

Australia, Climate Change and the Global South

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ABSTRACT *Australia's climate change relationship with developing countries is framed by the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol. Under those agreements, Australia has committed to take a lead in cutting greenhouse gas emissions and to provide technological and financial support to developing countries. In practice, Australian governments of both political hues have adopted a somewhat ambiguous and ambivalent attitude to developing countries within climate change politics and their fulfilment of those commitments has been uneven. This is particularly so if the concept of the 'Global South' is expanded from developing countries to include those people who are vulnerable to the environmental, social and economic impacts of climate change.*

KEY WORDS: Australia, climate change, Global South, UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, Kyoto Protocol, Rio Declaration, carbon trading scheme, Copenhagen Accord, Pacific Adaptation Strategy Assistance Programme, Asia-Pacific security, Australian foreign policy, human security

Introduction

In his opening address to the Australian Labor Party's Climate Change Summit in March 2007, Kevin Rudd (at the time Leader of the Opposition) called climate change 'the great moral challenge of our generation' (Rudd, 2007, p. 1), although in this and subsequent speeches he did little to explain what he thought those moral (as opposed, say, to economic or environmental) challenges were. Former Labor Foreign Minister Gareth Evans offered a clearer analysis in a speech in 2006 (although admittedly his pointed comments were directed, at the time, at a Coalition government). Evans argued that 'we can't just ignore the ... distress of our fellow human beings. Governments should act on ... climate change [among other issues] not just because our own narrow economic or security interests might be directly or indirectly advanced now or in the future but simply because it's the right thing to do' (Evans, 2006).

In the context of this special issue, this article reviews Australian government policy towards developing countries under the climate change regime. Its focus is not

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Australia's climate change foreign policy more generally or political debates about its domestic climate change policy.¹ Under the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and under the 1997 Kyoto Protocol to that Convention, Australia has committed to take a lead in cutting greenhouse gas emissions, to act in accordance with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, to provide technological and financial support to developing countries, and to acknowledge and respond to the needs of developing countries, particularly those that are most vulnerable to climate change. Against the background of this legally binding international commitment, Australia's attitude towards developing countries and peoples in the context of climate change, as in other issue areas, has always reflected some balance between protecting or advancing national interests (a self-regarding ethic) and a commitment to helping those who are in need (an other-regarding ethic). The point of balance between these two purposes has moved depending on the political leaning of the government of the day but not to the extent that one or other form of ethic has come to trump the other. As a result, Australian governments of both political hues (Coalition and Labor) have adopted a somewhat ambiguous and ambivalent attitude to developing countries within climate change politics. Policies on development assistance have always reflected a degree of concern for the most vulnerable of developing countries and people and have offered varying degrees of support for climate mitigation and adaptation strategies. For the most part, however, Australia's foreign policy on climate change has not usually been couched in terms of an obligation to help developing countries or peoples, or even an obligation to meet international legal obligations to take the lead under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Indeed, in public debate as in government statements, developing countries have often been chastised as climate change laggards.

To explore these tensions further, this article begins by examining the legal and ethical context of Australia's climate change relationship with the Global South. It then examines the ways in which Australian governments have executed (or not as the case may be) the requirement to 'take the lead' that is required of them in the UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol and how they have justified their positions through particular characterisations of developing countries. The third section turns to the expectation that developed countries will acknowledge and give effect to the 'responsibility they bear' for the impacts of climate change, a responsibility that Australian governments have generally sought to implement on practical grounds rather than the moral ones that might be expected from (former) Prime Minister Rudd's claims. The article concludes with some brief thoughts about what Australian policy might look like were it to give real effect to its commitment in international law to 'take the lead' on climate change (UNFCCC, 1992, article 3) and to meet the 'responsibility that [it] bears' (Rio Declaration, 1992, principle 7).

Framing Australia's Relationship with the Global South

The concept of the 'Global South' used in this article is more than a synonym for 'developing countries', those that are often referred to simply as the 'South' in contradistinction to the developed or industrialised countries of the 'North'. Inserting the idea of 'Global' expands the idea of 'South' in two ways: first by

moving beyond state-centric definitions to make people, and particularly those most suffering from poverty and marginalisation, crucial in the geography and politics of the South; and, second, to indicate that those who are poor and marginalised are found not simply in developing countries but are globally located including in developed countries. The latter observation notwithstanding, the focus here is primarily on the 'Global South' within the South for reasons that are explored below. This brings to the debates about climate change policy questions about human security, and human and community rights (see e.g. Bakker, 2007), and about ethics, obligation and responsibility. It is an approach to the 'Global South' that Gilroy (2005, p. 290) suggests is or at least should be inspired by and underpinned by a 'new cosmopolitanism' and a 'network of solidarity'. From an analytical point of view, it raises questions about whether Australian governments couch relevant aspects of their climate change policy in terms of the relationship with developing *countries*, or whether they also reflect upon how best to provide support for those *people* in developing countries who are most affected by climate change.

