As a dialectical process, we can see this as a process of 'socialisation', where the climate-accumulation contradiction becomes reflected in the institutions of the state. Within the neo-Marxist tradition, O'Connor argued that just as welfarism socialised the contradiction between workers and employers, so climate policy socialises contradictions between climate and accumulation (Goodman and Anderson 2020; O'Connor 1998). With the persistence of policy failure we see climate concerns pattern more and more aspects of social life, what Foyer et al have called the 'climatisation' of society (Foyer et al. 2017).

Through this research we found a broad reorientation where the force for change is expressed across multiple sectors of society, including non-fossil fuel business sectors. By investigating how

positions have changed over time we aim to illustrate 'climatisation' as a dialectical process, that produces new social possibilities and transformations. The Australian Government's failure to act at the scale required, in the face of what Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd described as the 'great moral challenge of our generation' (Rudd 2007), signals a failure not just of a single politician but ultimately of an entire political class and its structures of institutional legitimation. This crisis of legitimacy produces new grounds for contestation, and forces new players, structures and agendas into the political process. We suggest the research discussed here demonstrates this process at play, helping us understand the legitimacy contests, and the syetemic nature of climate contention.

In what follows we trace themes in the development of Australian climate policy networks, as reported to us by representatives of organizations that seek to influence Australian federal climate policy. The overall intention is to highlight innovations and change in the networks as they respond to on-going policy failure. We would suggest this process is mirrored in other national contexts, perhaps not with the same intensity, but at least in a similar logic of engagement and mobilisation. We have argued elsewhere that global climate policy-making itself also bears-out this process, with false global solutions presaging new agendas for transformation, an unintended 'generative dynamic for climate justice' (see Goodman 2011). Not all climate socialisation is necessarily generative – there has been an active climate justice movement in place for some decades with limited though growing impacts. Our study moves the focus from climate movements *per se* to a wider cross-sectoral frame. We aim thereby to capture wider reorientations that enable the progressive isolation of the fossil fuel sector, delegitimising its access to political influence. This study advances understanding of how the dialectical process of climate contention is played-out in the inter-organisational context on the ground, and offers insights into how these tendencies may be illustrated by reported practice.

Approach

The research discussed here forms part of the Australian contribution to an international research project, 'Comparing Climate Change Policy Networks' (Compon). Compon is an ongoing cross-national comparative study focusing on 'the causes of societal reactions to Climate Change and how these affect international negotiations'. The study has been designed 'to address the causes of variation in societal and governmental responses to the reduction of greenhouse gas (especially carbon dioxide) levels in the global atmosphere', and by doing so help overcome obstacles to decarbonisation (Ylä-Anttila et al. 2018).

We report on in-depth interviews with thirteen representatives of organisations, across business associations, government agencies, think-tanks and non-government advocacy organisations that have been engaged with the climate policy debate in Australia. The organisations they representative are part of a larger group of 110 respondent organizations that were contacted in 2016 to participate in an online survey about their involvement in climate policy debates. The interviewees had volunteered to participate in a follow-up discussion about the issues. Of the thirteen, four were from business, two were from government agencies, three from environmental organisations, two from unions, and two from think-tanks or research institutes. The interview instrument built on the themes explored in the survey. First, it covered general views on climate, including on climate science; technology and growth; climate and energy policy and the international context. Second, it focused on the organisational stance on climate policy, including the preferred policy mix and institutional mechanisms. Third, it asked about policy networks, including relationships with other players, and their relative influence. And finally, we sought data on activities, in terms of how the organisation sought to influence the policy agenda. The interviews were semi-structured, and explored a wide range of sector-specific issues, challenges, problems, trends and perspectives. The interviews were generally for an hour; they were taped, transcribed and coded.

Two key aspects became apparent from the analysis of the coded interview data. First, there is a shift underway from politicised deadlock to building high-level consensus with technocratic management. Second, new political forces and agendas were appearing on the policy landscape. Network fractures appeared to be contributing to a new quality of dynamism within and across sectors. In what follows we discuss each of these aspects in turn, selecting quotes from the interviews that best crystallise or illustrate the position of individuals and, where applicable, the membership bodies or sectors on whose behalf they were speaking. The interviews themselves, and the wider analysis are informed by ethnographic engagement with climate policy players in the Australian context since 2007 (see Rosewarne et al. 2014).

