

The rise of the 'greenhouse mafia' in Australia
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Introduction

Guy Pearse was an advisor to former Liberal Environment Minister, Robert Hill. In 2005, he completed a PhD entitled, *The business response to climate change: case studies of Australian interest groups*, for which he interviewed 56 elite representatives from seven different business groups having a close interest in climate change policy. His work was remarkable for the openness with which his respondents supplied information on their behaviour in influencing Howard Government climate change policy, and Pearse discovered that his respondents used the term, greenhouse mafia, to describe themselves. (Pearse, 2005). His work resulted in a Four Corners program in February 2006, a book, *High and Dry: John Howard, climate change and the selling of Australia's future*, published in 2007, and a Quarterly Essay, *Quarry Vision: Coal, Climate Change and the End of the Resources Boom*, published in 2009 (Pearse, 2007, Pearse, 2009, ABC, 2006).

In minute detail, Pearse documented the tactics of the carbon lobby which saw it 'dominate almost every greenhouse-related consultative committee established by the federal government and its agencies' (Pearse, 2009, p. 41), so that the lobby was able to dictate Australian greenhouse policy for nearly two decades. His Quarterly Essay extended his argument to show how the same network of influence continues under the Rudd Government and he extended his argument with an analysis of Australian policy on coal and the carbon industry. He described, sometimes in entertaining, satirical detail, how carbon lobbyists move between industry and government and often have close links with those they are lobbying. Brief extracts from one long description will suffice.

When Woodside's Labor-leaning lobbyist rang, it was the former general secretary of the Labor Party.....Once when the head of the Australian Coal Association called , it was an ex-prime ministerial advisor on the line; now it's Australia's former ambassador for the environment, as is the case when the Alcoa Foundation rings today.....Now when the BHP Billiton external-affairs boss rings, it's a former adviser to two prime ministers and one premier on the line, not to mention an ex-national secretary of the ALP.....For a long time, if Rio's chief technologist called the federal government's chief scientist to spruik "clean coal" technology, he would have been talking to himself! (Pearse, 2009, p. 39-40).

Pearse indicated briefly that the carbon lobby began 'in the early 1990s', but he did not explore just what factors caused the early 1990s to give rise to action by the

carbon intensive industries, particularly the mining and coal industries, except to say that climate change had 'emerged as an issue' (Pearse, 2009, p. 31). I will show that there was a response to climate change emerging as an issue, but that there were also other political events that caused the mining and coal industries to begin organising.

The importance of environment in public policy under Hawke and Richardson in the 1980s has been well documented (Hawke, 1994, Toyne and Balderstone, 2003, Toyne, 1994, Richardson, 1994). Recognising how significant environmental issues became in the late 1980s is important in understanding the period. Toyne and Balderstone were justified in lauding the achievements of the Hawke Government, which 'can lay claim to achieving more to protect the environment than any national government before or since' (Toyne and Balderstone, 2003, p. 170), and they list the following eleven achievements,

- stopped the damming of the Franklin River;
- expanded enormously the Kakadu National Park, adding Stages 2 and 3 (and getting the World Heritage Area extended), and blocked the proposed Coronation Hill mine;
- blocked international moves to allow mining in Antarctica;
- protected the wet tropic rainforests of North Queensland by nominating them to the World Heritage List;
- handed back ownership of Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park to its traditional owners;
- introduced Landcare, the first real attempt to deal with Australia's massive land degradation problems in a comprehensive way, and the One Billion Trees program – both part of the country's first prime ministerial environment statement, *Our Country, Our Future*;
- secured the protection of the Lemonthyme Forests in Tasmania, and tens of thousands of hectares of other icon forests around Australia;
- added a vast area to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park;
- stopped the proposed Wesley Vale Pulp Mill in Tasmania;
- added other important parts of Australia to the World Heritage List, such as Shark Bay in Western Australia, Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park and the Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves (around the escarpment of north-eastern New South Wales); and
- established the ecologically sustainable development (ESD) process, with a discussion paper, and then nine working groups being set up to consider the implementation of ESD principles in sectors of Australia's economy with major impacts on the environment. This was particularly remarkable, pre-dating as it did the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro by several years (Toyne and Balderstone 2003, p. 170).

