



# Beyond the discourse of denial: The reproduction of fossil fuel hegemony in Australia

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Corporate political activity  
Fossil fuels  
Hegemony  
Discourse  
Justification

## ABSTRACT

Despite growing public concern over the worsening climate crisis, tangible action to reduce carbon emissions and limit fossil fuel use remains limited. This is particularly apparent in carbon-rich nations which promote the extraction, export and use of coal, oil and gas as key drivers of economic activity. We examine this contradiction between growing public demands for climate action and the continued dominance of fossil energy in Australia, now the world's largest exporter of coal and gas. Through a qualitative analysis of media coverage and industry public relations during the period 2008–2019, we show how the fossil fuel hegemony has been maintained and extended in the face of growing social and political critique. We identify the key discourses that the Australian fossil fuel sector has employed in reproducing hegemony and delaying action on climate change. This extends previous theorisations of moral and intellectual leadership by detailing how the fossil fuel sector embeds particular technical claims into the climate change debate. Second, we expand knowledge of political strategy to show how corporate discourses aimed at maintaining hegemony are extended through the state as an ideological promoter.

## 1. Introduction

In 1966, the US coal industry publication *Mining Congress Journal* published an article which identified with surprising candour the disruptive effects of the combustion of coal upon the Earth's climate [1]. This article along with similar documents produced within the oil industry during the 1970s highlighted the fact that major fossil fuel companies had long known of the impact their products were having on the planet's climate system [2]. However, rather than developing adaptive strategies to transition to a low carbon economy, the industry instead ignored its own research and created a politically organized climate denial movement which proved remarkably successful in preventing any form of emissions mitigation [3].

In conceptualizing the success of fossil fuel corporations, researchers have engaged with Gramsci's [4] notion of hegemony [5,6]. Hegemony is built on a strategy of consent, rather than coercion, in convincing civil society actors to support a dominant strategic alliance [4]. Fossil fuel corporations have delayed action on climate change by forming business alliances opposing the regulation of carbon emissions, financially contributing to political parties, funding major advertising campaigns, and publicly appealing to broader conservative ideological values [7,8].

Fossil fuel interests have also played a key role in stressing "uncertainty" and "doubts" over climate science, highlighting the economic costs of cutting emissions, and promoting the views of climate "sceptics" in government representations, media and publications [3,9]. Through successful coalition building, the interests of the fossil fuel industry have become accepted as natural and taken for granted by other social actors [10].

Existing research convincingly demonstrates how the fossil fuel industry has created a "historic bloc" by coordinating the interests and identities of dominant and subordinate actors in seeding doubt about climate science and obfuscating the need for emissions reduction [5,6]. However, growing public concern over climate change has in recent years also led to an acknowledgement by governments and business organizations that climate change constitutes a "grand challenge" for humanity that requires urgent action [11]. In this era of increasing climate activism, a key question that emerges is how the fossil fuel sector continues to avoid social and political sanction given the threat its activities pose to the future of human civilization.

In addressing this question, we are interested in the reproduction of hegemony through the intellectual and moral leadership of the fossil fuel industry [4]. This shifts the discussion of hegemony from coalition

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**Table 1**

Timeline of Australian fossil fuel sector political activity.

24 Nov 2007	Labor leader Kevin Rudd elected as Prime Minister with a policy to ratify the Kyoto Protocol and introduce a Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS)
16 July 2008	Green Paper outlining an emissions trading scheme (ETS) released
30 Sept 2008	Garnaut climate change report released detailing costs of mitigation and adaptation
13 Nov 2008	Australian Coal Association (ACA) launches the NewGenCoal campaign featuring a \$1.5 million ad campaign and \$1 million website highlighting CCS technology
15 Dec 2008	Government releases final design of CPRS and 2020 emissions reduction targets
13 Aug 2009	CPRS legislation rejected in the Senate
7 Nov 2009	ACA launch multimillion-dollar advertising campaign "Let's Cut Emissions, Not Jobs" targeting coal-mining communities
1 Dec 2009	Tony Abbott takes over as Opposition leader voiding a previous consensus on emissions reduction
27 Apr 2010	Prime Minister Kevin Rudd announces the deferral of CPRS
24 June 2010	Julia Gillard becomes Prime Minister after internal party challenge
01 July 2011	ACA, Minerals Council and other business groups form the Australian Trade and Industry Alliance to campaign against an ETS
08 Nov 2011	ETS legislation passed by Parliament with carbon emissions from largest emitters to be costed under a fixed price for 3 years
23 May 2013	New head of the ACA denounces environmental groups as "insurgents" for demonising coal industry
16 July 2013	Minority Labor Government in alliance with the Greens announces move to full ETS in 2014
23 Aug 2013	ACA merges with the Minerals Council of Australia
1 Sep 2013	Federal election - conservative Coalition Abbott Government takes office vowing to scrap carbon pricing.
27 Feb 2014	Peabody Energy launches "Advanced Energy for Life" campaign promoting coal as a solution to "energy poverty"
17 July 2014	Carbon price mechanism repealed by Abbott government. Australia becomes the first nation to reverse action on climate change
13 Oct 2014	Prime Minister Tony Abbott declares "coal is good for humanity" at the opening of Queensland coalmine
14 Sep 2015	Malcolm Turnbull becomes Prime Minister after internal party challenge
18 Jan 2017	PM Malcolm Turnbull declares coal will be central to global energy "for a very, very long time"
9 Feb 2017	Federal Treasurer Scott Morrison brings a lump of coal provided by the Minerals Council into the Federal Parliament and declares "This is coal. Don't be afraid."
13 July 2017	Conservative politicians lobby for government funding to construct new coal-fired power stations in Australia
24 Aug 2018	Malcolm Turnbull resigns as Australian Prime Minister given internal party opposition to his position on climate change action
13 Feb 2019	PM Scott Morrison speaks at the Minerals Council of Australia annual dinner declaring his full support for the industry
18 May 2019	Conservative Coalition re-elected to government under PM Scott Morrison