Context: the turmoil in climate and energy policy

Australia was the only high-income country to be granted the right to increase emissions under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, and was credited with the famous ‘Australian clause’ in the Protocol, which allowed emissions to be offset against land-use changes. In 2001 the conservative Liberal-National Government failed to sign the Protocol (after the US refused to ratify it), and Labor’s pledge to (finally) sign the Kyoto protocol helped it win the 2007 election. With the 2007 Federal election

climate policy became a major stake in partisan party politics, within parties as well as externally (Christoff 2013). Under Labor's Kevin Rudd there was a brief period of bipartisanship with the Garnaut Climate Change Review, delivered in September 2008, but disagreement soon surfaced over Labor's emissions trading scheme, the Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS). The conservative Liberal-National Coalition installed a new leader, Tony Abbott, on a mandate of halting the CPRS and Labor soon abandoned it. Subsequently Labor installed a new leader, Julia Gillard, and narrowly won the 2010 election.

Under Gillard Labor passed the 'Clean Energy Future' (CEF) package, which included a carbon pricing mechanism. Abbott mobilised a highly successful populist campaign against the package, as a 'Giant New Tax on Everything' and won the 2013 election (Taberner and Zoirzetto 2014). In power Abbott dismantled key aspects of the CEF, replacing carbon pricing with industry subsidies. Abbott's neo-conservatism proved electorally unpredictable and in 2015 the Coalition replaced him with Malcolm Turnbull, who went on to win the 2016 election for the Coalition. Turnbull sought a political consensus on climate, with a review by the Chief Scientist, Alan Finkel, who recommended a 'clean energy target' for electricity. This was rejected by his conservative backbenchers, as was his subsequent proposal for a 'National Energy Guarantee' (NEG) that aimed to balance emissions reduction with 'guarantees' for affordability and reliability. With the NEG defeated, Turnbull was ousted in favour of the more conservative Scott Morrison, who opposed the Paris Agreement targets. Morrison's unexpected win at the 2019 election then generated new divisions over climate policy within Labor, which had adopted the Paris Target.

The twists and turns have been remarked-upon as signalling a new instability in Australian democracy. A Federal Parliamentary library paper in 2016 created a remarkable chronology of climate policy from 1990, showing its uniquely tortuous and disruptive logic (Talberg et al. 2016). The instability generated by elite-led climate populism saw Australia become the first country to repeal climate legislation; it is also, most probably the only country to lose not one but two prime ministers due to the problems of climate policy-making. As Eckersley argues, climate policy has imposed new pressures and strains on Australia's liberal democracy, injecting a new opportunism and short-termism into the electoral mix (Eckersley 2015).

In part, this reflects the peculiar dynamics of Australia as a high-income settler extractivist state. The Australian economy is highly dependent on fossil fuels, accentuated in recent years with the unprecedented boom in coal, and latterly also gas, principally for export. The economy is highly trade-exposed and the mining sector is dominated by a small number of large international players,

with coal, oil and gas accounting for about 60,000 employees (in 2015 ABS: Mining Operations). The fossil fuel and wider mining sector wields considerable influence in Australian political life, and regularly intervenes in political affairs, to forestall political threats. That influence has become more entrenched as the economy has become more dependent on mining, creating a resource curse for Australian democracy (Goodman 2008). At the same time the fossil fuel sector has become isolated as business and commerce has become more orientated to a rapidly growing renewable energy sector, and associated industries. Some of the resulting tensions are expressed in the interview data discussed here, especially in the perspectives from business associations.

From deadlock to collaboration?

Across the interviewees discussed in the paper, we found a broadly-evident attempt to shift the debate on climate policy into less volatile and more negotiable contexts. In this section we discuss how this shift was pursued differentially in the domains of business, government, think tanks, NGOs and unions. In some instances, there was a considerable degree of cross-sector agreement, and across all organisations there was a profound sense of failure and frustration, and a desire to develop new ways of collaborating.

Business associations: from resistance to engagement

Business organisations across all sectors interviewed (agribusiness, manufacturing, energy-intensive manufacturing specifically, plus umbrella organisations representing a wider range of businesses and sectors) described how the ground of policy development and implementation was shifting definitively from rejecting climate policy to engaging with it, with organisations frequently taking a more proactive approach. A widely-held view was that lobbying bodies, intra- and cross-sector networks, had recognised the imperative to both push government to develop clear energy and industry policies to address climate change via emissions reduction and related schemes.