Throughout the 1980s, environmental awareness grew significantly reaching its height in 1990. For large numbers of people, the Franklin campaign in the early 1980s was their introduction to environmental concern and Hawke's support for stopping the dam was a contributing factor to his record landslide in 1983. However,

it was in the period from 1987 to 1990, when Graham Richardson was Environment Minister, that most of the eleven gains listed above were achieved. On the state level, 1987 also saw the election of Bob Brown's 'Green Independents' in Tasmania when independents first gained the balance of power in any Australian lower house. These early Greens, before there was a formal Party, negotiated an Accord with Labor on many environmental issues, and put Labor into government in that state. A sense of the feeling of the time can be gained from *The Bulletin* in June 1989 which had a cover announcing, '*The Greening of Australia*' (Bulletin, 1989). Its main article led with the claim that, 'The environment is overtaking the economy as the issue that makes and breaks governments in Australia' (O'Reilly et al., 1989). It was a heady period for those concerned about the environment, as it seemed outwardly that a significant environmental perspective had been embraced by the people and governments.

Climate Change Policy in 1980s.

There were a number of factors that gave rise to the greenhouse mafia. However, the major one that must be noted first was a reaction to Hawke Government and Coalition policies on climate change, the role of the key environmental organisations in influencing these policies, and the extent to which public opinion was developing on this issue. This climate change history has not been recorded as prominently as the environmental gains of the 1980s. Climate change seems to have been obliterated from the political history of the period. As recently as Ryan and Bramston's 2003 retrospective analysis of the Hawke years, Toyne and Balderstone did not mention climate change in their list of eleven achievements of the Hawke Government (Toyne and Balderstone, 2003). This may be that it was only one of many issues addressed, but its omission is more likely because any achievements gained were negated soon after Hawke lost office and the authors were focussing on lasting achievements. In the wider documentation of the period, it may also be something of a testament to the effectiveness of the greenhouse mafia that history has written out climate change. Whatever the reason, significant action on climate change during the 1980s has been a blind spot in subsequent political and environmental analysis.

There were a number of developments during the 1980s which informed the knowledge of scientists and environmentalists and which contributed to international policy debates. In 1979 the first World Climate Conference in Geneva expressed concern over the link between greenhouse gases and climate change. In 1980, the Australian Academy of Science held a conference to review twenty years of measurements showing increasing carbon dioxide levels and by then there was an understanding that the greenhouse effect would result in climate change. However, scientists were still cautious about making categorical statements based on models that were being developed, despite rising trends in the CO₂ readings, and at first the issue was known mainly in scientific and environment circles. The first major international statement on the issue was in 1985 at Villach in Austria, when a UN

conference of scientists from twenty nine countries assessed the growing evidence and released a statement calling for international government action to address the threat. However, 1988 is one of the most important dates in the history of climate change, because it was when an international conference in Toronto actually set targets, calling for a 20% reduction of CO₂ emissions worldwide by the year 2005, with the brunt of this to be borne by developed countries and off a base of 1988 levels. These so-called 'Toronto targets' became important benchmarks worldwide.

It is remarkable that scientists were sufficiently confident to call for these targets over twenty years ago. In all the climate science debates, the discourse and the caution of climate change scientists tends to reflect their discipline and their use of scientific method, which treats propositions as hypothesis until proven otherwise, no matter how small the likelihood of other proof arising. In contrast, the discourse of politics approaches issues and approaches risk in a much less rigorous manner. A more than fifty per cent likelihood of an event is generally enough to generate political interest. The conjunction of these two different types of discourse has often resulted in scientific caution being used to justify political caution and political inaction. However, twenty years ago the scientific and political discourses were aligned in setting international targets for action.

Here in Australia, the CSIRO was recognised as being at the forefront of international research and they formed a partnership with the Commission for the Future to conduct two conferences in 1987 and 1988. The published papers from the first conference in 1987 are evidence of the quality and cutting edge work that was being done by Australian scientists at the time (Pearman, 1988). The Commission for the Future was a Government instrumentality established by Science Minister Barry Jones in 1985 as a forum for wider exploration of future scientific, social and economic issues outside the constraints of short-term government planning. At the 1988 Conference organised by the Commission, Jones was present as Science Minister responsible for the Commission, and Graham Richardson opened the conference in his capacity as Environment Minister. This second conference in 1988 was actually a series of conferences involving 8,000 people and linked by video for a keynote address. It continued as 'a network of conferences in all the major regional centres: the State capital cities plus Canberra, Darwin and Cairns'. Ian Lowe claims that, 'The network of conferences succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of the organisers' (Lowe, 1989, p. 5).