The framework within which Australia's relationship with this expanded notion of the 'Global South' might be expected to function is well established in both international climate law and international environmental law more generally. This relies in great measure on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR). Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration, adopted at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, states that 'developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command'. Article 3.1 of the 1992 UNFCCC establishes the principle that Parties should protect the climate system 'on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities' (UNFCCC, 1992, article 3.1). The same article goes on to say that '*accordingly*, the developed countries should take the lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof' and that 'the specific needs and special circumstances of developing country parties, especially those that are vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change, and of those Parties especially developing country parties that would have to bear a disproportionate or abnormal burden under the Convention, *should* be given full consideration' (emphasis added). Article 4 identifies various forms of 'new and additional financial resources' that should be advanced to developing countries and requires developed countries to 'take all practicable steps' in this regard. Indeed, Article 4.7 suggests that '[t]he extent to which developing country Parties will effectively implement their commitments under the Convention will depend on the effective implementation by developed country Parties of their commitments under the Convention related to financial resources and transfer of technology', recognising also that 'economic and social development and poverty eradication are the first and overriding priorities of the developing country Parties'.

CBDR therefore creates at least a dual set of climate obligations for developed countries such as Australia in their relationships with developing countries. First, they should adopt policies and measures on limiting their own greenhouse gas emissions as evidence that they are taking the lead as required by Article 4.2(a). Second, in light of their enhanced capacity, they should provide financial and technological support as a commitment to the needs and circumstances of

developing countries and of those people who are most affected and disadvantaged by the impact of climate change. This latter obligation is generally seen as arising from the ability to pay but not being confined to the ability to pay. Linklater (2006, p. 339) characterises it as an ‘obligation of rescue’ or a form of Good Samaritanism and elsewhere as a recognition of the ‘plight of strangers’ (Linklater, 2007, p. 136). This ethical calculus is overlaid with a more politically contentious argument. Put simply, those who are most immediately affected by the impacts of climate change are those who have contributed least to its causes. Their vulnerability is a consequence, then, not of their own lapses or decisions but of the activities and emissions of industrialised economies and consumers. Action on the part of developed countries is therefore demanded in recognition of historical (and continuing) emissions and of relationships of actual harm. While Australian governments are generally quick to point out that Australia is a small gross emitter, contributing only about 1.4% of global emissions, the country’s per capita emissions are ‘the highest of any OECD country and ... among the highest in the world’ (Garnaut, 2008, p. 153). Indeed, it is the segue from ‘South’ as states to ‘Global South’ as people that brings the mismatch between per capita contribution to emissions and concentrations on the one hand and impact and vulnerability on the other into sharper prominence.

Negotiating Climate Change: Australia’s Approach to Developing Countries

Australia was an active participant in the intergovernmental negotiations for the UNFCCC between February 1991 and May 1992. It was the eighth country to ratify the agreement in December 1992 only six months after signing it at the UN Conference on Environment and Development. The Convention includes only vague commitments on preventing dangerous anthropogenic interference in the climate system and rather understated exhortations for developed countries to return emissions to unspecified ‘earlier levels’ by the end of the 1990s. Under the terms of the Convention, the first Conference of Parties included on its agenda the question of the adequacy of commitments and emissions targets. While Australia had taken the ‘progressive stance’ (Christoff, 2005, p. 31) of calling for mandatory emissions reduction during negotiations for the Convention, this position had changed by the time of the first Conference of Parties in 1995. As Bulkeley (2001, p. 436) pointed out, by 1995 Australia (still under a Labor government) opposed discussions on strengthened commitments if those discussions did not include the issue of further participation by developing countries. The Berlin Mandate, which set the conditions for negotiations on what would become the Kyoto Protocol, contained no such reference, and although Australia did agree to the Mandate, its reluctance to do so was made clear.

This approach to developing countries within climate negotiations—there was little attention to the more people-centred notion of the Global South—set the tone for the new Coalition government elected early in 1996. Under the prime ministerial leadership of John Howard, the Coalition was determined in its demands for ‘procedures and future timeframes under which significant developing country emitters would limit and ultimately reduce their greenhouse gas emissions as part of global efforts’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997). In coalition with the United

States, the government argued that projections about future contributions from developing countries (China, India and Brazil were the usually identified ‘culprits’) meant that any abatement action taken by developed countries would be outweighed by the increase from non-OECD countries. As Foreign Minister Alexander Downer had argued not long after taking government in 1996, ‘what the Australian government does is going to be of negligible importance compared to what China does ... or India does’ (cited in Stevenson, 2009, p. 165).² In a later comment reported in the *Australian Financial Review*, Downer was even less sympathetic to the plight of developing countries—as well as deliberately misrepresenting the voluntary efforts of developing countries—arguing that it was no solution ‘if China and India and Brazil can go ahead and pollute the environment to their heart’s content because we’re all feeling a bit sorry for them’ (cited in Hamilton *et al.*, 2001, p. 13).