Most interesting was ambivalence on issues of competitiveness. Several stated the need to be cautious, assuming that moving to renewable energy would impose new costs on industry. To maintain competitive edge, Australia had to move with the global transition, not ahead of it, as one generic industry association put it, ‘You can be too early onto a good thing… [we need to] keep to the middle of the pack’. Another association explicitly put pricing before emissions reduction: ‘We don't think that the best outcome for consumers is lower emissions at any cost’. But this was the minority position – a more common approach was to accept the need for emissions cuts but to

express concern about how to achieve them: ‘We generally-speaking don't have a view on the targets. We accept the need for zero net emissions but… tell us how we are going to get there’. As one NGO stated, there is a studied ambivalence, of wanting to be seen to accept the need for emissions cuts, but to not wanting to bear the consequences (just yet): ‘The number of times people have used the kind of “well we should be chased but not yet”, you know’.

Ambivalence can enable deferral, but in the context of a clear horizon for maintaining climate stability, can also offer some common ground for substantive action. One generic business association pointed to the Paris Agreement with its 2050 deadline for net zero emissions, as a ‘huge and clarifying concept’: this was forcing people to ‘realise it does have an end date, and that just changes their willingness to engage’. The implications in financial terms were sobering: ‘We’ve already got four times as much carbon on the balance-sheets than we can ever burn’. The metaphor of a house on fire was used by one think tank: ‘you’re not going to clean your windows or you know vacuum your carpets when the roof is on fire’.

The result is an uneven but growing engagement with climate issues. An agribusiness body emphasised co-benefits - of ‘practice change adopted by the industry for its productivity benefits’, which would also produce ‘an incidental mitigation benefit’. The organisation had avoided division through practical policy - ‘instead of trying to reach the degree of consensus on those issues’ because it was ‘too difficult’, the organisation had agreed to ‘focus on how our sector needs to engage with the policy agenda…at a national and an international level’.

Attitudinal change around climate policy, energy policy and industry policy appeared in some energy-intensive sectors. One multi-sector body confirmed that business thinking was heading ‘towards second best solutions’ as first best solutions had been rendered ‘politically impossible, and so broad-based, extremely broad-based, single-pricing instruments are gone’, and therefore ‘there’s no political constituency for an efficient, national, broad-based multi-sectoral approach any more’.

Another generic business lobbying body stated that a number of their member companies were explicitly examining ‘what does a 2050 world net carbon emissions … actually mean for how they operate?’ Australia had to ‘start thinking in terms of a transformed industrial sector’ because ‘the idea that in 2050 we might be at national net zero with a completely unaltered domestic economy, making things in the same way we do today and importing…it’s ridiculous’. This group were ‘definitely interested in the development of new industries…and new opportunities for existing industries’. It was obvious that ‘in a world heading towards…net zero despite taking a somewhat circuitous route towards it, that there’s going to be enormous investment and opportunity associated

with meeting that'. However, in the near term, 'it's a lot harder to see the opportunities than it is to see the costs'.

Members of one business association were concerned if they could continue to have an 'energy advantage in the future', comparing it to the golden era of cheap extraction of fossil fuels and isolation from global energy markets. Could Australia's 'enormous amount of renewable resources' provide that advantage? Unfortunately, notwithstanding the take-up of roof-top domestic solar, Australia was 'not too flash' at 'large-scale energy projects, construction in general'. For this organisation, net zero carbon was inevitable, and 'how you get there, we're sort of indifferent'. The regulatory systems should allow all options, although the interviewee foresaw that Carbon Capture Storage and nuclear would have a 'big problem competing with future solar'. Key sectors such as aluminium and many energy providers were 'starting to grapple with this stuff'. However, there was little evidence that 'the coal producers had seriously grasped a net zero future for themselves as a concept yet', despite predictions that 'the coal market will be in structural decline for a long time'.

