

“A tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing ...”

The Prime Minister lacks Macbeth's sense of the dark absurd ... and Shakespeare's

brilliant wit. He is a man with a reckless mission and currently in a transcontinental flap. The world of global climate change policy is not taking it seriously enough, not moving fast enough for him. Not for the first time,

Kevin Rudd has talked down prospects of international agreement at a crucial climate change summit in Copenhagen in December, amid fresh predictions the conference is doomed to failure ... differences between the positions of the US, the European Union, China and India were too great ... Yesterday, preparing to leave for the US today for climate talks at the UN and the G20 summit in Pittsburgh, Mr Rudd went out of his way to dampen expectations

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,26094795-11949,00.html>:

But how much weight does his lament carry as he rushes from summit to summit with that sense of accessorised urgency. Just enough time to squeeze in a latte with Bill Clinton.

Flapping, of course, is a political strategy. Colour and movement to conceal vacuity; to hide his nation's nationally interested and shameful contribution - that huge 5 per cent in unconditional reductions that Australia has offered to the world when the science is calling for 40 per cent by 2020. This is "idiot's" work, full of "sound and fury, signifying nothing". A smarter person would stay at home and shut up. Rudd has the shameless front of a 10-storey building. But if sound and fury is all you have, you work it and work it hard.

The global game is pretty obvious now. Smart nations, most of the rich world, have one over-riding goal to which saving the planet has been well and truly subordinated: minimising carbon liabilities in order to advance economic ground. Climate change policy is about increasing or at least not surrendering competitive advantage; about upholding the national interest. It might cost the earth but, hey, you get to stay rich. This is why we, among the world's highest emitters, shame ourselves with 5 per cent reduction targets.

Getting our carbon costs down means getting others to pay more, especially those two giants to our north - who, almost ironically, are signing up for vast quanta of our coal and gas. Here's a few short grabs of what the Indian Minister for the Environment told Hillary Clinton about the idea of paying more when they met in July: "There is simply no case ...". Get that? "No case ..."

"There is simply no case for the pressure that we, who have among the lowest emissions per capita, face to actually reduce emissions," Ramesh told Clinton ... "an international agreement ... in Copenhagen will depend on being creative, leveraging international technology and especially "international capital is going to be key".

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/19/AR2009071900705.html>

China's story will be the same. Rudd will have the inside story on both. That's why he's flapping and hand ringing. At the moment it looks as if Australia's game is up here. This is another of many signals that western imperialism may have run its full course. There are now too many "natives" to boss around, they have a rock-solid argument and even if they didn't, some have

got weapons of mass destruction. India and China have uncontrolled carbon emissions as well as nuclear arsenals. So Hillary replies

... she "completely" understood India's argument about per capita emissions ... "On one level, it's a fair argument," she said, but she argued that the per capita argument "loses force" as developing countries rapidly become the biggest emitters.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/07/19/AR2009071900705.html>:

The only thing "losing force" here is the imperium's response. Only when India's people become big or equal *per capita* emitters does the developed world have a moral leg to stand on. How close are they? The most recent data indicates US, Chinese and Indian annual per capita emission stood at 19, 4.6 and 1.3 tons of CO₂ respectively. In other words, US emissions are four times as high as the Chinese and 15 times as high as the Indian. Even in aggregate terms, the US remains four times as high as India.

What was Hillary Clinton even doing there? I guess there was never any shame in empire. "No case" says Ramesh, and no wonder he sounds so morally confident. And no wonder, too, he registers the conclusion he does:

"... international capital is going to be the key." Sharing, this is what is making the rich choke. Many would rather die ... and, on this issue, they may again have their way.

It is true that New York has just witnessed more promising declarations of good intent on the part of both India and China. But no specifics demonstrating serious strategic changes were in evidence. We will have to wait and see. Image and PR count for them too. And the more reasonable they sound – well, the more unreasonable their opponents sound. If only the negotiations encompassed more than strategic positioning and impression management.

