

FAKING DECISIONS FOR THE FUTURE: CLIMATE CHANGE POLICY WA

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Postkyoto Conversations

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On May 10th or thereabouts the State Government released another climate change policy document. It follows the earlier *Greenhouse Strategy* of 2004 and the actual title, of course, is not “*faking*” but “*making*” decisions. Does the document deserve to be mocked in this unkind way? Like its predecessor, *Making Decisions* contains a beautiful collection of photos. Shots of the State’s stunning landscapes and beauty enough to make you swoon – colour, composition, clarity, focus, framing and texture are all there to do the subjects justice. But like its predecessor, the current report offers very little planning substance. It calls itself an “action statement” but there is very little action and it begins on a very poor footing: an inflated and self-congratulatory account of past inaction – hot air, as they say, in the world of climate change.

Past performance

This is evident from the bottom line – ie carbon emissions. On the few figures provided in the new document, we can see carbon emissions in WA are still growing at around 3.3% pa. That’s about as fast as they are growing in China. Need one say more? The Kyoto Protocol imposed an average 5% emission reduction across the developed world on 1990 base levels – to be achieved by 2012. Many are now saying that cuts should have been greater. But at least the direction – ie **down** – was right. WA is still spectacularly headed in the wrong direction and, come 2012, we might be **up** by 65%.

Increasingly urgent scientific warnings and Kyoto’s gruelling negotiations have had no impact on the ways in which we live, work, drive. The talk is there, and the glossy brochures, but the State’s ongoing contribution to destructive climate change continues to be relentless. The expansion of Perth’s rail system under the gruff direction of Allannah McTiernan is a significant exception but how much of the transport energy saving it promises has been gobbled up in advance by the city’s strange and undiscouraged love affair with SUVs?



One in five cars on our roads is now like this. These owners are all going to church to pray for rain.



GM Hummer H2 SUT 2005 model

The State Government has long sought credit by declaring its support for Kyoto in principle. But words, we know, are cheap and our actions have made cheats and free-riders of us. The only difference between our two major political parties appears to be that the Labor Party is still a wee bit ashamed of free-riding. The Libs, a couple of steps ahead, celebrate it as market savvy. But the gap is closing.

Bold new objectives, tired old strategies

Perhaps this is too harsh. Perhaps the new action statement signals new realisation. People, even politicians, can change. Does *Making Decisions* inspire confidence? The headline promise is there: **60% cuts by 2050**. Current emissions of 70 million tons will be brought down to 26 million tons of CO₂ equivalent. Even if, as many say, that's not enough, it is still a big turn around. On business-as-usual assumptions, we would be heading for 150 million tons. That's 124 million tons of turn around.

Does *Making Decisions*, signal enough tough decisions to effect such a turn – or does it, well, er, fake it? Does it rest on careful and conscientious analysis? Does it identify the strategies, initiatives and sector-by-sector interim targets necessary to an effective working program? Does it cost all of these actions, allocate budgets or at least indicate where money, resources and expertise may come from? Does it have these hallmarks of good policy made in good faith? In short, is it a plan, or is it just another self-promotional brochure? Weighing in at a hefty 20 pages, pretty much 10 of these are photos – beautiful photos, again, but photos nevertheless.

A decent report would provide basic background information – a basic emissions profile, better still, a comparative emissions profile clearly showing what our emissions were now and how we had changed over the past decade or two. Perhaps some ominous projections of the kind signal above. Background information could also show where WA's circumstances differed from those of other places and where they did not. With a few good graphics, it could all be done by leaving out just a page or two of photographs without adding to bulk. As well as providing the reader with perspective, information of this kind also helps to shape strategy so that it actually has a cutting edge and better responds to local circumstances as well. The Government thinks we are better off looking at pretty pictures.

It is interesting that one of the few published comment on *Making Decisions* came from, Mark Diesendorf, a visiting energy expert who happened to be in Perth at the right time. Diesendorf was in town to launch his new book, *Greenhouse Solutions with Sustainable Energy* but the key point is that he had the information necessary for critical perspective in his head. Normal citizens don't and this Government is obviously not that keen to help them.