There was a strong call for consistency and coherence across government policy-making, and the need for more effective national-level planning. An industry-specific energy-intensive manufacturing lobby wanted its sectoral voice heard in three interrelated policy spheres, that is, climate change, energy, and industry policy. They needed 'to all be doing the same thing or it's just madness'. Currently policies seemed to be working against one another: 'our industry policy is saying do one thing, energy policy is saying do a different thing… and climate change policy is doing a third thing'. Meanwhile, in a federal system with leapfrogging by state levels of government, there was 'a bunch of policies, which creates a lot of apprehension' with 'multiple patches lying on top of each other of Federal and State policies, but as the bed is made, so you must lie'.

Government and think tanks: from re-pricing to intervention

Government agencies and think tanks reported a broad shift to greater engagement: as one think tank commented, 'most of the major groups have come the realisation that having [climate] as a hotly debated election topic actually doesn't serve anyone's interest because we need long-term policy'. In this context there was a move from abstracted models to more embedded and applied policies. One interview participant representing an energy regulatory body said that their agency aimed to make the process for changes to market arrangements 'very structured, objective-based…[and] transparent'. Echoing other participants calling for government action, this body

favoured a ‘sectoral approach’ based on ‘political pragmatism… design something that’s sustainable, that will be long-lasting, that works well with your existing mechanisms, and we can just sort of get on with it’.

The preference for a pragmatic sector-based ‘Plan B’, given that the idealised ‘Plan A’ of economy-wide emission trading was politically unpalatable, was commonly expressed: as one think-tank put it: ‘We’re way past first-best solutions, [that are] politically impossible’. Another argued, ‘If we wait for the emissions trading to emerge… we’ll never get there… and if it does it will be bastardised by industry anyway’. As one put it, it was better to be ‘a little bit less ambitious’ to ensure ‘political sustainability’ and certainty around how emissions reductions will be achieved, rather than dealing with voter backlash to ‘bill-shock’. In other words, ‘rather than spending 15 years fighting and get nowhere, go with something pragmatic and at least get something…Then we all stop talking about the mechanism’.

The idealised ‘gold standard’ though, remains in place, in the imagination of policy-makers and business associations. As one think tank put it, ‘I don't think there is any question if you’ve got an overall cap, you have this beautifully designed perfect model, then the market works it out’. Another went so far as to suggest that, in the idealised world of a perfect carbon market, Australia could continue to burn coal, offsetting all its obligations offshore, commenting ‘If it’s cheaper… to continue to produce electricity from brown coal and to pay for emissions to be reduced in Indonesia - I don't have a problem with that’.

Sector-by-sector industry policy was on the agenda in new ways, but governments remained wary. A think-tank reported a ‘general extreme caution about industry policy from all sides of politics, really’. As a result, rather than intervening to achieve the necessary outcomes in terms of reduced emissions, ‘they fiddle around the margins,’ essentially taking a ‘business-as-usual’ approach. This view was echoed by an energy market stakeholder who stated that the most efficient mechanism, an economy-wide carbon tax, ‘politically that’s not going to happen in Australia’. The best alternative would be a sectoral approach based on ‘political pragmatism’, something sustainable that would work well with existing mechanisms, allowing the country to ‘just sort of get on with it’. Direct industry policy was the best way of ensuring the growth of renewables: ‘We would much prefer that if you had an industry policy to invest in renewables, that you made it an industry policy’. This could overcome the disjuncture between climate and energy policy, stating ‘we now see them as two objectives, climate change and energy standing side-by-side’.

The regulator noted a wider shift across business sectors in this direction. The industry had shifted away from the idea that policy had to be 'a single instrument' to arguing that policies must be 'tailored to different sectors'. The emphasis was on suiting the policy to the context and the purpose: 'while a trading scheme might work well for the electricity sector, it's not going to work for agriculture and you've got to reduce emissions in agriculture too, so you need something different there and it won't work for vehicle transport, you need a fuel efficiency scheme for there. So… you may well need different policies for different sectors, and a challenge becomes fitting them all together'.

Given the lack of effectiveness and certainty about policy interventions there was the perception that both energy market and climate policy 'are in a mess' and lacked credibility. Often policies would backfire or be at cross-purposes. One was the 'Contracts for Closure' instituted by the Labor Government in 2011, which aimed to 'negotiate the orderly exit, by 2020, of around 2,000MW of highly emissions-intensive coal-fired electricity generation capacity'. But, as this interviewee noted, 'No money was paid under that, the negotiations were abandoned. But the brown-coal fire generators were paid a couple of billion dollars in cash separately, as a part of the compensation for the introduction of the carbon price itself'.