This second conference also publicised climate change very widely for the first time. with a number of current affairs television programs taking up the issue and The Age doing a four page lift-out in association with the Commission. There were also state and local government responses, as Ian Lowe describes,

State governments established working parties or inter-departmental committees to explore the local implications, and the Brisbane City Council

showed the way to local authorities by commissioning consultants to write a report on the issues affecting the city (Lowe, 1989, p. 6)

Professor Ian Lowe was acting Director of the Commission for the Future at the time and did much to assist in communicating the issue to the public, including numerous public speaking engagements and the publication of a book, *Living in the Greenhouse*. The book was aimed at a generalist audience, but it also drew together a vast amount of data, not just on climate science, but also on how Australia could change its CO₂ output with minimum effect on lifestyle (Lowe, 1989).

Environment Minister Graham Richardson responded in a context of international calls for action by scientists and the UN, Australian scientists playing a leading role, environmental action being rated a high priority by opinion polls and the need for positive action on climate change being taken up by the Coalition. In 1989, he took a submission to Cabinet that proposed reducing greenhouse emissions by 20% of 1988 levels by 2005 – the so-called Toronto Targets, but it was rejected by the Economic and Resource Ministers (personal communication). The country was experiencing economic difficulties and the caution of the Ministers is probably not surprising. However, 1989 did see a greenhouse statement by the Prime Minister which provided funding for research. Later in the year, in the lead up to a Federal election, a major environment statement, *Our Country, Our Future*, covered many traditional 'green' issues, but gave prominence to climate change. It supported international action, promised to look for ways to reduce carbon dioxide emissions, including co-operating with the states on transport use and it provided \$350,000 for public awareness and education (Hawke, 1989).

Soon after, the Hawke Cabinet did agree to a climate change submission similar to that sponsored by Richardson, but it was in the context of an inducement to the environment movement to remain in negotiations known as the Ecologically Sustainable Development (ESD) process. The environment movement was intending to withdraw from the process after the resource industries were granted significant changes, and to encourage them to stay the Government proposed the Toronto targets on greenhouse emissions for a 20% reduction of CO₂ emissions by the year 2005. When the climate change proposal finally came to Cabinet, it was after the 1990 election, it was Minister Ros Kelly who introduced it and it was passed with a proviso that reduction would not be at the expense of the economy. With the succession of Keating to the position of Prime Minister the issue was conveniently ignored and allowed to lapse.

The last decade of the Howard Government has obliterated the memory of the progressive Liberal Party policies on the environment and climate change during the late 1980s. Under Shadow Environment Minister Chris Publick, the Coalition had progressive environmental policies on a number of issues. Publick says that in relation to Labor,

We were at one with them on CFC control and CFC emissions. We were ahead of them on the Antarctic. I, in fact, announced that we would oppose the signing of the Antarctic Minerals Treaty at a time when Richardson was advocating that we should sign the treaty. It was our coming out and saying we would sign the treaty, that caused them to go back and revise their position that they would sign the Treaty. We were ahead of them on whaling issues - that was a legacy of Fraser's long involvement (Puplick, 2008).

Importantly, for the 1990 election he claims, 'We were ahead of the Labor Party on global warming issues' (personal communication, 2007). So, by the 1990 election, there was bipartisan interest in climate change as an issue. Not only that, environment ranked only second to the economy as a key issue at the 1990 election.

So, the significant influence of the environment movement on both Government policy and public opinion, a Cabinet decision on greenhouse emissions and strong Coalition policies promising action on climate change were key political motivating forces for the greenhouse mafia or carbon lobby.

The Coronation Hill Decision

However, there was a specific Cabinet decision that appears to have resonated throughout the whole mining sector and that is likely to have been a key motivating factor for the formation of the greenhouse mafia. The decision to reject a gold mine at Coronation Hill in Kakadu elicited a vigorous response from the whole mining sector. The decision has been discussed previously in the context of Hawke's loss of the leadership and the demise of environment from public policy debates, but, in the light of Pearse's work, Coronation Hill now takes on a new significance.

Toyne discussed the decision in terms of a turning point in support for environmental decisions by the Labor Government and as contributed to the ending of Hawke's Prime Ministership.

This decision marked a watershed in the strong support there for the environment. It was also another nail in Bob Hawke's coffin, and he paid dearly for forcing through the decision on Coronation Hill, losing much Cabinet and Caucus support as a result....The ongoing leadership struggle was fuelled by the result on Coronation Hill (Toyne, 1994, p. 148-149).

Paul Kelly also places the decision in a similar context (Kelly, 1994) and in Ryan and Bramston's review of the Hawke years, it is described by Toyne and Balderstone as 'an unfortunate end to a glorious period of environmental action' (Toyne and Balderstone, 2003, p. 179).