The government made much play of the need for any agreement to be fair and equitable and to recognise the ‘fundamental concept of distributive justice’ (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), 1996b). Yet Australia also took a rather novel approach to the question of equity and a ‘fair go’. At the same time as calling for significant commitments from major developing country economies, the government pleaded that its special circumstances as an energy-intensive economy should be taken into account in the calculation of any legally binding commitments on or targets for emissions reductions (DFAT, 1996a). When the Kyoto Protocol was adopted at the third Conference of Parties for the UNFCCC in 1997, the government hailed it as a triumph for Australian diplomacy. Against the odds, Australia’s preferred method for calculating targets for reductions in greenhouse emissions was incorporated into the agreement. More to the point, Australia was one of only three developed countries (the Annex I parties) permitted to *increase* its emissions within the targeted timeframe of the first commitment period (2008–12), having successfully argued for an 8% increase against 1990 levels.³

The Coalition’s Environment Minister at the time, Robert Hill (2000), has argued that Australia’s advocacy of differentiation was central to agreement at Kyoto; but Australia’s efforts at Kyoto did not fulfil the country’s obligations to take the lead in dealing with climate emissions under the Framework Convention, nor did they persuade developing countries that Australia was a fair global player or partner in the climate change negotiations. The government defined equity in terms of an equal percentage change in terms of per capita gross national expenditure (DFAT, 1996a), but it is reasonable to ask why it should be considered equitable that low emitters should face the same kinds of costs as high emitters, or why rich countries should be permitted to increase their emissions when the overall goal of the Protocol was to move towards a reduction in emissions and, in the long term, a stabilisation of concentrations. Certainly critics within Australia argued that that a much more ‘appropriate equity ... principle for the distribution of emissions reductions’ and one that would demonstrate a more serious commitment to the circumstances and needs of developing countries would be one where ‘countries which are responsible for high per capita emissions and which are more wealthy should do more to reduce their emissions’ (Hamilton and Quiggin, 1997, p. 26; see also Moore, 1997).

The government signed the Kyoto Protocol on 29 April 1998, although the Ambassador for the Environment Meg McDonald was quick to point out that ‘signature itself carries no binding obligation’ (McDonald, 1998). The government

continued to participate in the Conferences of Parties under the UNFCCC and in various working groups charged with advancing debate on implementation. It was keen to emphasise the technical rather than political aspects of the Protocol and, pursuing a particularly narrow view of the national interest, made it clear that Australia would consider ratifying the Protocol only if its economic interests were not compromised, its costs were minimised, and if a number of other issues could be resolved. These included some kind of formal process for reaching an agreement that contained legally binding targets for developing countries, particularly the largest of the gross emitters among them. On 5 June 2002 (World Environment Day), the Australian government announced that it would not ratify the Protocol.

From 2002 the government sought to present its non-Kyoto position in constructive terms. It stated that it 'view[ed] climate change as a serious problem that warrant[ed] a long-term commitment to substantive action' (Adams, 2005). Despite not being a party to the Protocol, the Australian government was at pains to point out that it remained committed to its Kyoto target of limiting its 2008–12 emissions to 108% of 1990 emissions. However, it also sought to change the focus of the climate change debate from past emissions by developed countries to likely future emissions from developing ones. The Coalition's argument about the likely economic costs for Australia cast at least some (although usually un-named) developing countries as possible competitors whose refusal to accept binding obligations would threaten Australia's national interest through 'carbon leakage'. The Australian Greenhouse Office (1999, p. 7) argued that 'without the effective participation of developing countries in measures to reduce global emissions, an incentive could be created for some industries to relocate ... to developing countries [with] the potential to undermine Australia's competitiveness in some sectors'. Prime Minister John Howard referred to this as 'the flight of dirty industries from this country' (Parliament of Australia, 2002, p. 3163).

In Opposition, and during the campaign for the November 2007 election, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) made climate change a key issue in its pursuit of reinvigorating Australia's reputation as a good international citizen, and made the relationship with developing countries, particularly those in Asia and the Pacific, a centrepiece of this commitment. Kevin Rudd's first significant foreign policy act as new Labor Prime Minister was to attend the 13th Conference of Parties to the UNFCCC in Bali, and to announce (to applause) that his government had ratified the Kyoto Protocol. Yet Labor's commitment to an ethic of good international citizenship was not enough to warrant a substantive change in the demands made of developing countries in the climate negotiations.