There is a widespread desire to overcome this uncertainty in climate and energy policy. The sentiment was widely expressed, as one interviewee put it: 'Most of the major groups have come the realisation that having it as a hotly debated election topic actually doesn't serve anyone's interest because we need long-term policy'. Another pointed to the 'growing sense of commonality and linked interest over the last few years I think particularly because the policy discussion has been so disastrous'. The lack of bipartisan agreement on policies and mechanisms leads to technicised measures by one party in power being replaced by different and not necessarily more effective measures by the next party to lead the government. The effort to overcome this was a key preoccupation.

Interviews revealed a wide range of players advocating for and working on, sector-by-sector approaches to energy, industry and climate policy. This again was in response to a demonstrated lack of both government leadership and bipartisan agreement. A leading think tank considered that it was possible 'to have a scheme for electricity, having a scheme for everything else…[and] have trading between those two'. Individual businesses or sectors would have absolute baselines, while there would be an intensity-based baseline credit scheme for the electricity sector. Operating in parallel, this would allow 'cross-sector' trading.

NGOs and Unions: from minimalism to transformation

Similar to other sectoral shifts discussed above, the issues for NGOs were more frequently framed in the subsuming context of climate change. One NGO confirmed the trend to a cross-sector consensus that climate change must be addressed, with reinsurers, insurers and then investors getting on board: 'the gravitational centre has shifted towards understanding the need for action, whereas it was peripheral 10 years ago'. This, in turn, increases the number of fronts that contestations can play out on, and the new kinds of alliances that can be forged. The NGO health alliance for instance, had broadened engagement beyond their own stakeholders group, to try 'to bring some of the other major health players along' with them: the health NGO used consultation with healthcare peers as an opportunity to 'build up a detail of that and draw in more people'.

Mirroring the position and language of business organisations, one NGO described itself as being 'agnostic on the specific mechanism', provided it was 'done in an equitable way… so that we don't have unintentional benefits accruing to polluters'. They would support 'whatever the most rapid emissions reduction mechanism is going to be'. Another ENGO had a broader agenda: 'any plan we put forward has to reduce emissions, it has to keep known [fossil fuel] reserves in the ground… it has to build energy efficiency and renewables towards a 100 per cent pathway as fast as is possible'. Moreover 'everything has to be predicated on the notion of Just Transitions'. They predicted the eventual outcome would be a 'mixture' of emission standards, carbon pricing and so forth, even if they themselves were 'deeply sceptical of market-based mechanisms'.

For the health NGO, the details of how a carbon reduction scheme might work were far less important than just getting something workable in place, due to the immediacy of the environmental threat. 'There's a motivation to respond to those risks because they're happening right now, they're not … distant in time and space'. Citing the World Health Organisation's warning that 'climate change is the defining public health issue of this century', they stated that 'the scale and speed of climate change means that no amount of adaptation will save lives if we fail to mitigate'. Moreover, mirroring business sector arguments, they highlighted health co-benefits: 'you spend a million dollars on the trading scheme and you return $10m in avoided ill-health and productivity gains'. The health benefits from decarbonisation then drive emissions reduction: 'it completely blows up the argument that we can't afford to act on climate change, you know, because we clearly can't afford not to and it's actually better for our health'

Unions were shifting quickly to a focus on managing the impact of decarbonisation on jobs and

communities, via ‘just transitions’ programs. This shift was accompanied by wider engagement with climate change policy, across a range of unions affected by climate change, representing fire-fighters, nurses, electricians, construction workers and agribusiness workers. The new players, more engaged with the need for stronger action on climate change, were shifting ideological stances. One white-collar union stated there were new pressures from their members to be active on climate issues, for ‘serious transition plans’, with strong industrial policy. Unions were moving from the previous ‘very defensive’ position of protecting jobs despite environmental costs, ‘to talk about the possibilities to be created by going to a renewable energy economy’. The ACTU had created a climate justice program and was seeking practical measures to maximise the opportunities for workers in the energy transition, for instance for social ownership of renewables, dubbed ‘energy democracy’, and for just transitions.

