

***IN THE EYE OF THE STORM***  
***REFLECTIONS FROM THE SECOND***  
***PACIFIC CLIMATE CHANGE CONFERENCE***



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## 6

POLITICS AND SECURITIZATION: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE  
CLIMATE CRISIS IN THE PACIFIC*Christopher Wright\**

## 6.1 Introduction

The escalating use of fossil fuels, industrialization and deforestation have fundamentally transformed the chemistry of the atmosphere and oceans. This human disruption to the carbon cycle now threatens the life-support systems of the planet, evident in increasingly severe storms, droughts and heatwaves, the melting of glaciers and ice-shelves, a sixth mass extinction of animal and plant species, and escalating sea level rise (IPCC, 2013; Mann and Kump, 2015). On the current path of carbon emissions, projections suggest an average global temperature increase of as much as four degrees Celsius this century; a level incompatible with continued human civilization (IPCC, 2018; New, Liverman, Schroeder and Anderson, 2011). Responding to the climate crisis requires the radical decarbonization of global energy, transport and industrial systems, replacing coal, oil and gas with renewable energy technologies, and reinventing economic and political norms. Moreover, these changes need to occur as rapidly as possible in the face of opposition from the most powerful industry in the world: the fossil fuel sector (Klein, 2014; Wright and Nyberg, 2015).

This chapter explores the political and security implications of these unprecedented changes to our world within the context of Australia and the Pacific region. As one of the world's leading exporters of coal and natural gas and one of the largest per capita carbon emitters, Australia's national interests have historically been tied to the ongoing expansion of the global fossil fuel industry. However, its near neighbours in the Pacific are amongst the most exposed peoples in the world to climate change impacts. The chapter begins by outlining the general political economy of the climate crisis, before exploring the dominant political responses evident in Australia, and then outlining the implications of these for politics and security in the Pacific and Asian regions in coming decades.

## 6.2 The political economy of the climate crisis

Over the last 30 years, climate change has generated significant political activity. The United Nations' formation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 1988 signalled the beginning of an ongoing process of international negotiation over carbon emissions mitigation (Weart, 2003; Edwards, 2010). However, these negotiations also highlighted the fundamentally "wicked" political nature of this issue. Responding to the climate threat requires dramatic reductions in the global production of greenhouse gas emissions, which in turn demands government regulation of fossil fuel use. Thus, a classic "tragedy of the commons" dilemma has been revealed: economic

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development based on fossil fuel use benefits individual countries in the short term, at the cost of long-term environmental destruction for the global community and future generations.

Conscious of their individual economic interests, nations have divided over how best to respond to climate change. Early opponents of emissions reductions included: the world's foremost economy, the United States of America; the oil-rich kingdoms of the Middle East; and countries such as Australia, Canada and Russia, heavily reliant on fossil fuels as key sources of energy and export earnings. Divisions over decarbonization have continued to this day, with developing economies such as China and India, now among the world's largest carbon emitters, arguing that they should not be penalised in their drive for economic development. Indeed, despite the landmark 2015 Paris Agreement in which 195 signatory nations agreed to limit global warming to no more than two degrees Celsius,<sup>1</sup> tangible measures to implement such ambitions have remained illusory (Spash, 2016). Carbon emissions have continued to rise, exceeding levels not seen on this planet for millions of years. Recent studies demonstrate that the world has already warmed by as much as one degree Celsius above pre-industrial levels (Hawkins et al, 2017), and the heating of the planet and other physical impacts (for example, ocean acidification and sea level rise) will grow in intensity as greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase. As outlined in the most recent IPCC projections, limited change in emissions or a continuation of current levels would result in an estimated warming of three degrees Celsius or possibly even five degrees Celsius by 2100 and further increases thereafter (IPCC, 2013; Fuss et al, 2014). Climate change thus represents a fundamental challenge to the future of the global economy and the viability of human civilization.