In their shadow ministerial capacities, Peter Garrett and Bob McMullan (later Environment Minister and Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance, respectively) had chastised the Howard government for neglecting Australia's CBDR obligation under the UNFCCC, implying that a Labor government would do better (Garrett and McMullan, 2007, p. 3). At the same time, Peter Garrett had confirmed the Party's position that 'developing country commitments for the post-2012 commitment period', including binding targets, would be an 'essential pre-requisite for Australian support' for any amended Kyoto Protocol or a new climate agreement (Garrett, 2007, p. 1). The new government's White Paper on its proposed carbon pollution reduction scheme was also adamant

that a 'post-2012 outcome must tackle growing emissions from developing countries' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, pp. 3–5).

A draft proposal submitted to the UNFCCC Secretariat as part of the preparatory working group meetings in advance of COP-15 in Copenhagen offered a somewhat more moderate approach. The government reinforced the principle that 'developed country Parties should take the lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof' and that 'Parties whose national circumstances reflect the least capability and the most vulnerability to the adverse effects of climate change should be prioritised for support in their efforts to adapt to the adverse effects of climate change' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009c, p. 3). Yet the government also reiterated its view that 'developing country Parties whose national circumstances reflect greater responsibility or capability' should register 'nationally appropriate mitigation commitments and/or actions aimed at achieving substantial deviation from baselines' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009c, p. 5). While this was clearly directed at countries such as China (though in possibly more moderate language than that used by ministers in the previous government), countries such as China made it clear at Copenhagen that they were not impressed by these arguments. While not directing his comments at any particular country, Premier Wen Jiabao (after providing a detailed listing of China's various efforts on climate mitigation) called for governments to 'uphold the fairness of rules' and advised those present that the CBDR principle 'must never be compromised'. It was, he continued, 'all too clear who should take the primary responsibility' and he called for developed countries to take 'deep . . . emissions cuts and provide financial and technological support to developing countries [as] an unshirkable moral responsibility' (Wen Jiabao, 2009, pp. 4–5).

Taking the Lead Domestically⁴

Under both the Framework Convention and the Kyoto Protocol, developed countries are expected to take steps to manage their own emissions in light of the fact that they have been and continue to be the major contributors to atmospheric *concentrations* of greenhouse gases (in other words, the problem of climate change gases is one equally of stocks as of flows). As the Convention puts it these 'policies and measures will demonstrate that developed countries are taking the lead in modifying longer-term trends in anthropogenic emissions' (Article 4.2a). If such policies and measures are the test of climate leadership, then neither a Coalition nor a Labor government is likely to pass.

Developed country governments had, in fact, first explored targets at the 1988 Toronto Conference on the Changing Atmosphere, voluntarily committing to a 20% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2005. As noted above, the Australian delegation to the negotiations for the UNFCCC supported the idea that mandatory targets should be included in the final agreement. In 1990, at the time of the UNFCCC negotiations, the Hawke Labor government announced (and later confirmed at the World Climate Conference) an 'interim' planning target based on the Toronto commitments—to reduce emissions to 1988 levels by 2000 and by 20% below 1988 levels by 2005.⁵ This was the basis for the non-binding goals included in the December 1992 National Greenhouse Response Strategy. In 1995, however, the Labor government's new *Greenhouse 21 C* did not contain any clear emissions

targets. The Coalition government elected in 1996 was also reluctant to establish national policies on emissions reductions, despite continuing to argue that it was committed to the targets in the Protocol that it would not ratify. In mid-2007, in the run-up to an election in which climate change was going to be an issue, and following the report of a Prime Ministerial Task Group on Emissions Trading, the Howard government announced that by 2008 it would adopt a long-term 'aspirational' target for reducing emissions as well as implementing a national carbon trading scheme by 2012 (see Stephens, 2007, p. 15).