What could Rudd do here if he were another man? What could enlightened political leadership do more generally? It needs to start talking to its constituents about the exceptional nature of the times and the exceptional historical obligations of wealth in times of crises like these. These are not obligations to self - though they are to one's children and grandchildren. Leaders should also cease the insane pretence that the planet will be kind as long we try hard or, worse, just pretend to. These are the lines that Penny Wong falls back on when there's nothing else: "We're doing our best." This is stunning human conceit.

The planet doesn't care, it isn't capable of care, it's indifferent. Let's say benignly indifferent. If it spoke in words rather than in biochemical processes, it would say: "These carbon emissions are compatible with human life and abundance and these others are not. Take it or leave it. Take it and prosper; leave it, and it's all over." But it's not malicious. It's not Gaia's revenge in a personalised sense as James Lovelock might suggest.

I just see biophysics and biochemistry confirming that the world is an integrated whole. How else would you want it? An unreliable law of gravity? Or: "Penny, Kevin, as you have both been good, I'll vary the laws of carbon chemistry today. Australia can keep burning as much coal as it likes."

If the developed world was not obsessing fitfully about its comparative advantage or its 40 or so national interests, it could easily pay the premiums for a global refit. That's for carbon neutral infrastructure for its own economies and for those of the developing world over the next four or five decades. Also, at the end of that time, we would have the level playing field everyone is so anxious about losing now - with one difference. It would be pitched at a higher and cleaner altitude. No one would be grimly hanging on to dirty comparative or competitive advantage in the pathetic and criminal ways we do at the moment.

These positions were staked out in the foundational documents of Australian climate policy, *The Garnaut Review* and the Treasury's *White Paper* and they are false in several ways. They are false, first, in the sense that we can afford higher carbon prices than these documents say. They are built on phony accounting. Let me explain how this works in very quick and simple terms.

You have two compartments in your wallet: one for coins and one for serious money. You "ignore" or hide the serious money and, eventually, everyone, especially the critical journalist, forgets about it. Climate change is only brought into contact with small change. Of course, it's a huge struggle. Of course when you empty it right out you appear generous - yes, this is the trick.

Then there's the other falsehood already noted: the "doing your best" case. It is only ever intimated, it oozes, as a kind absurd earnestness from between every line of the documents noted above and it says: "Hey, we're turning ourselves inside out here (paper money all hidden away) and just haven't got any more to give. It's got to be enough."

Yet Professor Garnaut wrings his hands and intones the word "diabolical" for the 500th time. This is the theatre of trying hard: "The 5 per cent we are offering must be enough!" This is "sound and fury" taken to the level high art: this is just so much manipulative claptrap.

The planet has its limits and thresholds and they are not negotiable and it does not care about the Professor's hand wringing, or about Penny Wong's or the PM's sincere testimonials.

The people fall for it for a time because the lying has this viscous oozing quality and it is buried deep in 600- or 800-page reports. But the planet does not read either and is summary in its judgments. Cross the threshold, and it will not hesitate, not for a nano-second, to do its thing. A sizeable portion (perhaps most, perhaps all) of the 9 billion we will become at mid-century will be homeless and the adjustment is likely to be protracted, painful and violent as we scrap over shrinking licenses to live.

What should we do? Sack Garnaut and Treasury and start again. This time, put fixing the planet and an alternative politics of the general human interest first ... put those ahead of trade advantage and the old murderous politics of the national interest. Hanging on to the last two will be the death of us.

Maybe it doesn't have to be forever. Just for the half century or so the planet needs to recover and restabilise. That might be enough. Anyway, that's all, that's the guts of it, the heart of the moral and political effort called for by climate change. Yes, just two things: a sense of the planet's vulnerability and of the common interest humans have in its wellbeing. It's that simple. The rest is engineering.

For now the planet needs a break. And what's half a century between *homo sapiens* friends? We have been going at it no-holds-barred, *laissez faire*, just the way we want, for a couple of hundred thousand years, haven't we? Fair's fair. We know what's fair even if the planet doesn't. That's what makes us its 'highest' form of life. Let's live up to that name and do what we are supposed to on a decisive scale for a change. Forget grand bargains, we need a grand show of who we are or claim to be: humanity and human wisdom. Intelligent earth (from homo, humus and soil).