Pearse has confirmed that he recalls his interviewees making reference to Coronation Hill on a number of occasions (personal communication 2009). His work in documenting the role of the greenhouse mafia now suggests that we should re-evaluate the enormous backlash by the mining industry that occurred at the time as

having other implications than Hawke's demise. It appears likely that the mining industry backlash led to longer term proactive organising on the part of the industry and may have contributed to the formation of the greenhouse mafia. It would also explain why the greenhouse lobby in Australia has been led by the whole mining industry and its peak body, not by the coal or petroleum industry alone, as is mostly the case in other countries.

The mining industry response to the Coronation Hill issue was neither measured or restrained. They 'saw the decision as a test case' (Toyne, 1994, p. 145). Because of the Aboriginal opposition to the proposal, Managing Director of Western Mining Corporation, Hugh Morgan, declared Prime Minister Hawke had become a 'neo-pagan' (Australian, 1991). The Australian Mining Industry Council (AMIC) and various mining leaders warned that the decision would result in mineral investors in Australia and elsewhere taking their investment dollars elsewhere (SMH, 1991, FinancialReview, 1991). 'Media commentators and business spokesman savaged the government' over the decision, AMIC claimed a reduction in the exploration zone of 98 per cent and depicted the decision as total capitulation to the conservation movement (Kelly, 1994, p. 539). This was despite the deciding factors for the decision being based on Aboriginal concerns, not environmental. Hawke and Sir Arvi Parvo, whose friendship was well known, had an exchange in which Parvo said, 'I can't believe anything the government says anymore' and Hawke responded saying that Parvo 'can't be trusted in terms of the relationship between the government and BHP' (Kelly, 1994, p. 539-540). The bitterness of the mining industry as a result of the Coronation Hill decision was deep seated.

The causes for the dramatic change in the status of environment issues in the years following Coronation Hill is not doubt multi-faceted. However, the degree and swiftness of the change in the status of environmental issues by the time of the 1993 election is hard to explain given the high approval ratings in 1990. Kelly quotes Richardson as claiming that, 'The Kakadu decision, even after a month of bucketing by the journalists and editors in virtually every paper still has a 75 per cent approval rating (Kelly, 1994, p. 541). Importantly, at the 1990 election, the environment ranked only second to the economy as the key issue for that election (Lohrey, 2002, p. 33), which was a continuation of its high regard during the previous three years of Richardson's Ministry. The Coronation Hill decision was also seen as contributing to Labor's success at the 1990 election because it persuaded the ACF and Wilderness Society to campaign in marginal seats supporting a second preferential vote for Labor – a tactic that is credited with winning the election for Labor (Kelly, 1994).

Yet, three years later at the next election, 'environment was largely absent from the campaign agenda' (Economou, 1996, p. 19). There has been insufficient analysis of why this dramatic change took place. I have attempted to draw together many factors for an essay in *The Hawke Legacy*, a new attempt at assessment of the period (Staples, 2009). Some authors have focussed on the tactics of the environment movement (Doyle, 2000, Jensen-Lee, 2001), others have emphasised

the influence of key institutional actors such as Hawke and Keating (Economou, 1996, Toyne and Balderstone, 2003, Toyne, 1994). A new factor must now be added to the equation. If Pearse is correct that, 'In the early 1990s the Australian carbon lobby got busy, fast (Pearse, 2009, p. 31), then their efforts may have already begun to take effect by the 1993 election. The continuing leadership by the mining industry peak body in promoting opposition to climate change action, rather than the coal and petroleum industries providing leadership, is also a strange anomaly that may be due to the beginning of the carbon lobby being linked to the mining industry's response to the Coronation Hill decision.

Factors Creating a Fertile Environment for the Carbon Lobby

There were also a number of factors that did not cause the carbon lobby to organise, but that created a fertile environment in which they could flourish. First amongst these was the change of Prime Minister from Hawke to Paul Keating and the demise of environment as a key issue. From taking power in 1992, Keating actively tried to minimise Commonwealth involvement in environment issues. Pro-active, progressive environmental action was no longer on the agenda. That perspective was demonstrated by the Keating Government abolishing Commonwealth woodchip export controls and divesting itself of responsibility for forestry issues, and in its failure to follow through with the recommendations of the Ecological Sustainability Process set in train under Hawke (Economou, 1996). I have previously recorded Keating's comment to Ministerial advisers during the 1993 election when he was reported to have said, 'This, this and this are the priority issues ... and the environment will NOT be one of the priority issues in this election' (Lambert, 2008).