This was, of course, somewhat moot with the change of government in November 2007. The Labor government's approach to 'taking the lead' on climate change, and emissions reductions in particular, has been fraught with inconsistency. As shadow environment minister, Peter Garrett (2007, p. 1) confirmed that 'Federal Labor believes that leadership must come first from developed economies'. In its CPRS White Paper, the Labor government acknowledged that 'as a first step, Australia—along with other developed countries—should take credible and robust steps to cut domestic emissions' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p. 3-1). Yet Climate Minister Senator Penny Wong (2010, p. 1) made it clear that Australia will do 'no more and no less than the rest of the world'. Labor's emissions targets were announced in its proposed Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS). This scheme, which was later abandoned by the Prime Minister when it was rejected by the Senate, proposed a 5% reduction against 2000 levels by 2020 with an increase to a 15% cut if other major economies, including developing countries, accepted comparable commitments.⁶ Underpinning this was a goal of 60% reduction below 2000 emissions levels by 2050. Although the CPRS is, at the time of writing, 'on hold', this is also the target that the government submitted to the UNFCCC Secretariat as its voluntary commitment to be appended to the Copenhagen Accord adopted at COP-15 in December 2009.

Climate Change and a Responsibility to Assist

In Asia and the Pacific—Australia's nearest region and one that takes priority in its broader development assistance policy—climate change will have a fundamental impact on the livelihoods of millions of people. It is in this context that the concept of the Global South—or perhaps the 'Regional South'—as people rather than just states is most important. Of the 10 countries in the world most imperilled by climate change in terms of the *number* of people likely to be affected, six are in this region: China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Japan, Thailand and the Philippines. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports a worrying litany of likely climate change impacts for the Asia and the Pacific: a decline in crop yield, an increase in climate-induced disease, an increased risk of hunger and water scarcity, an increase in the number and severity of glacier melt-related floods, significant loss of coastal ecosystems, many millions of people in coastal communities at high risk from flooding, and an increased risk of extinction for many species of fauna and flora. Climate change will almost certainly undermine or slow progress towards achievement by the 2015 target deadline of the Millennium Development Goals, including those on reducing poverty and achieving sustainable development (see United Nations Millennium Campaign, n.d.; UN ESCAP/Asian Development Bank,

2007). Poverty further exacerbates other climate insecurities. Marginal incomes provide little or no safety net for those who are poor against health and disease burdens, food insecurity, flooding and drought, or other impacts of climate change. In a region in which subsistence lifestyles constitute a significant proportion of human livelihoods, the poor in both rural and urban areas will be disadvantaged and impoverished by climate change, a condition the Asian Development Bank (2007) refers to as 'environmental poverty'. These are very real human security issues. Australian governments have included climate change in their aid policies but have done so in a way that downplays the idea embedded in the UNFCCC that this is a 'responsibility they bear'.

The Coalition government elected in 1996 promised to develop a new environment strategy for the aid programme which would concentrate on climate change and adaptation. The White Paper on aid policy showed that this would be driven more by a worry about challenges that could undermine economic growth and less by concerns about human insecurity and vulnerability or social resilience *per se* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1996).⁷ In later elaborations of the objectives of Australia's foreign policy, Foreign Minister Downer did point out that the 'desire to assist others' (Downer, 2005b, p. 7) was also central to the government's aid policy. The Coalition government's strategies for 'assisting others' were informed more by a preference for practical strategies rather than in response to demands that, as a high per capita emitter, Australia might be a contributor to climate change harms. This approach was evident in the speech that the then Minister for the Environment and Heritage David Kemp made at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. The Australian government's position, he suggested, was that trade liberalisation, removal of agricultural subsidies and expansion of foreign direct investment (FDI) were 'more important to the dignity, development, independence and environmental sustainability of developing countries than official development assistance' (Kemp, 2002). In this context, the government's view was that the most effective opportunities for recognising and supporting the needs of developing countries, particularly those most vulnerable to climate change (to paraphrase the UNFCCC), were through technical programmes—especially those that focused on efficient energy and clean technology especially but not exclusively for poorer communities—and on capacity building.

This theme also characterised the 2006 White Paper, *Australian Aid: Promoting Growth and Stability* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2006), which had little to say about climate change as a source of vulnerability for those people most affected and more about climate change as a threat to growth and a challenge for development planning. Climate change was one of three themes in the environmental aid programme that focused on adaptation and investment programmes and clean energy initiatives. By August 2007, Liberal Senator Ian Macdonald was able to advise his parliamentary colleagues that the government had provided Aus\$42.25m in practical assistance to Pacific island countries to deal with climate variation and sea-level rise by monitoring sea levels, improving climate prediction, assessing vulnerability and planning adaptation action (Parliament of Australia, 2007, p. 108). The proposed clean energy initiatives were to be pursued through the recently established Asia-Pacific Partnership for Clean Development and Climate (AP6).⁸ AP6 had been announced by the government in July 2005 as a partnership that

would deliver a ‘new way of approaching global environmental challenges’ (Downer, 2005a) and a way of working with the two developing economies in the region—China and India—that the government argued were central to any global effort to address climate change.⁹