### 6.3 Business as usual as the dominant political response

However, despite the drastic implications of climate science, the dominant political response to the climate crisis has involved a continued commitment to compound economic growth and the unending expansion of fossil fuel energy. This "business as usual" response rejects the threat posed by climate change and, as Levy and Spicer argue, represents a "fossil fuels forever" imaginary,<sup>2</sup> in which all sources of fossil fuels are exploited to ensure continued economic well-being.<sup>3</sup> Such a response is based upon a founding ideology of the conquest of nature via industrial capitalism as central to human progress (Foster, Clark and York, 2010). The adoption of fossil fuels during the Industrial Revolution led to the belief that human society could free itself from the limits of natural laws (Klein, 2014; Malm, 2016). This focus on human progress over the natural environment underpinned the economic expansion of the 20th century and was celebrated in the ideology of "free-market capitalism" as a superior form of economic organisation. From the late 1970s, this view was

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1 Paris Agreement 55 International Legal Materials 743 (adopted 12 December 2015, entered into force 4 November 2016), article 2(1)(a).

2 David L Levy and André Spicer "Contested Imaginaries and the Cultural Political Economy of Climate Change" (2013) 20(5) Organization 659 at 663.

3 See for example Alex Epstein *The Moral Case for Fossil Fuels* (Portfolio, New York, 2014).

reinforced through neoliberal commitments to free trade, reducing the role of government and the public sector, cutting corporate taxation and promoting corporate self-regulation (Harvey, 2007).

In regard to climate change, the "business as usual" response began soon after the political recognition of the issue in the late 1980s when proposals for government regulation of carbon emissions met with organised resistance from the fossil fuel sector (Levy and Egan, 1998). Over the following years, an increasingly powerful climate change denial movement developed in economies such as Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, consisting of major fossil fuel corporations, industry groups, conservative think-tanks and politically-aligned media organisations (Oreskes and Conway, 2010; Dunlap and McCright, 2011). This political movement lobbied governments and sought to sway public opinion by questioning climate science, highlighting the economic costs of cutting emissions, and promoting the views of so-called "climate sceptics". Following the failure of the 2009 Copenhagen climate talks, right-wing politicians and media in the United States propagated a narrative of climate change as a "hoax" and conspiracy (Mann, 2012). This found political voice in industry-funded social movements such as the Tea Party in the United States, which gained increasing control over the Republican party (Dunlap and McCright, 2011; Brulle, 2014). With the election of Donald Trump in 2016 as President of the United States, the "business as usual" response to climate change became the official policy of the most powerful country in the world, evident in the United States withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, the expansion of coal, oil and gas extraction, removal of environmental regulations dating from the 1970s, and the promotion of prominent climate deniers to key government positions (De Pryck and Gemenne, 2017).

As Wright and Nyberg argue, this vision of economic development involves a form of "creative self-destruction" where "businesses are encouraged to further devour the very life-support systems of a habitable environment".<sup>4</sup> Here, the climate crisis results not so much in attempts to reduce carbon emissions, but rather in a doubling down of the bet that we can harness technology to better master nature. In particular, technological innovation has been directed towards more efficient and effective ways of sourcing and extracting new, unconventional fossil fuel resources (Kitchen, 2014). This is evident in the significant government support and subsidies for the expansion of coal mining (Measham et al, 2013), the dramatic expansion of gas "fracking" around the world (de Rijke, 2013; Nyberg, Wright and Kirk, 2018), the emergence of the tar sands industry in Canada (Lê, 2013), and the growth of deep-water and Arctic oil drilling (Stephenson and Agnew, 2016).