building to a form of governance. By examining how the Australian fossil fuel sector has reproduced the hegemonic project, we explain how the industry constructs its position as measured and forward-looking in addressing climate change *and* expanding the production of fossil fuels. Drawing on an analysis of media coverage and industry press releases during the period 2008–2019, we identify the core discourses underlying the Australian fossil fuel sector's response to growing public concern over climate change and how these discourses stabilize the hegemonic project and defuse central themes of critique. We find that many of the justifications for the expansion of new carbon frontiers have been mirrored by politicians and governments, which highlights the way in which the fossil fuel sector has successfully shaped the political agenda in staving off regulatory changes threatening its operations.

Our article contributes to a more detailed understanding of the reproduction of fossil fuel hegemony by clarifying the active processes underlying the delay in climate change action. This advances neo-Gramscian discussions on hegemony as a form of governance by explaining how articulatory practices establish a grip over key actors and groups in society. We also demonstrate how the Australian fossil fuel industry's moral and political leadership limits the possibilities for dramatic decarbonization of the economy. As such, our analysis is of relevance to other capitalist economies, where heated political debate continues over the need to decarbonize economic activity [12,13].

## 2. Background: Australian fossil fuels and the climate crisis

As a colonial settler economy, Australia has since its formation been shaped by the extraction and use of fossil fuels [14]. From the 1980s, a series of resource booms led to the dramatic growth of the mining sector, with Australia now the world's largest exporter of coal and gas [15]. This historical reliance on coal, and to a lesser extent gas and oil, as sources of energy and export earnings have resulted in a deeply entwined corporate-state nexus of multinational resource companies, industry associations and political parties. As a result, the resource sector has been at the centre of various policy interventions including legislative battles over native title, industrial relations, mining royalties and resource taxes [16,17].

As outlined in Table 1, the last two decades in Australia have been marked by significant political debate over climate change, beginning with the election of a federal Labor Government proposing climate

action and emissions regulation in late 2007, and concluding with the re-election of a conservative government supportive of continued fossil fuel expansion in May 2019. Climate science, international climate negotiations, extreme weather events, fossil fuel exports and renewable energy have become key issues within Australian political debate, resulting in dramatic policy shifts and leadership changes [18,19]. With a growing social movement for climate action threatening the established consensus of fossil fuel expansion and, at the same time, vehement climate scepticism being a marker of conservative political identity, disputes about the expansion of the industry were central to the 2019 Federal election [20].

The fossil fuel sector has been a key participant in this political debate through a series of public relations campaigns aimed at limiting carbon emissions regulation and promoting the expansion of coal mining, gas extraction and coal-fired power generation. These instances of public campaigning build on other covert forms of political activity such as industry association lobbying; donations to political parties; and the exchange of personnel between politics and industry through revolving door appointments [16].

However, while the fossil fuel sector has proven successful over the last thirty years in limiting carbon regulation, the growing dominance of climate change in social and political discourse now appears to threaten that hegemony. Following the recent release of increasingly catastrophic scientific projections of the world's climate future [21], a new wave of climate activism has erupted around the world through groups such as Extinction Rebellion [22], and the school climate strikes initiated by Swedish teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg [23]. Combined with social movements for fossil fuel divestment [24], legal actions against governments and fossil fuel corporations [25], and growing concerns amongst regulators and institutional investors over the financial implications of climate change [26], a tipping point or "dislocation" [27]: [302] may well have been reached in the hegemony of fossil fuel energy. In the following section, we advance the concept of hegemony to explain how the fossil fuel sector continues to avoid social and political sanction despite the threat its activities pose to the future of human civilization.

## 3. Fossil fuel hegemony and the climate crisis

To understand the dominant political and economic role of fossil fuels, we engage with the theoretical concept of hegemony [4]. Fossil

fuel hegemony [10,28], or petro-hegemony [29], involves the study of how the industry gains the active and passive consent of key actors in forming a historical bloc supporting societal dependence on fossil fuels. Through building relationships and agreements between different groups, the industry constructs the expansion of fossil fuels and new carbon frontiers as the “collective will” and “common sense” [4]. More specifically, we draw upon neo-Gramscian studies of hegemony to highlight the conflictual and processual character of the strategic practices constructing the temporal fixation of meaning as the accepted social reality [30]. This opens up the identity and significance of involved actors in that their interests are not pre-determined by class or group belonging.

In their seminal book, *Hegemony and socialist strategy*, Laclau and Mouffe [30] emphasize the relational aspect of discourse as an articulatory practice which constitutes social formations and constructs their meaning. Drawing on these insights, Nyberg et al. [6] show how corporations engage in practices which seek to build a common identity with citizens and synchronize their interests with those of business. They found that in creating “chains of equivalence” between their own interests and those of other social groups, corporations needed to be pragmatic and flexible in that “hegemony around concepts like climate change is fractured, divided by internal antagonism and characterized by ambiguity in which actors articulate contradictory positions” [6: 447]. The flexible nature of hegemonization has also been stressed by Ferns and Amaeshi [31], in their longitudinal analysis of oil company BP, in which the company adapted its climate change position in response to changing circumstances through the adoption of new discourses adjusted over time. Through this process, the company was able to “both incorporate and evade various types of stakeholder critique” [31: 1].