Several blue-collar unions had shifted their position some time ago to favour new jobs in the emerging renewables sector, with electrical and manufacturing unions increasingly active in advocating for effective climate policy. Similarly, mining and energy unions had accepted the inevitable decline of coal-fired power, and begun advocating for ‘just transitions’ policies that would support workers displaced by the emerging renewables sector. As a representative of a mining union stated, ‘with coal power generation being definitely in decline, we’re certainly pushing [industry] diversification’; it was calling for a new federal agency to oversee a systematic and just transition, ‘focussed on managing the restructuring of regions’.

Mining unions, though, actively supported new coal mines and gas fields, and backed the wider export trade in fossil fuels. The representative argued that non-mining unions had no standing in the debate. To speak on mining matters unions ‘need to have skin in the game’: some were using climate as a political football, ‘something that gives them free kicks’, at the expense of miners. Reflecting this, the representative from the white-collar union stated, that the Australian Council of Trade Unions position on climate was ‘still dominated’ by the mining and energy unions. This produced a studied ambivalence within the Labor Party about the future of coal and gas in Australia.

New political forces and agendas

Widespread exasperation and mounting impatience with the policy inertia has seeded new political forces within and across sectors, creating new alliances between traditional antagonists, and was enabling the emergence of new external constituencies. Strange bedfellows perhaps, but

nevertheless these interactions were constituting new multi-sectoral social forces, a swarm of sorts, pressing the agenda against fossil fuel interests.

Cross-sector alliances

Networking with organisations in other sectors that share overlapping interests is one way to meet the challenge. For example, a powerful body in the agribusiness sector, one normally associated with conservative forces, described itself as a 'keen partner' in the 'Climate Change Research Strategy for Primary Industries… [as] looking at the range of research questions around how climate change affects agriculture and how agriculture can be part of…the global response'. The collaboration sees scientists, researchers, bureaucrats, policy people, and NGO advocates grappling with the 'nuts and bolts of the research questions and challenges that we have'.

Increased willingness to engage was a common factor. One large multi-sector representative body cited organisational and generational change as creating a more open attitude towards cross-sector networking and support. In a number of bodies the people who were a part of a 'dynamic in confrontation and resistance' had moved on. They argued the shift had opened the way for increased discussion between business and other sectors, that, conversely, 'if all you see is the hurdles and the road-blocks and you lose sight of where you're actually going, then you can devolve into a lowest common denominator, myopic resistance'.

One 'manifestation of that' was the Australia Climate Roundtable, an alliance of business, labour, social justice and environmental NGOs. A labour organisation cited it as an initiative 'to achieve more bipartisanship and consensus around climate policy, so that there is more certainty both in actually fixing the climate but also for business and investing'. For the union the Roundtable helped it gain more acceptance for 'decent work' as an objective, paving the way for the idea of 'just transitions' to become more widely understood and embraced.

An interviewee from a business association stressed the Roundtable initiative was born of frustration and a 'growing sense of commonality and linked interests over the last few years, I think particularly because the policy discussion has been so disastrous'. It built on a 'ground layer of trust, and sense that there was something to talk about'. Interestingly there was a shared desire to overcome previous conflicts on climate issues, and a shared willingness to recognise different perspectives, and a realisation that 'when you put birds of a feather together, they are much less likely to display flexibility or systemic thinking'.

There were limits to cross-sector alliance-building. Engagement with the fossil fuel sector appeared in the realm of the impossible. As one business participant stated, this reflected 'extreme organisational tension between the environment movement and the Minerals Council - they're both calling for each other's destruction and it's very hard for people to sit down at the same table'. Certainly, from the perspective of the fossil fuel sector any alliance-building to advance climate policy was hostile to their interests. The effect, intended or unintended, was to isolate the fossil fuel sector and its advocates.

In large part, the new political space opening up for alliances reflected the wider engagement with climate concerns across industries, the professions and the general public. For a health NGO, once unimaginable cross-sector alliances focussed on broader policy issues had become feasible, because 'there's a much stronger recognition that health is a prominent issue'. Several of the NGOs were using alliances to define climate as a society-wide concern. One environmental NGO stated it was common to host public forums and rallies with renewable industry representatives, farmers, unions and indigenous representatives. The aim was to make a claim on the wider public interest, as the representative put it, 'we're trying to say "Climate change has to sit above Party politics"'.