In terms of politics and security, under the "business as usual" scenario, we can expect to see an exacerbation of what Klein has termed "disaster capitalism" (Klein, 2007), in which catastrophes are exploited by elites to push through further self-destructive policies of resource extraction. Carbon-intensive industries such as coal, oil and gas are likely to continue to thrive financially for the next decade despite a rapidly deteriorating climate, extreme weather events of growing ferocity and increased social and civil unrest. Under this scenario, governments would also take on an increasingly authoritarian role as guardians of fossil fuel and corporate interests and, through increased

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4 Christopher Wright and Daniel Nyberg *Climate Change, Capitalism, and Corporations: Processes of Creative Self-Destruction* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015) at 25.

securitization, seek to control and limit public unrest, as well as the growing waves of refugees and migrants fleeing the increasingly uninhabitable equatorial zones of the world (Dyer, 2010; Ghazi, Muniruzzaman and Singh, 2016). Indeed, there are already signs of such a movement towards authoritarianism evident in the use of police and security forces to uphold the interests of multinational corporations over those of local communities (Klein, 2014), and the categorisation of environmental activism as a threat to national security (Potter, 2011; Ahmed, 2014).

#### 6.4 The climate crisis in the Pacific: fossil fuel expansion versus physical vulnerability

For Australia and the Pacific, the implications of this dominant political narrative are profound, in that Australia is one of the world's leading carbon exporters while low-lying Pacific Island nations are amongst the world's most vulnerable to climate change impacts. This contrast in positions highlights the fundamental conflict between continued fossil fuel use and the maintenance of a habitable climate.

Within the global debate over climate change, Australia has increasingly acted as a fossil fuel hegemon. Australia is one of the world's largest exporters of coal and natural gas and has among the highest levels of greenhouse gas emissions per capita among developed economies (Garnaut, 2011). Although an early leader in climate change negotiations in the early 1990s, under conservative government rule from 1996-2007, Australia reverted to a minimalist approach to climate change policy, viewing emissions mitigation as a threat to economic growth and fossil fuel exports (Pearse, 2007). This was evident internationally, in Australia's refusal (following the lead of the United States of America) to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.<sup>5</sup>

During the next decade, climate change became an increasingly partisan political issue in Australia. By 2005-2006, opinion polling revealed that climate change had become a growing area of public concern and political parties explored policy responses such as carbon pricing. A change in government in 2007 highlighted this policy shift, with the incoming Labor government led by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd finally ratifying the Kyoto Protocol and committing to the introduction of a carbon emissions trading scheme. This policy focus coincided with unprecedented extreme weather events, including the "Black Saturday" bushfires in Victoria in February 2009 in which 173 people perished (Head, Adams, McGregor and Toole, 2014).

However, movement towards domestic climate action became increasingly problematic following the failure to reach a global agreement at the 2009 Copenhagen climate talks, conservative political opposition, and growing resistance from industry to carbon pricing proposals. Narrowly holding on to power in the 2010 federal election, the minority Labor government under Prime Minister Julia Gillard announced the introduction of a fixed carbon price as a prelude to a carbon trading system (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011). The conservative opposition, with backing from the media, right-wing think-tanks and industry groups, launched a highly effective public campaign against what

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5 Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change 2303 UNTS 162 (opened for signature 16 March 1998, entered into force 16 February 2005).

was dubbed a "toxic carbon tax" (Manne, 2011). This proved to be a key factor in the defeat of the Gillard government in the 2013 federal election. Under the new conservative leadership of Prime Minister Tony Abbott, climate policies were disbanded and Australia had the dubious honour of being the first nation on Earth to abolish a price on carbon emissions (Bogle and Oremus, 2014; Crowley, 2017). The promotion of fossil fuels was highlighted in late 2014 when, at the opening of a new export coal mine in Queensland, Prime Minister Abbott proclaimed that "coal is good for humanity" and the "foundation of prosperity ... for now and the foreseeable future".<sup>6</sup> This statement duplicated the message promoted by United States coal giant Peabody Energy that coal exports helped to solve "energy poverty" in developing economies and were thus a moral rather than just an economic choice.<sup>7</sup>