These studies have emphasized the practice of politics involved in the coalition building of linking together interests and demands in constructing and defending fossil fuel hegemony. Howarth [32] refers to this as the first face of hegemony – explaining how a discourse coalition links together in contesting rules or policies. However, considering the growing international movement for stronger action on climate change, further development is needed to understand how the fossil fuel hegemony continues to hold sway. This is what Howarth [32] refers to as the second face of hegemony – as a form of governance – and perhaps closer to Gramsci’s [4] original definition of hegemony as moral and intellectual leadership.

Considering two centuries of dependence on fossil fuels in many Western capitalist democracies [33], there are normalized traditions around consumption and production that support its continuation and expansion. As such, fossil fuel hegemony is a legitimate regime entrenched in concrete habits of societal groups and actors. One means of tracing this entrenchment has been through mapping the connections between industry and government [see for e.g. [34]]. Others have emphasised the differences between key politicians [35] and disputes between competing coalitions [36]. This work has offered insight into the practices and discourses within disputes over climate change, however, here we seek to understand how, even within such fierce debates, the hegemonic position of the industry is maintained.

Hegemony is reproduced through a form of governance in which discourses are incorporated and groups co-opted by others. In regard to climate change, this often occurs among those with incumbency and a shared interest in protecting the status quo [37]. For example, Kraushaar-Friesen and Busch [10] show how the Canadian fossil fuel industry has sustained its dominance by depicting oil to be in the interest of the wider public through outcomes such as “job security”, “health-care”, and, somewhat ironically, a “clean environment”. The hegemony offers attachment that provides benefits to certain groups, whilst demonizing those that threaten these articulated interests [37,38]. We advance these discussions further by i) detailing the logic of equivalence whereby the industry depicts itself as concerned about both climate change and the national interest and ii) showing how the logic of

difference is employed to exercise “leadership” over the governed. Both have implications for theorizing hegemonic blocs and for exposing the strategies used to maintain them in the face of increasing public concern over climate change.

#### 4. Methods and procedures

In exploring the key discourses that the Australian fossil fuel industry has used in defending its activities, we undertook a detailed qualitative study of statements made by industry spokespeople and senior executives in the media during the period 2008–2019. As noted above, this encompasses the period from the election of a new Labor government in late 2007 which ratified the Kyoto agreement and began the process of implementing a carbon price, to the re-election of a conservative government in mid-2019 committed to continued fossil fuel expansion. Our data collection of the public statements of fossil fuel industry spokespeople began with an online search of the *Factiva* database of the country’s leading national and suburban print media outlets (*The Australian*, *Australian Financial Review*, *Courier Mail*, *Sydney Morning Herald*), supplemented by a Google search of major online media (*ABC News*, *News.com*, *The Guardian*). Using a keyword search for the terms “climate change”, “fossil fuel” and key industry associations (Minerals Council of Australia, Australian Coal Association, Australian Petroleum Production & Exploration Association and the Business Council of Australia), we identified an initial sample of over 1250 documents. We then refined this data set by selecting only those articles which included direct quotes from fossil fuel executives, their industry associations, or articles they had authored regarding climate change and emissions regulation. This resulted in a smaller sample of 271 articles which were then supplemented with an additional 43 media releases and statements from coal and gas companies and their industry associations (see Table 2).

To analyse the refined data set, we imported these articles and extracts into the qualitative data analysis software *QSR NVivo*. Through a process of “open coding” [39], we identified segments of text into first order categories representing actors (e.g., “companies”, “industry associations”, “politicians”, “activists”), concepts (e.g., “technology neutral”, “sensible policy”, “energy security”, “clean coal”, “jobs and growth”), and activities (e.g., “lobbying”, “public relations”, political campaigning”, “advertising”). In a second stage of analysis, we used axial coding to search for patterns and relationships within and between the first-order categories [40]. Coding was led by the first author and coding definitions adapted through discussion and testing with the other authors. A key theme that emerged from this process was the way in which the fossil fuel industry and politicians enlisted a defined range of discourses that sought to re-assert the industry’s legitimacy and social reputation in response to environmental critique. By engaging with the concept of “hegemonization” [31], we identified four core discourses (consisting of a variety of subsidiary themes) which sought to publicly

**Table 2**  
Data sources analysed.

Source	No. of articles				Total
	2008–2010	2011–2013	2014–2016	2017–2019	
ABC News	20	11	9	12	52
Australian	21	20	23	22	86
Australian	15	13	20	14	62
Financial Review					
Guardian	0	1	11	28	40
Sydney Morning Herald	9	7	4	4	24
Courier-Mail	3	2	2	0	7
Media Releases	8	6	9	20	43