New constituencies

Simultaneously with the focus on creating unusual alliances, across the policy network, there was a turn to creating and mobilising new external constituencies. A major ENGO described this as a strategically-motivated internal change in their climate-related focus and how they conducted campaigns. This entailed a 'shift away from [a focus on] the kind of mechanisms for reducing emissions and the kind of UN process, towards effectively direct action'. Such action was aimed unambiguously at stopping fossil fuel production: 'it's much more the external campaign that actually shifts public opinion and actually stops some of those [coal mining] projects from going ahead'. Community organisation was in the first instance a form of 'street-fighting' designed to displace 'wind sceptics': 'wherever they organise we will go out and counter-organise, and our model was to find a local partner and build their power and that obviously resulted in a shift'.

This 'outsider track' has dynamic effects – it creates new and often disruptive alliances, and constitutes new players in the policy process. It hinges on the growing articulation of climate concerns across multiple fields of life, so that it is no longer defined as a scientific or technical matter, but rather a matter of everyday life and livelihood. Reflecting this growing subsumption of

fields of social life by climate change, there is a multiplying or layering of mobilisation. In institutional terms there were very few if any organisations specifically devoted to climate issues prior to the mid 2000's; from 2006 there had been wave upon wave of climate-focused NGOs, each centred on a particular facet and mobilising potential under the unfolding climate crisis. A whole tier of climate-focussed NGOs had emerged, a trend mirrored in research, with many institutes constituted to have a specific focus on climate. One NGO interviewee noticed a new type of climate politics, citing 'a shift in the climate movement and even though the phrase 'climate movement' is something that didn't exist a few years ago very much, that's something that's been driven by work around investment and… the kind of community organising model and building the idea of a people's movement around climate change'.

The process was creating broader constituencies at a different levels, as each organisation was 'mobilising a different sort of layer of people', from farmers, to young people, to investors and to legal and health professions. There was also a strong element of community organising, for renewables and against fossil fuels, with community-level referenda and other forms of political engagement. One NGO interviewee outlined the wider strategy, that, facing a rise in climate denialism, 'we needed to find different ways to build political power, so we went to conservative rural areas that were under risk from either coal or gas and we've built an active constituency since then that shifted the debate around energy'.

The political impact was immediate as fossil fuels and renewables became a political stake in a State election and a major obstacle to more effective energy policy was removed. The resultant 'policy tension' in that State election triggered an enquiry, a moratorium on on-shore gas, and a new State-level renewable investment strategy. Local mobilisation had created new constituencies as people moved from talking generally about renewables to investigating how they could establish a community-owned wind farm or solar park. The links into other sectors, including with unions, were being explored, focussing on the 'downstream manufacturing benefits of renewables', engaging blue-collar unions around local procurement and jobs, and tapping-into the move to 'just transitions'.

The tendency for climate to subsume other issues, and inspire and inform community mobilisation, thus building new constituencies, is evident also in the account given by the health NGO. Their report on the health impacts of coal mining in regional New South Wales identified wide-ranging effects from the 'psycho-social impacts associated with things like information asymmetry between people who are trying to fight fossil fuel projects and …very well resourced mining companies with their teams of lawyers', to increased suicide rates, to communities destroyed by the progressive

purchase of farms and villages and consequent friendship fractures 'when somebody refuses to sell and somebody sells'. The health sector had been working as co-investigators with communities, building an 'evidence-base about the risks that they face and…to then take actions to protect themselves'. Yet notwithstanding the greater understanding in specific communities about health effects, there exists a 'huge gap between what health professionals understand about climate change and what they need to know'. Much work remained, particularly for those in the public health and epidemiology domain, to grow intra-sector and cross-sector constituencies for political and policy change.

Finally, the political organisation we interviewed described their strategy of building a new climate policy-focussed constituency within Australian Labor Party (ALP). In response to their announcement that they would visit every one of the 370 branches around the country to discuss how grassroots Party members could input into climate policy, 'people came out of the woodwork' to meet in pubs and form climate groups. Membership was free and open to all. This previously dormant network rebuilt an 'incredibly active base', in part by downplaying the 'environment imperative' and instead talking about it 'in terms of things Labor cares about - safety, prosperity, innovation…opportunities…threat to equality…and then the solution in terms of jobs innovation'.