For Pacific Island nations, the response to their larger neighbour's promotion of continued fossil fuel expansion has been one of increasing dismay and anger. Pacific Island countries are amongst the most vulnerable nations in the world to the impacts of climate change in the form of increasingly intense tropical cyclones, coral bleaching and accelerating sea level rise (Keener et al, 2013; Storlazzi, Elias and Berkowitz, 2015). Not surprisingly, Pacific Island governments have led international calls for strong global action on carbon emissions mitigation. For instance, in May 2015, Fiji's Prime Minister Voreqe Bainimarama explicitly criticised the Australian government's role in promoting the expansion of the coal industry, arguing that such self-interest endangered the future existence of Pacific Island nations. As he stated in a speech attended by the then Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop:<sup>8</sup>

Australia is siding with what I call the coalition of the selfish – those industrialised nations which are putting the welfare of their carbon-polluting industries and their workers before our welfare and survival as Pacific Islanders.

In the lead-up to the Paris climate talks in late 2015, Fiji's Prime Minister and leaders from other Pacific Islands such as Kiribati, the Marshall Islands and Vanuatu called for a "moratorium on the development of further reserves of Australian coal", an argument that newly anointed Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull dismissed, proclaiming that "coal is ... the largest single part in fact of the global energy mix, and likely to remain that way for a very long time".<sup>9</sup> Moreover, utilising what critics termed the "drug dealer's defence", Turnbull argued that "if Australia stopped exporting coal, the countries to which we export it would buy it from somewhere else".<sup>10</sup> Thus, while the 2015

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6 Latika Bourke "Coal Is 'the Foundation of Prosperity' for Foreseeable Future, Says Prime Minister Tony Abbott" *Sydney Morning Herald* (online ed, 4 November 2014) <[www.smh.com.au](http://www.smh.com.au)>.

7 Suzanne Goldenberg "The Truth Behind Peabody's Campaign to Rebrand Coal as a Poverty Cure" *The Guardian* (online ed, 19 May 2015) <[www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)>.

8 Rowan Callick "Fiji Blasts Australia's 'Coalition of the Selfish'" *The Australian* (online ed, 7 May 2015) <[www.theaustralian.com.au](http://www.theaustralian.com.au)>. See also Chapters 4 and 7 in this book.

9 Megan Darby "Australia PM Turnbull Stands by Coal Amid Moratorium Calls" (28 October 2015) Climate Home News <[climatechangenews.com](http://climatechangenews.com)>.

10 Oliver Milman "Fiji PM Decries Australia's 'Climate Change Deniers' in Turnbull Cabinet" *The Guardian* (online ed, 28 October 2015) <[www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com)>.

Paris Agreement resulted in state parties (including Australia) undertaking to take action to keep the global average temperature to well below two degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius,<sup>11</sup> Australia's response focused solely on domestic carbon emissions and ignored the fact that if the world was to meet even a weak two degrees Celsius target, over 80 per cent of the world's coal reserves would need to stay in the ground (McGlade and Ekins, 2015).

In recent years, Australia's conservative political leadership has maintained an explicit policy of fossil fuel expansion both in terms of opening major new coal and gas export projects (including the politically controversial Adani Carmichael coal mine in Queensland), as well as undermining nascent renewable energy developments. Both federal and state governments have strongly promoted fossil fuel expansion via government funding of new rail lines, ports and water licenses for new export-oriented coal mines, the development of new gas extraction projects as well as proposals to finance new domestic coal-fired power stations. The Australian government's promotion of fossil fuels has also extended to the international political stage, with senior diplomats lobbying foreign financial investors to fund so-called "clean coal" power plants in Asia (Hutchens, 2016), and aligning itself with other fossil fuel boosters such as Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United States of America at recent international climate change fora (Doherty, 2018).