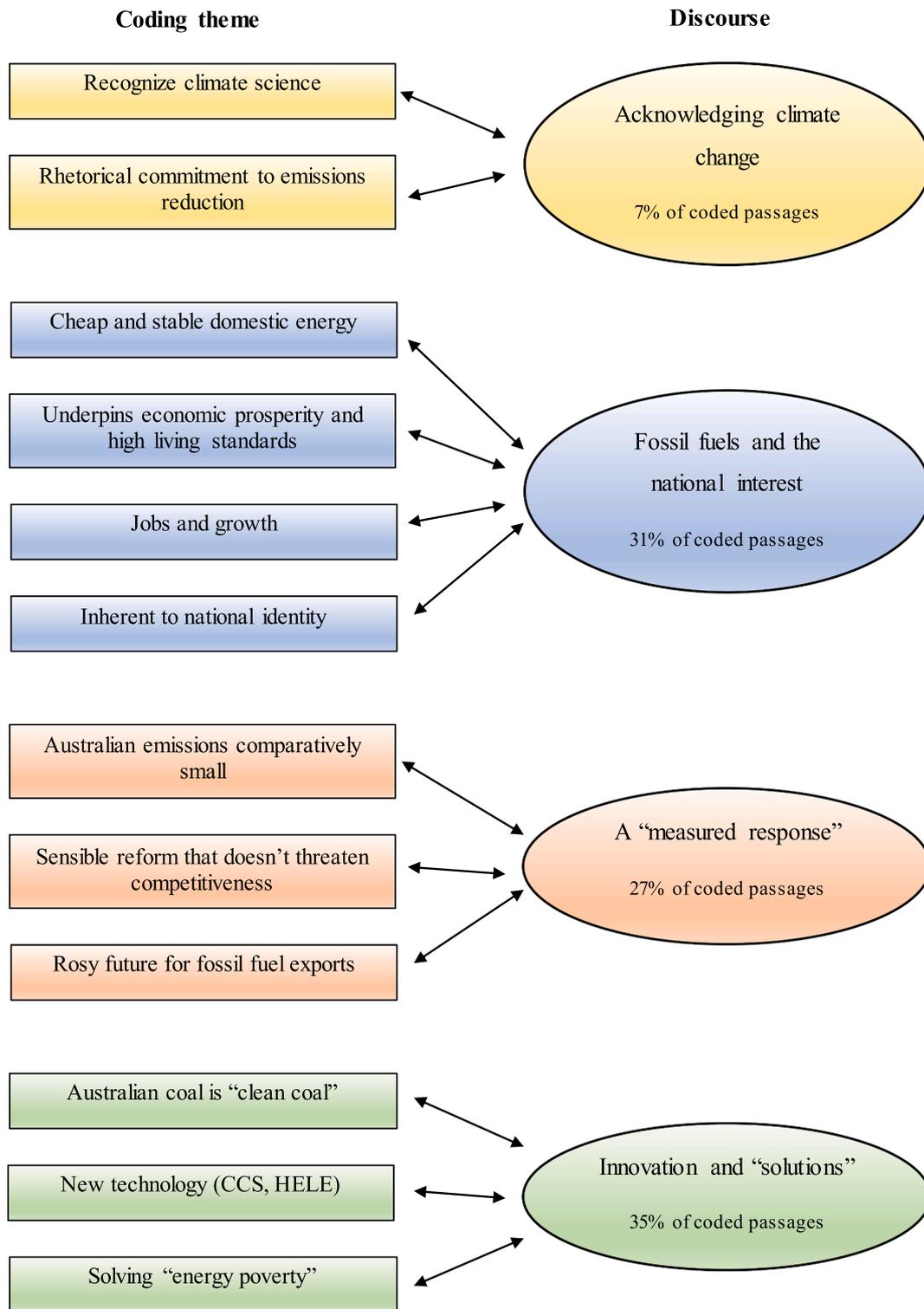


Fig. 1. The Australian fossil fuel sector's climate change discourses.

reproduce the hegemonic project of fossil fuels in a period of climate crisis (see Fig. 1). These we labelled "acknowledging climate change" (consisting of 7 percent of coded passages), "the national interest" (31 percent of coding), "a measured response" (27 percent of coding), and "innovation and solutions" (35 percent of coding).

Following this grounded analysis and identification of four key discourses, we then sought to analyse what these discourses achieved as articulatory practices constituting social relations and formations [41].

That is, we identified how these discourses functioned to construct meaning within the broader public debate over climate change and energy policy by drawing a logic of equivalence with, or against, other interests in order to reproduce fossil fuel hegemony. In the sections that follow we identify both the content of critique and the key discourses underpinning the industry's justification of its activities.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1. Acknowledging climate change

While early efforts from the fossil fuel industry in Australia and overseas aimed to undermine climate science, we found public commentary from the industry during this period was more likely to acknowledge climate change as a real and urgent problem. For instance, industry commentators commonly expressed the need for global and national solutions to climate change, committed to international targets such as those in the Paris Agreement, and even recognised the need for an energy transition. This discursive strategy allowed industry representatives to actively participate in the specific framing of climate change as a political issue and contribute to the shaping of policy interventions. By emphasising the breadth of responsibility for acting on climate change, industry leaders deflected criticism by claiming they were working in line with the science, and with different levels of government, to come up with solutions. This discourse presented the industry as exercising moral and practical leadership in facing a global problem and hence synchronized its interests with those of humanity more generally.

For example, in 2008 the Australian Coal Association (ACA) in launching its public relations campaign against the then Labor Government's proposals for carbon pricing acknowledged that "Climate change is a real problem. Burning coal for electricity creates CO<sub>2</sub>, which contributes to global warming" [42]. Fast forward to the present day and the Minerals Council of Australia (MCA) has continued its public acceptance of the reality of climate change while stressing the leadership role it is playing:

"The minerals industry acknowledges that sustained global action is required to reduce the risks of human-induced climate change...This includes participation in global agreements such as the Paris Agreement, which would hold the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels" [43].

Such statements not only acknowledged the problem; they aligned the industry with global leadership on climate change, while at the same time suggesting that solutions were already in motion.

By appealing to the need for leadership on the issue, the industry positioned its own interests and concerns as being aligned with the public good – in contrast to the view that the industry was obstructing action on climate change. Indeed, when confronted with criticism that it had acted in ways that exacerbated the climate crisis, the industry mounted a vigorous defence of its position. As the CEO of the Australian Petroleum Production & Exploration Association (APPEA) responded to claims that his organization had been a leader in hindering climate progress:

"we are absolutely committed to making sure that we have a consistent approach to climate change and emissions reduction, and we've been on the record now for more than 15 years, with a very consistent approach and a very clear policy, that says we absolutely support a national approach to climate change" [44].