Importantly, the party network was positioned an insider, mobilising from within the party to gain leverage to affect policy: 'because we're a legitimate, an organised stakeholder in the Party, we couldn't be so easily smashed'. The power play is described pragmatically: 'a winner takes all politics just hasn't worked for us in this space'; even if it was possible to 'impose our will from the edges, it doesn't hold, we've actually got to take the middle with us'. This grassroots organising approach resulted in Labor adopting an ambitious climate policy aiming for 50% renewable energy target. These agendas had extended further, centring on democratizing energy ownership, and related hopes that 'as we deal with Climate, we can remake capitalism'.

Conclusions

In 2013 a special Issue of the *Australian Journal of Politics and History* pointed to the continuing obstacles to effective climate policy in Australia, highlighting the 'problems of achieving and sustaining genuine public support' and the importance of 'building partnerships with industry' (McDonald 2013: 449). This study unearths similar themes in a determination to develop new alliances and build wider constituencies to advance the policy agenda. We find that climate policy networks, across NGOs, industry and think tanks, play an important role in generating these new

strategies. As revealed in the interviews discussed here, groups engaged with climate policy issues were actively evaluating approaches, engaging in a process of strategic reflection. We would argue this process is central to the possibility of realising more 'generative' forms of the climate policy dialectic.

The reorientations we point to, from embattled resistance to a process of engagement and collaboration, are vitally important. These shifts enabled various players to recognise a common endeavour, and find ways to advance it, both within new alliances and in building new outward-orientated constituencies. The various effects of this are played-out across a range of climate policy spheres, among corporate players, with State and local governments, in alliance with think-tanks, unions, non-government organisations and international counterparts. The policy deadlock at Federal level had effectively been sidestepped with a wide range of climate initiatives at other levels and contexts. Agendas for emission reduction were being advanced 'on the ground', outflanking the Federal context, especially at State level, but also at household level, and in finance and the wider corporate sector.

In the developing positions and conflicts over climate and energy we see the various players in Australia's climate policy networks seeking new ways to address the growing crisis. The policy urgency drags otherwise short-termist and self-interested players into a process of recognising climate impacts and taking action. In the process they produce new agendas for climate and energy policy, and for social change. As outlined at the outset, this process of generative failure can be understood as part of a wider climate dialectic that comes into play as climate change intensifies and societies become increasingly drawn into a range of climatised contexts and scenarios. Across the interviews discussed here policy failure cretaed new dynamics within and across sectors. Amongst business organisations there is a progressive de-linking of economic growth and fossil fuels, with a sharp fracture opening up between the priorities of players in the domestic economy, seeking cheap and reliable energy, and the priorities of the fossil fuel sector. There is a parallel fracturing among government agencies between those concerned with climate policy and those seeking to define Australia as an export platform for fossil fuels. Among think-tanks there is a bifurcation between groupings concerned primarily with carbon pricing and other market-based measures, and a growing interest in more sector-based industry policy. With NGOs there is a difference in strategy, with some focused on alliance-building while others seeking to create new constituencies in an increasingly climatised society, notably with rural populations threatened by fossil fuel projects. And finally, among trade unions some common ground has opened-up over 'just transitions' and a range of concerns around climate change impacts, the emergence of green jobs, and wider 'energy democracy', though the question of fossil fuel extraction for export remains

a key flashpoint. These disagreements within sectors disrupt the established links of political debate, creating possibilities for new cross-sector alliances in climate network politics.

Opposition to climate action is seen as largely counterproductive in a context where the crisis is allowed to deepen, with ever-more profound implications for the existing social model. The article has addressed the intense interplay and conflict of interests, regrets and hopes in actively constructing socio-ecological narratives to address climate crisis. In the process, players in the climate policy network are themselves producing the political dynamism and possibilities for new socio-ecological relations. This dynamism is still short-circuited by the special position of fossil fuels in Australian socio-economic and political life: as noted, the country is still without an effective set of climate policies at the national level. Yet, equally, the resulting political furore has forced a wider search for climate agency and transformation, in a more dialectical and generative process, that is creating new possibilities on the ground for advancing decarbonisation.

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