The earlier *Greenhouse Strategy* is a more substantial document in this respect but it would do no harm to continually remind Western Australians that they are dangerously big greenhouse gases (GHG) emitters in a nation of big emitters. Thus, on 2005 figures, generates more of Australia's GHGs than its population would suggest: we should be emitting 60 rather than 70 million tons of CO₂ equivalent. We are stand-outs in a nation of bad offenders. Nationally we consume around 6 times more per capita than the Chinese and almost 20 times more than Indians. WA is just a little bit ahead of the rest of the nations. Why aren't or Asian neighbours impressed when we ask them to slow down?

In WA, electricity generates around 40% of our GHG emissions. Transport, by contrast, accounts for 14%. This split is common enough for industrialised economies but WA is unusual in another respect: 97% of our electricity is generated from fossil fuels. For the rest of Australia that figure is 92% and for the world as a whole it is 65%. We are serious fossil fuel junkies and WA is one of the few places in the world that uses fossil fuels as intensively for electrical as it does for transport energy. Is that because we have so much less space and sun and wind and coast than the rest of the world? A good climate change policy document needs bit more information like this.

Clean or cleaner – the key commitments

The single most important climate change policy obligation is clean energy! Yet, the proudest promise in *Making Decisions* document is not **clean** but **cleaner** energy: the substitution of one fossil fuel for another. The Government's very first promise in *Making Decisions* is a promise to increase new combined cycle gas turbine capacity by 50% (lifting its contribution from about 40% to 60% of generating capacity) by 2020. Isn't gas cleaner than coal or oil and so, isn't that a good thing? Unfortunately it's not that simple.

How much cleaner is gas really? *Making Decisions* says that natural gas emits only half as much CO₂ as coal or oil. That's true but it's also true that gas production, from extraction through to ignition, involves methane leakage – and methane is 24 times more potent than CO₂ in greenhouse terms. It takes only a 2% leakage rate to undo what look like the clear carbon advantages of natural gas. Although incomplete, the evidence suggests that gas leaks associated with extraction and delivery in the real world are in the 2%-4% range. The Government's whole strategy looks shaky as of its very first commitment.



The gas in these monsters boils and leaks too.

And it gets worse, the Government's promised gas conversions needs to be seen in conjunction with its other commitments and, most especially, its second promise: its 2020 target for clean (renewable) energy. This target is a mere 15%. The Government is telling us that "cleaner" is better than "clean" when we all know, even without any figures that completely "clean" is better than just "cleaner", better than leaking gas.

An earlier document Mark Diesendorf has authored, *A Clean Energy Future for Australia* argues for overall national GHG reductions of 50% by 2040. This is predicated on a supply mix for electrical energy as follows: renewables 60%, natural gas 30%: and coal and oil 10%. Similar mixes have been proposed in a recent *European Renewable Energy Council Report* released earlier this year. Of course there must room that allows for local circumstances but the basic orders magnitude are clear. These documents look more like real plans. *Making Decisions* is still faking it. _

It's not a bad idea to use gas as an alternative for dirtier fossil fuels when the engineering is leak proof. But given the urgency of climate change problems and the long life infrastructure we install now, the development of **any** new fossil-fuel based generating capacity – including gas – should be undertaken with extreme reluctance – and only when really clean options have been pushed as hard as they can. The WA government is not pushing hard here.

More disappointment

After this poor start, *Making Decisions* continues to disappoint. Another 26 proposed actions follow the two big leaders. There is merit in some of them too but, overall, considered as working elements of a plan intended to rein in a 150 million ton carbon blow-out and deal with a grave threat to the human future, they are low rent stuff. There's hardly a significant number to be seen anywhere. There is the big one, of course: the "60% reduction below 2000 levels in WA's total greenhouse gas emissions by 2050" is to be enshrined in legislation.