Thus, the fossil fuel sector for much of this period rejected critics' claims of climate change denial by stating its acceptance of the scientific consensus on human-induced climate change and acknowledging it as an issue requiring "action" which it supported. This not only built a linkage to a generic common interest but also allowed the industry to present itself as a leader in responding to the issue.

However, the vagueness of the industry's official statements on climate change also provided space for a range of shifting policy positions. Here, critics noted the industry's potential for "doublespeak"; advocating publicly for climate "action" while behind closed doors lobbying politicians to reduce commitments to emissions mitigation and renewable energy [45]. By acknowledging climate change, fossil fuel corporations and their industry associations benefitted from the more extreme public expressions of climate denial expressed by corporate-funded think-tanks and conservative media [46]. The industry thus

appeared to present a more measured response by distancing their rhetoric from climate sceptics on the flanks of the public debate.

### 5.2. Fossil fuels and the national interest

The industry's acknowledgement of climate change as an important concern was however often qualified by other issues which it framed as central to the national interest, such as energy security, electricity costs and the maintenance of export earnings. In leveraging its historical role as a cornerstone of economic development in Australia, industry discourse linked its ongoing survival to the continuation of established habits of consumption and production. As the head of the ACA declared in response to moves to reduce carbon emissions "Fossil fuels underpin Australia's economic growth and will do so for the foreseeable future" [47].

This identification of common national interests functioned to counter the threat of acting on climate change and reproduced the hegemonic position of the industry. For instance, a prevalent refrain throughout the industry's public communications (and one echoed closely by conservative politicians) was the key role that coal-fired power played in the production of Australia's electricity supply. Coal was stressed as an essential part of Australia's economic development and a cost-effective and stable source of energy for homes and industry. Indicative of this framing, the ACA's NewGenCoal advertising campaign strongly promoted the theme of how all Australians benefited from coal:

"You can't just shut down fossil fuels like coal. In Australia alone eight out of ten times you turn on the lights, it's powered by coal. The average Australian household burns 10 kilos of coal for electricity every day and our prices are amongst the lowest in the world" [42].

While the industry sought to emphasise the importance of coal-fired electricity in Australia, it also sought to downplay domestic carbon emissions. This was done by arguing that Australia's carbon emissions were comparatively small and that reducing domestic emissions would have little effect on the rest of the world. This discursive framing sought to differentiate Australia's interests from the broader global context, thereby discounting the need for dramatic national emissions cuts. For instance, in launching its campaign against carbon pricing proposals in 2011, advertisements by the fossil fuel sector proclaimed that "Australia produces less than 1.5 per cent of the world's carbon emissions but will pay the world's biggest carbon tax" [48]. Whilst ignoring the embedded carbon emissions Australia contributed as the world's largest exporter of coal and gas as well as having amongst the largest per capita emissions in the OECD, this "small fish in a big pond" framing provided a public justification for a minimal and delayed approach to emissions mitigation. Indeed, it was a rhetoric reiterated politically for much of the last decade, with Prime Minister Turnbull in 2015 declaring that "If Australia were to stop all of its coal exports, it would not reduce global emissions one iota" [49].

Australia's traditional role as a leading fossil fuel exporter provided a further theme of economic contribution, with the industry's communications stressing the mining royalties and tax revenue that accrued to government. As the ACA's campaign against carbon pricing declared: "The majority of the coal we mine here is exported. It brings in billions of dollars in tax and royalties that fund schools, hospitals and roads" [42]. Indeed, the industry's economic contribution was a consistent response to growing environmental opposition to fossil fuel extraction, with environmentalists portrayed by the industry as threatening the national economic interest. Responding to climate campaigners opposing the opening of new coal mines, the head of Rio Tinto's coal division argued.

"Australia's comparative wealth and high living standards are completely embedded with the improving prosperity and prospects of our trading partners. Whatever threatens their continuing successful development, threatens our living standards just as directly" [50].

Indeed, the industry rhetoric was often explicit in arguing that coal mining was an inherent part of Australian national identity further reinforcing an abstract common interest. As the CEO of coal giant

Peabody Energy declared: “Coal has transformed society over hundreds of years by fuelling industrial revolutions and digital economies. It’s the pride of Australia’s past, and the pride of its future” [51].

Moreover, the coal and gas industries emphasised a rhetoric of regional development and job creation. Indicative of this localised discourse, the head of the state industry association sought to promote a more human, domestic image in linking the interests and identities of regional communities with the industry.

“Every day in New South Wales [Australian state] more than 22,000 hard working men and women put on their hi-vis shirts and hard hats and go to work at one of the most arduous jobs around, a job that contributes so much to the state — coal mining... our miners live in the towns near where mining takes place. They shop at the local supermarket, eat at the local cafes, their kids play for the sports team on the weekend. They are major contributors to the fabric of their local community” [52].

This focus on local communities, job creation and regional development was reinforced over time through the industry’s public relations campaigns and community programs, creating an equivalence between the industry and regional centres.

Thus, despite growing public concern over climate change, the capital-state nexus of fossil fuel expansion continued based upon assertions of the economic necessity of fossil fuel extraction for export earnings, local employment and the provision of public services. Coal mining was presented by both the industry and politicians as central to the Australian way of life and a continued source of economic well-being.