As noted above, the new Labor government promised to reinstate in Australia’s foreign policy not only the terminology but also the action of good international citizenship. The government promised to increase aid expenditure on climate change, develop a Pacific Climate Change Strategy (later released as *Engaging our Pacific Neighbours on Climate Change*; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009a), support capacity building for better forest management, share Australia’s climate expertise with developing country neighbours, and participate in greater measure (and with greater amounts) in multilateral and bilateral assistance programmes. The government also promised to ‘ensure that Pacific views are represented in international forums, by highlighting the challenges faced by the Pacific region due to climate change and by supporting organisations that articulate regional views’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009b, p. 2).¹⁰ In one of his first speeches as Labor Foreign Minister, Stephen Smith emphasised that the government’s aid and foreign policy would reflect the country’s obligation to give a ‘helping hand to those less fortunate and standing by them’ and that, in doing so, Australia would ‘deal with other nation states with civility, dignity and respect’ (Smith, 2007). The Labor government’s 2009 policy document on how it would work specifically with Pacific island countries on climate change was couched in terms both of a responsibility to assist—helping those less fortunate—and of advancing Australia’s reputation, influence and national interests (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009b, p. 1).

Much of Labor’s climate change aid policy maintained the previous government’s emphasis on practical measures such as sea level and climate monitoring projects designed to improve data gathering and impact prediction. In 2008, the government announced its International Climate Change Adaptation Initiative, with initial funding of \$150m, later increased to \$178.2m to help vulnerable developing countries meet high-priority adaptation needs. The initial geographic focus on the Pacific and East Timor has since expanded to include Southeast Asia, particularly the Mekong sub-region, and further afield (the latter through contributions to the World Bank’s Pilot Programme for Climate Resilience). Whereas clean energy was the focus of the Coalition’s financial and technical assistance to developing countries in the region, Labor put considerable efforts into addressing deforestation and supporting the elaboration of strategies and capacities for REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). This came particularly through the new government’s International Forest Carbon Initiative involving specific country projects (with Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, for example) and also contributions to international efforts such as the World Bank’s Forest Carbon Partnership Facility and the Asia-Pacific Forestry Skills and Capacity Building Programme.

It is generally accepted that Australia’s climate change relationship with its developing country ‘near neighbours’ in the Pacific and Southeast Asia improved with the election of the Labor government in 2007 (see Maclellan, 2009); but a better relationship did not necessarily mean an uncomplicated one. As Stewart Firth (2007, p. 57) pointed out, ‘Pacific Islands countries have not been reassured by these initiatives and by Australia’s climate change diplomacy generally’. While welcoming

financial and technological support through various adaptation and mitigation programmes, Pacific Island governments, in particular, have raised concerns about the difficulties of ensuring that funds are easily accessible by those most in need at the local level. In his speech to the 14th Conference of Parties in Poznań (Poland) in November 2008, the Prime Minister of Tuvalu, Apisai Ielemia, told the gathered delegates that ‘handouts from aid budgets’ would be insufficient to assist those most in need. He also said that he was ‘deeply disappointed’ with the bureaucratic challenges that came with efforts to apply for support from the Adaptation Fund, likening it to being buried in red tape by key industrialised countries (Government of Tuvalu, 2008, p. 3).¹¹

As a member of the Pacific Islands Forum (and, indeed, Forum Chair from August 2009 to July 2010), Australian governments also had a key role in drafting the various Pacific Islands Forum statements on climate change. While apparently reflecting unity in calling for all countries to make an effort on mitigation, this consensus has not been so easily accepted within the Pacific itself, particularly when those statements contradict the more stringent calls for action that are made in UNFCCC submissions and other documentation by AOSIS, the Alliance of Small Island States. Commenting on the 2009 *Pacific Leaders’ Call to Action on Climate Change*, an editorial in the current affairs and business magazine *Island Business* was trenchant in its criticism, accusing Australia of neo-colonialism in its approach to the Island countries. It went on to argue that ‘[t]he outcome of the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) meeting on climate change’ was not only ‘woefully inadequate’ but ‘essentially a death warrant for Pacific Islanders’ (Anon, 2009).

Climate Migration: Failing in the Duty to Assist?

The relationships and programmes explored above reveal, perhaps not surprisingly given the central role of the state in international climate law and politics, that Australian governments have focused more on the South than the Global South. While both Coalition and Labor governments have been prepared to provide financial and technological advice and assistance to developing *countries* in the region for efforts in the region, particularly the Pacific, they have been less forthcoming on the issue of how to address the most severe of vulnerabilities faced by *people* in the region, that of loss of home, livelihood, land and possibly even country. The use of the concept of ‘climate refugee’ to capture this degree of vulnerability is somewhat controversial. It does not formally exist as a category of displaced person in international law and there is also concern, in some quarters at least, that it undermines the usually accepted legal definition of ‘refugee’ in the 1951 Convention relating to the status of refugees.¹² It was, in fact, this objection that appears to have impelled Liberal Senator and Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone to claim in an interview in 2006 that there was no such thing as a climate change refugee (see ABC Newsonline, 2006; Maclellan, 2009, p. 12).