This target was based on Stern's advice following his visit to Australia earlier in the year. But adopting Stern's objectives without paying attention to his rigorous and stern means makes no sense. Thus *Making Decisions* hardly ever tells us what savings to expect from its 26 separate measures or the path that each one will follow at, say, decade long intervals on the way to 2050. If our Government is going to legislate for an ambitious forty three year target don't we, the public, need to know that it has more than high level political theatre in mind. It's our lives and children's lives, too!

To find out just how much the Government intends spending on climate change, one has to go to its budget papers and there one learns that it has committed some \$15 million pa over the next 5 years to fund climate change prevention or mitigation measures – and a little more for impact management. That's about 10% of what Stern and, more recently, the IPCC estimate to be necessary. The State cannot be responsible for everything here but 10% is a long way short.

No wonder the Business Council for Sustainable Energy was effusive in its praise: "Western Australia has secured its place at the forefront in the fight against climate change following the release of the Climate Change Action Statement and State Budget." You can't fool all the people all of the time but you can certainly fool some of them, some of the time – especially those that want to be fooled.

There are a few more numbers in *Making Decisions*. But how good are they? Take the brief discussion of landfills which allegedly contribute as much as "19 million tons of CO₂ equivalent or 2.5% of WA's total emissions." Although the figures are attributed to the Australian Greenhouse Office, they looked wrong and an independent check revealed that they were. Greenhouse Office sources indicate that waste involves not 19 but 2 million tons and this amounts to just over 3.0% of WA's total emissions. Whatever the nature of the errors here, they suggest insufficient commitment to doing a good job. They don't seem to get it yet – our children's lives.... the human future.... again.

How many more errors are there like this? It can't be a huge quantity because there aren't that many numbers. On the other hand, that should make it easier to get them right. Are the people working on the project too rushed? too junior? Is managerial quality control poor? Even if you want to fake it, isn't it better to put a bit more effort into the fraud. You have a better chance of getting away with it and low quality fakes are just so insulting... a sign of executive contempt for citizens and tax payers.

Many of the ideas in *Making Decisions* – especially those that relate to conservation and efficient energy use – are good in principle. But most are, again, underdeveloped or underspecified. The Government either doesn't know what it is doing yet, or can't be bothered telling tax payers or, worse, doesn't want to tell. This is not a leisurely high school student workshop. The problems are serious and politicians, senior public servants and consultants are being paid large sums of money to deal with them. They are also, again, accountable to a public.

Here the *Making Decisions* gets something right. It promises a new portal to keep the public informed and to forge a better partnership between government and community in dealing

with climate change. Will this portal or website be better than the “action statement” in which it is promised? Will it be real, accurate, honest, well-maintained and helpful? Let’s hope so....

Symbolic gesture

More than just a few of the promised initiatives in *Making Decisions* are symbolic in character and not expensive. That’s not a bad thing in itself. Symbolism and setting examples in this way can be immensely valuable. But, even here, where action is cheap, the Government is half-hearted. Take its initiative the on its own car fleet, for example. *Making Decisions* tells us that “most” of the once six and eight cylinder government fleet vehicles have been replaced with four cylinders cars.



Why not one of these Italian numbers each for Ministers? Stylish and economical.

That’s good, but if one were serious about exploiting symbolism here, it wouldn’t be “most”, it would be **all**. And the replacement vehicles would be state of the art hybrids. Not stock standard internal combustion engines. The Premier would be getting around in one! These are not impossible or absurd expectations. The City of New York, for example, is demanding that its 13,000 cabs go hybrid in the next 5 or so years!

Vagueness may not be great for the planet but we know that it is a proven good for politicians. Specific detail not only provides clear direction it also quickens the pulse of that democratic beast called accountability. Politicians and bureaucrats often prefer life without either. Avoid detailed commitment and it will be hard for anyone to ask “Did you do it?” when the time for review comes around. No-one will be able to determine one way or the other. Nor will they be able to say much about what worked and what didn’t, what to do more of, what to abandon and so on. Did we ever need the kind of real intelligent feedback that political authenticity makes possible more?