### 5.3. A “measured response”

The discourse of promoting continued fossil fuel expansion based on the collective economic good was also interlocked with the discourse of the need for a “measured response” to emissions mitigation. The fundamental contradiction between an acknowledgement of a worsening climate crisis and advocating for new coal mines, gas fields and even offshore oil drilling, was papered over by an appeal to limited policy intervention based upon the presentation of the industry as a rational and mature actor. Within this discursive framing, the industry emphasised the need for emissions mitigation to be “balanced”, “sensible”, “responsible” and “measured”. This was promoted as a moral stance of defending jobs and the economy against the dangerous proposals of environmentalists. Importantly, this discourse was furthered by politicians, who participated enthusiastically in the othering of environmental actors and their concerns.

Building on the argument of Australia’s small comparative contribution to a global problem, the industry discourse of a “measured response” to climate change presented carbon pricing and other moves towards decarbonization as a threat to national competitiveness. As the Minerals Council CEO argued during the 2011 campaign against carbon pricing:

“As a nation, we should be having a debate about whether exposing Australia’s export industries to the highest carbon costs in the world, ahead of their global competitors, is a sensible economic reform...the debate should be about global solutions to climate change and a measured transition to a low carbon economy that does not sacrifice jobs, our international competitiveness and standard of living” [53].

Localising such a discourse, the industry argued carbon pricing would result in the closure of mines and job losses. For instance, the industry’s 2009 public relations campaign against carbon pricing was relentless in stressing the threat to investment and employment. Entitled “Cut emissions, not jobs”, the campaign used advertisements and opinion pieces in print, radio and TV media targeted at regional coal-mining areas to drive home the threat that meeting the demands of environmentalists would have on local jobs. Indeed, the industry was remarkably consistent in promoting the message that any form of government policy to address climate change needed to be incremental and

restrained in order not to upset the country’s exports of coal and gas. Speaking in the lead-up to the most recent federal election in 2019, the CEO of the Minerals Council again pushed for moderation: “a measured response is critical to reducing greenhouse gas emissions in a way which does not damage the economy, destroy jobs and hurt Australian businesses and families” [54]. This discourse was replicated by the country’s political leaders who emphasised a minimal approach to emissions mitigation, with the current Prime Minister arguing that: “It’s important to have a balance in your emissions reductions policies...our Government is taking, meaningful, practical, sensible, responsible action on climate change without damaging our economy or your family budget” [55].

Despite growing criticism from financial and market analysts that the rapidly declining cost of renewable energy technologies was undercutting the economic viability of fossil fuel energy, the industry continued to promote a “business as usual” framing in which the future viability of coal mining was assured, pointing to continued demand for coal-fired power in Asian markets. As the heads of the country’s two major fossil fuel associations declared in an op-ed in the national newspaper.

“Coal is still the most abundant, most economic and the most reliable means of delivering access to energy and supporting a rise in living standards in many developing economies...There will be plenty of growth in gas and renewables. But coal will grow as well. It will grow because it is low cost, abundant and versatile” [56].

Reinforcing the industry message, Prime Minister Turnbull in 2017 argued that coal would be central to the world’s energy needs “for a very, very long time” [57], a position further reinforced by the industry: “we don’t see a transition out of coal in the short, medium or even the longer term at this stage” [58]. Thus, the fossil fuel sector’s discursive response to environmental and international criticism sought to frame climate change as an important concern requiring the future reduction of carbon emissions but that “economic reality” required this to be limited in the present and that Australia should certainly not lead such an initiative; an example of what has been termed more generally as “predatory delay” [59].

The industry’s “measured” approach also contrasted the industry from what were presented as the “radical” agendas of environmentalists. For instance, campaigns by environmental NGOs to disrupt the opening of new coal mines were presented by industry and government as not only a threat to the collective good of economic prosperity but also to law and order and democracy, with the CEO of the Minerals Council arguing that: “war against coal and fossil fuels risks walking a more radical path with its warriors feeling no longer bound by the normal rules of a civilised, democratic society” and that “Anti-development activists are attempting to bludgeon society with a singular value-set that has the capacity to transform our world in ways that most of us would not endorse” [60]. Here, the fossil fuel industry sought to emphasise its role as the calm and rational actor in the policy debate over climate and energy. As the CEO of the NSW Minerals Council declared having watched footage of climate activist Greta Thunberg’s powerful speech to the United Nations:

“To see that footage that you showed earlier of that young lady [Greta Thunberg] it is very concerning! To see the level of emotion, the lack of logic of the arguments and the platform and the audience as well. Let’s hope that in the months ahead, we see a far more logical approach to these issues” [61].

This “othering” of environmental criticism was further amplified by politicians who criticised environmental concerns as marginal to the interests of “quiet Australians” and “the ravings of some pure, enlightened and woke capital city greenies” [62].

Indeed, this is a strategy which has appealed to both of the major parties in Australia, which often adopted the industry discourse, tying fossil fuel expansion to national economic development, further strengthening the “historic bloc” and reinforcing the defence of the industry against environmental critique [63]. Political rhetoric made explicit the implication that reducing fossil fuel expansion would affect

the funding of community services, epitomised in the 2012 declaration by the Premier of the state of Queensland that, “We are in the coal business! If you want decent hospitals, schools and police on the beat we all need to understand that” [64]. Thus, politicians have continued to emphasise a strong “jobs and growth” message in favour of coal and gas expansion. In this way, the concerns of environmentalists are pitted against a “sensible” approach to climate change – in which the fossil fuel industry continues indefinitely.