In June 2007, the Australian Greens’ immigration spokesperson Kerry Nettle introduced into Parliament a Migration (Climate Refugees) Amendment Bill. Its purpose was to establish a special climate refugee visa and to outline mechanisms by which the Immigration Minister could set parameters for accepting climate refugees. The reinvigoration of the debate about climate change migration arose in light of

requests from the governments of Tuvalu and Kiribati for resettlement assistance, even though both countries were clear that it was their ‘fundamental right’ to ‘survive as a people and as a nation’ (Government of Tuvalu, 2008, p. 4). The response from Coalition senators—via Liberal Senator Ian Macdonald’s intervention in the parliamentary debate—was that there was no evidence that sea-level rise presented any immediate danger of displacing ‘entire Pacific Island populations’ (Parliament of Australia, 2007, p. 107). This seems to have been part of a longer trend in Coalition government policy on climate migration and dislocation. The low point came perhaps with John Howard’s reported 1997 comments that the concerns of Pacific island countries about existential threats from sea-level rises were ‘apocalyptic’ and ‘exaggerated’ (cited in McDonald, 2005, p. 227). A senior Tuvaluan bureaucrat characterised the Australian government’s position as having ‘slammed the door in our face’ (cited in Hamilton *et al.*, 2001, p. 11).

The Labor Party’s response to the Greens’ climate migration bill was not to deny the extent of climate impacts or the vulnerability of the region’s people but to argue that the proposal was unacceptable because it relied on a unilateral solution rather than the principle of ‘shared responsibility’ that informed the ALP’s approach (Parliament of Australia, 2007, p. 105). Senator Dana Wortley advised her colleagues in the upper house that Labor would establish an international coalition to ‘deal with people displaced by the effects of climate change’ as part of the party’s proposed Pacific climate change strategy should it win government (Parliament of Australia, 2007, p. 105). The ALP had advocated this model of a coalition of countries who would commit to accepting people displaced from the Pacific at least as early as February 2006 (see Banham, 2006). However, despite its commitment to a Pacific Adaptation Strategy Assistance Programme, and its commitment to supporting the ‘most vulnerable least developed countries and small island developing states’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p. 3.6), the Labor government has not moved to construct such an international coalition. Nor does the Adaptation Strategy refer to the specific resettlement needs of those facing dislocation.

In fact, other strategic documents have cast those whose vulnerabilities to climate change could result in dislocation or migration in a very different light. Labor’s 2009 Defence White Paper fretted about ‘potentially destabilising mass migration flows’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009c, p. 30) and worried that significant inability to respond to climate-related stresses within the region could result in political turmoil, social unrest and even ‘very old forms of confrontation and war’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009c, p. 40). Although the White Paper did recognise the importance of humanitarian and emergency assistance for those countries and peoples most affected by climate change, it also argued that should ‘coordinated international climate change mitigation and economic assistance strategies’ fail, the government would ‘possibly have to use the ADF [Australian Defence Force] as an instrument to deal with any threats inimical to our interests’ (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009c, p. 40). This is somewhat reminiscent of the position taken by Australian Federal Police Commissioner Mick Keelty in 2007, when he suggested that climate change would turn border security into the country’s biggest policing issue of the century. Existing cultural tensions, he argued, could be ‘exacerbated as large numbers of people undertake forced migration’ with ‘potential security issues [that] are enormous and should not be underestimated’ (Anon, 2007). It also echoes, in some

measure, the position taken by the Australian Labor Party while in Opposition. In a 2006 policy discussion paper, Shadow Ministers Bob Sercombe (Overseas Aid and Pacific Island Affairs) and Anthony Albanese (Environment, Heritage and Water) noted that as well as presenting a challenge to individual countries in the Pacific, the impacts of climate change ‘also represent a challenge to regional stability and security’ with ‘the potential to . . . lead to considerable instability, disruption and conflict’ (Australian Labor Party, 2006, p. 7). This was important, they argued, because Pacific security was a precursor for Australian security.