Against this, Pacific Island nations have continued to voice criticism of Australia's fossil fuel expansion and maintained a strong position of the need for dramatic decarbonization of the world's economy. For instance, the 2017 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP23) in Bonn, Germany was presided over by Fiji's Prime Minister Bainimarama, the first time a small island developing state had assumed the presidency of the negotiations. At this and subsequent climate negotiations, Pacific small island developing states have called for members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to phase out coal by 2030, followed by other countries by 2040. Moreover, recent trade and security discussions between Australia and Pacific Island nations have provided a venue for continued criticism of Australia's fossil fuel agenda. As Fiji Prime Minister Bainimarama stated to Australia's Prime Minister Morrison, in reference to earlier jokes made by Australian politicians about sea level rise:<sup>12</sup>

Here in Fiji, climate change is no laughing matter. From where we are sitting, we cannot imagine how the interests of any single industry can be placed above the welfare of Pacific peoples — vulnerable people in the world over.

## 6.5 Implications for politics and security

Despite Australia's short-term focus on a "business as usual" model of fossil fuel expansion, worsening scientific projections of climate change impacts pose serious challenges not only for vulnerable Pacific Island nations, but also for developed economies such as Australia. These extend

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11 Paris Agreement, above n 1, article 5(1)(a).

12 Stephen Dziedzic and Erin Handley "Climate Change Is 'No Laughing Matter', Fiji's PM Frank Bainimarama Tells Australia During Scott Morrison's Pacific Trip" (18 January 2019) ABC News <abc.net.au>.

across financial and economic uncertainties, to physical and geopolitical risks that require strategic consideration and planning over coming decades.

The economic and financial risks of Australia's commitment to fossil fuel expansion occur at several levels. First, the Australian government's commitment to the development of export coal and gas relies upon the continuation of strong and growing global demand for these products. In terms of thermal coal, Australia is now the world's second biggest exporter behind Indonesia. However, there are signs that global demand for imported thermal coal is waning and some financial analysts have argued that the commodity is actually in structural decline (Buckley, 2015). This is evident in the shift in China towards significant investment in renewable energy (Mathews, 2017), concerns over urban pollution in major Chinese cities fuelled by coal combustion, and plentiful domestic coal reserves. Other major export markets for Australian coal, including Japan and India, are also seen to be weakening. Indeed, the opening of major new export-oriented mines in Queensland's Galilee Basin threatens to flood world markets with a further supply of thermal coal, thereby depressing prices for existing Australian coal exports (Buckley, Nicholas and Shah, 2018). While Australian politicians have sought to leverage their support for new coal mines as vote winners in economically depressed regional centres, this "jobs and growth" message is unlikely to come to fruition given broader global shifts in energy markets away from coal and towards renewable energy.

The financial risks of a "fossil fuels forever" agenda also extend into the economic impacts of worsening climate change upon established industries in Australia and the Asia-Pacific region. Australia is particularly exposed to climate change impacts evident in recent extreme weather events, such as drought, heatwaves, wildfires, cyclones and coral bleaching (Head, Adams, McGregor and Toole, 2014; Steffen, Stock, Alexander and Rice, 2017). For instance, the 2018 World Employment and Social Outlook estimates that climate change directly threatens 1.2 billion jobs worldwide, particularly in primary industries, such as agriculture, forestry and fishing exposed to extreme weather events, droughts and warming oceans.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, these climate induced impacts extend across global supply chains, as graphically illustrated in Thailand's 2011 floods which caused an estimated USD 45 billion in direct losses and global impacts across the automobile, computer and consumer goods industries (Aon Benfeld, 2012). As extreme weather events heighten in intensity, so the costs to government and industry from disaster relief and climate adaptation are also increasing. Indeed, recent analysis suggests a business as usual scenario of three to four degrees Celsius warming by 2100 would reduce global per capita output by between 25-30 per cent (Burke, Davis and Diffenbaugh, 2018). Thus, the economic costs of Australia's current energy policy are likely to be significant.