#### 5.4. Innovation and “solutions”

The fourth discourse underlying the reassertion of fossil fuel hegemony has been to claim that the industry itself has the innovative capacity to provide “solutions” to climate change. In this discourse, fossil fuel companies and their associations argued paradoxically that continued growth of the industry was the best way to reduce global carbon emissions. This discourse rested on three principle themes: “clean coal”, innovation, and alleviating global energy poverty.

The rhetoric of “clean coal” has been evident in Australian politics from at least the early 1990s through industry and political characterisations of Australian coal as “cleaner” and more energy efficient than its export rivals in other countries. As the head of the coal industry association claimed in 2015 “Australian coal, which by virtue of its higher energy content, produces electricity with 10–20 per cent lower CO<sub>2</sub> emissions than product from other exporting nations” [65]. While this claim was rarely tested, the rhetoric of “clean coal” persisted in the political discourse and came to be incorporated with further claims that emerging markets were embracing new, more efficient coal-fired energy production which would help to reduce global carbon emissions. The rhetoric was again picked up by the Australian Government, keen to support the coal industry and deflect growing criticism of the lack of a coherent climate policy. As Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull declared in 2017:

“We are the biggest coal exporter in the world. If any country has a vested interest in demonstrating that clean coal and cleaner coal with new technologies can make a big contribution to our energy mix and at the same time reduce our emissions in net terms – it’s us” [57].

Indeed, the industry had been down this path before, having earlier promoted carbon capture and storage (CCS) as a silver bullet in mitigating carbon emissions while maintaining coal-fired power generation. During its initial campaigning against carbon pricing under a Labor Government in 2009, the ACA’s NewGenCoal public relations campaign emphasized how the industry was investing significant sums into research and development of CCS technologies.

“Worldwide, demand for energy is growing rapidly and coal will remain a major source. That’s why our industry is investing in carbon capture and storage, with many active projects, to reduce our emissions. It’s a practical solution, and alongside renewables, energy efficiencies, and your actions and new ideas – it can make a real difference” [42].

However, despite a billion dollars of government and levy funding over the ensuing decade, no commercial-scale project using the technology eventuated and the largest experimental plant was later axed at a cost of \$200 million [66]. Despite this, the rhetoric of “clean coal” continued as a staple discourse of the industry and allied politicians in defending the continued expansion of coal extraction and export.

This rhetoric of innovation also constituted a moral argument that linked the fossil fuel sector to the alleviation of global “energy poverty”. By providing electricity to populations in developing countries, the industry claimed that it was improving health, education and living standards. This “energy poverty” discourse had in fact been developed as part of a sophisticated public relations campaign by US advertising giant Burson-Marsteller for the coal company Peabody Energy. Entitled “Advanced Energy for Life”, this campaign claimed that “energy poverty is the world’s number one human and environmental crisis” and included images of children from different parts of the world in impoverished conditions against the tagline “Let’s Brighten the Many

Faces of Energy Poverty” [67]. Australia was a key location for the launch of the public relations campaign in 2014 which was soon promoted not only by coal companies and their associations but also by politicians keen to endorse the coal industry [68]. This was epitomised by the then Australian Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, symbolically opening a new coal mine in 2014 and declaring to the assembled media that “coal is good for humanity” [69]. Echoing the industry’s moral claims, Abbott went on to argue that:

“Coal is the foundation of the way we live because you can’t have a modern lifestyle without energy, you can’t have a modern economy without energy. So if we are serious about raising people’s living standards in less developed countries, if we are serious about maintaining and improving living standards in countries like Australia, we have to be serious about making the best use of coal” [70].

Building on these claims, fossil fuel companies argued that increasing exports of Australian coal and gas were offsetting the use of more polluting energy sources in developing countries with growing populations. In particular, the rapid expansion of gas extraction and export (with Australia now the largest global exporter of liquified natural gas), was promoted by the industry as a major solution to global emissions mitigation [71]. Despite dramatically increasing Australia’s domestic carbon emissions, industry leaders promoted further expansion in gas extraction as “the best thing we can do to reduce global emissions by displacing coal and dirty fuels in Asia” [72]: 5]. This “transition fuel” argument was echoed by government ministers keen to talk up the gas industry’s growth, with the Energy Minister replicating the industry talking points: “LNG exports are important because they’re actually being sold up into Asia, to replace coal. That’s resulting in significant reductions in global emissions” [73].

Through these claims the fossil fuel sector and its political allies sought to defuse the growing critique that climate change was not only an economic and social problem but also a moral and ethical one. Pushing back against environmental activists, the “energy poverty” discourse sought to reframe the industry as a concerned corporate citizen and moral leader engaged in a humanitarian project of poverty alleviation and economic development. This rhetoric built upon earlier economic and technological framings, to again promote the industry as socially worthy and exercising moral and intellectual leadership in a context of heightened political critique.

## 6. Discussion

Despite growing public concern over climate change, the Australian fossil fuel sector has maintained a firm hold over political decision-making and succeeded in delaying any meaningful attempts at emissions regulation and decarbonization. While a range of practices underlie this process of political influence including lobbying, network building, revolving doors appointments and political donations [16], in this article we have focused on explicit public relations and campaigning activities and sought to identify the core discourses the industry has used to claim leadership over responding to climate change while concurrently undermining more ambitious legislative responses. This has involved a process of four inter-linked discourses which have: first, acknowledged the issue of climate change; second, emphasised the essential economic contribution of the fossil fuel industry; third, advocated for a minimal incremental approach to emissions mitigation; and fourth, promoted the industry’s investment in “solutions” providing a technical claim for further fossil fuel expansion.