Follow the leader

In its opening lines, *Making Decisions* promises that “WA will play a leading role in the global effort to combat climate change.” Perhaps “lead” has another meaning in WA. Indeed, just a couple of paragraphs down, we discover that this is so. In its quest to lead:

.. the State Government will protect the WA economy by not exposing energy intensive or trade exposed industries to substantial costs above those their competitors face..... **strong independent action in WA would damage our economy**, without any significant reduction in global green house emissions. (emphasis added)

In other words, we will only act when or after others do. Once “lead” and “follow” were opposites. Not any more in WA.... And this is the thing that will be the planet’s downfall. This carelessness and disrespect that extends even to language... to the truths its is supposed to convey, the communication is it supposed to permit and the co-operation it supposed to make possible.

You don’t believe me? Ask 3 billion Chinese and Indians who are convinced that “following” is their prerogative. They want us to lead in the traditional sense of the word: showing the way and going first. They have a strong claim too. Clearly it is our place to reduce emissions before they do, and to take the “strong and independent action” the WA Government explicitly refuses. These guys can risk the planet’s ruin and barely bat an eyelid but run the risk of economic inconvenience or corporate displeasure... and they shake with fear, outrage and agitation. The planet, not the economy, needs such deep commitment!

The WA Government wants to lead but does not want to do the work of leading – ie take “strong independent action”. In a further inversion of language it declares the only

responsible course of action “irresponsible” because the State cannot bring about “a significant reduction in global greenhouse emissions.” That may be true but it overlooks by far the most important and difficult climate change challenge we face. And that is not just to limit our emissions – we are, indeed, just two of the 6,500 million humans on the planet and what we do materially almost doesn’t count. It is influence others.

We are again in that complex and potent political theatre of the symbolic. Even the very small can be very influential one way or the other here. There is no guarantee that our good example will be followed. But we can be certain that our bad example will seriously diminish our own and the world’s chances of getting through. *Making Decisions* reveals that the State Government has at least a rudimentary understanding of the politics of symbolism and its subtle logic.

To make it quite plain, our real job here is to be part of a developed world effort that inspires, encourages, persuades and helps the world’s five and half going on eight billion poorer people not to go where we have gone before – not to even seriously try it. Shouting at them, or sullenly trying to outwait or out manoeuvre them won’t work or wash. They know the score this time and one thing’s for sure: the planet will not be saved unless we, the developed world that is, start doing things first and then some more ... providing serious targeted financial and technical assistance through an instrumentality like a cashed up world bank, for example.

We, meaning we Australians and Western Australians, have to start taking the “strong independent action” that our governments – and the Federal Labor Opposition as well – still renounce and refuse at every opportunity. We have to do this for the sake of moral credibility and moral purchase and these are our most precious and powerful assets in the real politic of climate change. The Carpenter Government (like its big Commonwealth brother) is blind to these realities or refuses point blank to recognise they exist. And, in a world that knows only commerce, they don’t. There, grace and trust and generosity always look like foolishness and free riding looks like the smart thing. In that world, only suckers go first.

But can we really persuade others not to pile onto the carbon train while we’re still on board? And the Chinese have made it perfectly clear in Mandarin, in English and in the language of mass engineering that builds coal-fired generating plants – a new one to be commissioned every 10 or so days according to an article published in the New York Times a year ago (June 11th 2006). The Indians are still going a bit slower but not much and not for much longer. For as long as we’re on the train, they are not going to stay off and continue the hard running so that we can keep riding in comfort for a bit longer. Some of them, at least, reckon that a short ride to the end of the earth beats panting all the way.



Chinese coal fired plant off the assembly line.

Would you see it any differently in their worn-out shoes? Then there’s the fact that they still only emit fractions of what we do. Carpenter and company may refuse to believe this is happening... But it is and *Faking Decisions* is a document written in the shadow of this denial. It may fool most of us for a while longer. But it’s not fooling the Chinese or Indians and it certainly won’t fool the planet... And then, at some point in the not too distant future, it won’t matter who’s fooled and who isn’t.