Conclusion

As the discussion above shows, Australian governments have been rather uneven—and occasionally downright recalcitrant—in their execution of the responsibility that they bear (as the UNFCCC puts it) towards developing countries and towards the people of the Global South. Nor have they met either the spirit or the letter of their international legal obligations to take a lead in cutting emissions under the Convention and the Kyoto Protocol. The differences between Coalition and Labor governments have not been as marked as some of their rhetoric would suggest. The most trenchant of critics have characterised Australian policies towards the Global South as signifying a ‘callous disregard for the future well-being of the poorest and most vulnerable’ (Hamilton *et al.*, 2001, p. v). At the very least, Australian governments have run the risk of alienating the very countries that they argue are crucial to a global agreement on climate change.

Ross Garnaut (2010, p. 15), author of the Australian government-commissioned equivalent of the UK’s Stern Review on the economics of climate change, has said that governments have ‘abdicated [Australia’s] leadership’ on climate change. In brief, what then would be required for Australian governments to meet the test of taking the lead, bearing responsibility, and doing so in a way that recognised the needs of the Global South—the *people* who are most made insecure by climate change? To a considerable degree, the framework for action is already there. It is implementation and application that are lacking. While the private sector and individual sub-national jurisdictions have adopted emissions targets and committed to moving to a low-carbon economy, mechanisms for ensuring a robust cut in emissions have yet to be adopted and implemented effectively at the federal level. If Australian governments are to demonstrate that they are taking the lead—in effect acting first together with other developed countries—then domestic targets and the mechanisms for ensuring those targets are met (whether through an emissions trading scheme or a direct price on carbon) will need to be delinked from demands for developing country obligations under the climate change regime, at least in the short term and possibly even medium term.¹³

As Stevenson (2009) argues, Australian foreign policy-makers have sought to downplay the politics of responsibility within the climate change debate and reframe the issue as a technical one. To the extent that the transfer of financial and technological resources, monitoring and capacity building can help Australia’s near neighbours to measure, predict and adapt to the impacts of climate change, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, as the discussion above indicates, Australian governments have instigated various kinds of programme in this regard; but there

are caveats here. Meeting international commitments under the Convention on the provision of financial resources and transfer of technology is not a substitute for policies and measures that, increasingly, need to implement aggressive action on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Worries about future growth in emissions from developing countries and peoples cannot be used to mask past emissions and continuing high per capita contributions. In developing and implementing Australian aid policy on climate change, along with other forms of regional engagement, governments must be able to ensure that that support and assistance reaches and benefits those who are most vulnerable. When it does not, or when adaptation strategies are not enough to enhance resilience in the face of climate change impacts in developing countries, then, as Gareth Evans put it in the speech referred to in the introduction to this article, that distress cannot be ignored.

Notes

1. For more on Australia's general position in the climate change negotiations, see Christoff (2005), McDonald (2005) and Stevenson (2009).
2. Downer did also include the United States in this list of other countries where action on climate change was crucial.
3. At least one source suggests that Australia won concessions because it threatened to withdraw from the negotiations if its demands were not met (Australia Institute, 1998, p. 5). Certainly, Environment Minister Robert Hill told a press conference at Kyoto that 'unless it is a fair target, we can't sign' (Hill, 1997).
4. For analysis of Australia's domestic policy on climate change, see the various chapters in Bonyhady and Christoff (2007), Crowley (2007), Hamilton (2001), Garnaut (2008) and Jotzo and Betz (2009).
5. McDonald (2005, p. 222) points out that the government did add the caveat that measures taken to reduce emissions should not have adverse effects on Australia's economic competitiveness in the absence of similar action from other major greenhouse gas producers.
6. The government suggested that this was the equivalent of a '4–14 per cent reduction from 1990 levels' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p. 3–1).
7. The terms resilience and vulnerability appear only once each in the White Paper, and only in the context of humanitarian and unforeseen crises.
8. The phrase 'climate change' appears only four times in the whole document, including the executive summary.
9. The full members of the partnership were the United States, China, India, Japan and the Republic of Korea.
10. The government was a co-sponsor, for example, of the Pacific countries' UNGA resolution on climate change and its possible security implications.
11. For an alternative proposal on how Australia might engage with its Pacific neighbours in particular, see Christoff (2008).
12. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) uses the term 'environmentally induced migrants', which it defines as 'persons or groups of persons who, for compelling reasons of sudden or progressive changes in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions, are obliged to leave their habitual homes, or choose to do so, either temporarily or permanently, and who move either within their country or abroad' (IOM, 2007, pp. 1–2).
13. In July 2011, the Australian Labor government announced its Clean Energy Future package which included a price on carbon of \$23 per tonne from 1 July 2012, rising by 2.5% a year (in 'real terms') until 1 July 2015, at which time the price would be determined by the market (see Commonwealth of Australia, 2011, pp. 25–26). The Plan acknowledges Australia's substantial per capita contributions to greenhouse emissions and the importance of taking action, although it says nothing about the impact of climate change on developing countries.

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