Beyond economic impacts, a "business as usual" scenario based upon continued use of fossil fuels also raises a range of humanitarian and geopolitical concerns. Worsening climate change will further fuel mass migration around the world as people flee communities endangered by flooded coastlines, droughts, famines, storms and floods (Berchin, Valduga, Garcia and de Andrade Guerra, 2017). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, extreme weather has already

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13 See generally International Labour Organization *World Employment Social Outlook 2018: Greening with Jobs* (International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2018).

displaced 22.5 million people since 2008, and by 2050, climate change is estimated to force around 700 million to migrate to new locations around the world (Markham, 2018). This mass movement of "climate refugees" is likely to be pronounced in the Asia-Pacific region, where vulnerable communities are particularly concentrated around equatorial regions. Australia's controversial, hard-line approach to refugees, particularly its so-called "Pacific solution" of outsourced refugee camps in Nauru and Papua New Guinea,<sup>14</sup> suggests future mass movements of people will further challenge government policy. To date, Australia has turned a deaf ear to calls for tangible responses to the migration of Pacific Island populations endangered by rising sea levels resulting from climate change and appears wedded to a continuation of its uncompromising border security policy (McMichael, Farbotko and McNamara, 2019).

The impacts of climate change-induced extreme weather also raise geopolitical risks as nation states seek to protect their interests and expand their influence in an increasingly unstable world. For instance, military analysts have for some time argued that climate change acts as a "threat multiplier" in that extreme weather events can precipitate crop failures, threaten food supplies and access to water, heighten domestic political tensions, and potentially fuel regional conflicts and wars (Dyer, 2010; CNA Military Advisory Board, 2014). These security concerns are already evident in the Asia-Pacific region under China's expansionary "Belt and Road" initiative, which seeks to project China's economic influence within developing nations through low-cost loans for infrastructure development (Wang, 2016). The security implications of China's expansion into the Pacific have not been lost on the Australian government, which after years of reducing foreign aid, has recently shifted to a more active security approach, including commitments to fund new naval bases and military training for Pacific Island nations (O'Keefe, 2019). While the Australian government has become more focused on military and security issues, Pacific Island nations have used this increasing attention to promote their own concerns over climate change and sustainable development. It remains to be seen to what extent Pacific Island nations can leverage Australia's security focus into more tangible climate change commitments.

## 6.6 Conclusion

Climate change represents an existential crisis for humanity. Two centuries of fossil fuel-based economic expansion have resulted in the disruption of Earth's carbon cycle resulting in a warming of the planet and extreme weather events that now threaten the basis of human society. To date, countries have neglected the global nature of the problem and responded to the climate crisis through a short-term focus on their individual national interests. The costs of climate change will thus be disproportionately borne by those who have least contributed to the problem, specifically developing nations and future generations.

This fundamental climate injustice is particularly stark in the case of Australia's relationship with its Pacific Island neighbours. As one of the world's leading carbon exporters and one of the largest per capita carbon emitters, Australia's status as a prosperous, developed economy has greatly

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14 Eberhard Weber "The Pacific Solution – a Catastrophe for the Pacific!?" (2015) 3(4) *Environment and Ecology Research* 96 at 100-102. See also Chapter 9 in this book.

benefitted from its fossil fuel profligacy. By contrast, its nearby Pacific Island neighbours have not only lacked access to this economic development, but are at the frontline of the climate change impacts that fossil fuel use has created. This chapter has sought to draw out the political and security implications of our climate-changed future. While Australia continues to maintain a "business as usual" approach to climate and energy policy, the financial, humanitarian and geopolitical implications of the growing climate crisis appear likely to undermine this political narrative. One sign of this shift is the growing anger amongst Pacific Island nations to Australia's continued promotion of fossil fuel expansion and their willingness to use regional security concerns as a political lever for more productive commitments to regional aid and climate adaptation.

Pressure is growing, both diplomatically and within civil society, for governments to take the threat of climate change more seriously. It is these political pressures which will determine the degree to which humanity can avoid the worst implications of a rapidly unravelling climate crisis.

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