These discourses served several functions in the construction and maintenance of hegemony. As forms of propaganda, they emphasised an assumed common interest between the industry, government and citizens. This was highlighted through both appeals to the national economic interest (e.g. mining royalties, taxes, employment and economic growth), as well as more localised contributions (e.g. jobs and regional economic development, corporate welfare and funding of local services). This synchronising of national and local interests was also

expanded into a broader appeal to a common identity, in which resource extraction was presented as central to national identity and character.

Our analysis suggests significant commonality between the rhetoric of the industry and that of politicians which has functioned to maintain the industry's hegemonic position. Indeed, conservative politicians have often provided a more extreme articulation of the defence of fossil fuels (and denial of human-induced climate change) than the coal and gas companies and their industry associations. This was perhaps most ably demonstrated, when in an almost vaudevillian performance in the Australian Parliament in February 2017, the Treasurer (and later to become Prime Minister), Scott Morrison stood up and waved a lump of coal at the Opposition and proclaimed: "This is coal! Don't be afraid! Don't be scared!" [74]. The argument that fossil fuels are the bedrock of national wealth, energy security and identity appears fundamentally engrained in the country's political psyche and demonstrates an assumed world-view which is defended vociferously by the nation's corporate and political elite.

By contrast, environmental critique was represented as not only threatening interests through its "radical" proposals but also inconsistent with general public attitudes. The fossil fuel industry discourses position the industry as morally superior; as having a shared interest in national prosperity and concern for the common good, as opposed to environmentalists who pose a risk to people's well-being and lifestyles. The hegemony excluded forces for change by suggesting that environmental activists were opposed to the national interest and by establishing an equivalence between any actor or group challenging the hegemony as radicals lacking a logical approach to the situation. Reinforcing antagonism within the debate allowed the fossil fuel industry to link itself with what it characterised as "responsible" climate action. As such, by providing a "measured response" in the national interest, the fossil fuel industry emphasised its authority and legitimacy within the political debate over climate change and reproduced its traditional hegemony.

Beyond the synchronisation of interests with an apparent concern for climate change and emphasis of difference with environmentalists, the fossil fuel sector (and allied political discourse) also provided broader moral appeals of justification and worthiness, particularly in highlighting how the industry was taking on leadership in finding technical solutions and benefits for a global problem. One such concern is reflected in industry rhetoric about energy poverty. Previous studies on climate policy in Australia have noted the differentiation between energy and climate policy as one means by which the latter has been muted [35]. We further this observation to suggest that indeed, energy policy – in particular the importance of coal in providing cheap electricity – has been discursively situated within climate policy by both industry and governments as a means of drawing a chain of equivalence with the public.

International research has also shown how similar appeals to economic prosperity and national identity have been used by fossil fuel industries to reassert their hegemonic position. For instance, Stegemann and Ossewaarde [75] have observed attempts by the nuclear and fossil fuel industries to incorporate similar forms of "innovation" and solutions within the green growth discourse in Europe. We add to this literature by showing not only how the hegemonic bloc works to defend the industry, but how by imbuing the discourse with the notion that the industry is acting as a leader on climate change, it is extending its position while at the same time pushing back against and demonising those who would seek stronger, legislative responses.

By identifying the ways in which these discourses operate together, we show how the industry has attempted to position itself as a moral actor, taking a reasonable approach to climate change. Similar mechanisms have been observed elsewhere; in Canada and the US, the oil industry has successfully embedded the idea that it is crucial to economic prosperity [37,76]. Here, we argue that not only has the industry attempted to create a "discursive lock-in" as to how to respond to climate change, but that this is pushed further by politicians who have

participated in creating a power bloc alongside industry for their own benefit. Thus, while Kuteleva and Leifso [37] suggest that in Canada, politicians are "hostages" of the discourse, in our case, politicians have been more than willing to build an equivalence of interests and further the fossil fuel industry's claims.

While our article details the discourses evident in the public statements of the fossil fuel industry and aligned politicians, the corporate political activity underpinning the continued dominance of fossil energy involves a much broader range of practices. These extend into the less visible worlds of lobbying, professional networks, revolving doors appointments, campaign contributions and other forms of political influence which are much harder to research and document. While some journalistic accounts now detail some of these practices [see for e.g. 46], academic research is also needed in better theorising the maintenance of fossil fuel hegemony beyond its more obvious public manifestations.

## 7. Conclusion

We conclude this article with a potentially more positive coda. Despite the significant resources that the Australian fossil fuel sector has devoted to public relations and political campaigning over the last decade, recent public opinion polling suggests significant decline in public goodwill towards the industry. Particularly revealing in this respect has been private opinion polling conducted by the mining industry which found that traditional messaging regarding the industry's economic importance was increasingly discounted against rising concerns over environmental destruction and climate change [77]. Noting that the industry's social licence was now endangered, the polling research identified "strong negative perceptions of open-cut coal mining" [[78]: 19], a view that established industry narratives were failing to counter. While only a single study, when viewed in combination with growing public concern over climate change, the rise of mass climate protest movements around the world, and the recent election of a new US President with an explicit focus on climate action, we may well be witnessing the beginnings of a serious threat or even "dislocation" [27: 302] to the established fossil fuel hegemony that dominates global political economy [79,80]. Indeed, as research from Germany – which is much further along the transition debate – suggests, the industry may face serious dilemmas if it is not able to begin the transformation to a decarbonised economy imminently [81,82]. As the physical realities of a world unravelling under climate disruption become more obvious, the fossil fuel industry will need to develop new public relations discourses if it is to continue delaying the dramatic decarbonization needed to avoid a catastrophic climate future.

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Acknowledgement

### Funding

The authors gratefully acknowledge that funding for this research was provided by the Australian Research Council, DP180102064.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.erss.2021.102094>.

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