On the question of climate change, Keating was called to account very soon after he became Prime Minister. The huge Rio Earth Summit on environmental sustainability was held in June 1992. It was a widely-publicised, international event attended not just by an unprecedented number of governments, but by 2,400 representatives of non-government organisations and 17,000 individuals having UN consultative status at a parallel Global Forum. The governments attending produced action on environment and development, biological diversity and forest principles and set the agenda for much of the UN's work in the following decades. It also saw the ratification of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which later evolved into the Kyoto protocol. The high profile of this international Summit can be seen in the fact that one hundred and seventy two governments participated, and one hundred and eight heads of state or heads of government attended, including US President George Bush senior. However, despite urging from the Australian environment movement and others attending, Australia's Prime Minister Keating chose not to participate.

A number of resource and finance Ministers who had been antagonistic to environmental issues, but whose views were not able to dominate under Hawke, were able to exert more influence once Keating became Prime Minister. Paul Kelly

identified these Ministers as Walsh, Dawkins, Kerin and Button. These Ministers had reluctantly agreed to a number of Hawke Government environmental initiatives such as Shelbourne Bay, supporting the dissenting report of the Helsham Inquiry into Tasmanian forestry and Coronation Hill. Supporting the dissenting report on Tasmanian forestry resulted in the longest Cabinet discussion ever, of fourteen hours (Richardson, 2008), and Coronation Hill saw Kerin take the unprecedented step of breaking Cabinet solidarity and publicly criticising the decision (SMH, 1989). Kelly describes these Ministers after the Coronation Hill decision as Walsh retiring 'beaten and sick', Button 'retreating into his shell', and Dawkins 'maintaining his rage against Hawke' (Kelly, 1994, p. 539). Subsequent years have seen Peter Walsh, become President of the Lavoisier Group, which was formed in 2000 specifically to deny the existence of climate change and oppose any government initiatives. It is described by Pearse as the extreme end of the denial spectrum in Australia and he claims Walsh to be 'the spiritual leader of today's greenhouse mafia' (Pearse, 2007, p. 246). Gary Johns, although holding a number of only minor Ministerial positions in the Keating Government, went on to play a key role in the conservative think tank, the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA), setting up its NGO Watch website that attacked the non-government sector, while other parts of the IPA's website denied climate change and attacked environmentalism. Although these two players from the early 1990s are representative of the extreme end of Labor Party support for the carbon lobby, the resentment of the resource and finance Ministers who were overruled on environmental Cabinet decisions under Hawke contributed to the Keating Government being closed to environmental initiatives – a situation creating a desirable environment from the point of view of the carbon lobby.

Conclusion

The rise of the greenhouse mafia or carbon lobby in the early 1990s can be seen as a reaction to the strength and influence of the environment as an issue under Prime Minister Hawke. In particular, the Hawke Government initiatives on climate change, which included setting strong targets to limit emissions must have set alarm bells ringing in the carbon intensive industries, particularly coal and petroleum. However, I have proposed that the decision to reject the development of a gold mine at Coronation Hill by the Hawke Government in 1989 may have been a key factor motivating on top of the climate change initiatives. Previous analysis of this Cabinet decision has focussed on its relevance in contributing to Hawke's loss of the Prime Ministership, because it alienated many Ministers who were already frustrated by earlier Cabinet decisions. Analysis has also focussed on the decision as a turning point in the influence of the environment movement on government policy. However, there was a massive reaction to the decision by the mining industry and Pearse has recalled that a number of the greenhouse mafia whom he interviewed for *High and Dry* made reference to the decision. It is most probable that the Coronation Hill decision was a key motivating factor why the carbon lobby 'got busy, fast' in the early 1990s. It is also a possible explanation of why leadership in opposing climate

change initiatives has been taken by the mining industry peak body, rather than simply by the coal and petroleum industries. In assessing the demise of support for environmental protection and progressive initiatives, two relevant factors are the lack of interest in environmental issues, including climate change, by Keating, and the frustration of a number of the resource and finance Ministers towards Hawke Government environmental initiatives. Neither factor necessarily led to the creation of the carbon lobby, but they created a non-threatening environment for the carbon lobby or greenhouse mafia to take root in the Australian polity.

The history of Hawke Government climate change initiatives has been ignored in assessments of the period. With the issue now dominating much of public policy debate, it is time that those initiatives were brought back into currency. It is also timely, to reassess the significance of the fallout from the Coronation Hill mining decision and whether it was a key factor in the rise of the greenhouse mafia.

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