

## Democracy and climate change: a story of failure

By David Shearman,  
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It seems that some of the most perceptive brains in society have given up on an effective response to climate change. Stephen Hawking infers that mankind should colonise distant planets. James Lovelock thinks the remnants of humanity will seek refuge on the tropical shores of the Arctic. Scientific data now strongly suggests that physical and biological changes in the planet are increasingly greater than those defined by the modelling in the most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change ([IPCC](#) [1]) report. Despite the steadily rising levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, even countries expressing commitment are having little impact compared to the huge task in hand. Democratic governments continue to approve projects that will make reductions difficult if not impossible.

In an **openDemocracy** article, Andrew Dobson contrasts this environmental inactivity with the speedy response to a recent international financial emergency (see "[A climate of crisis: towards the eco-state](#) [4]", 19 September 2007). If governments can recognise a cyclical financial emergency and in an instant move heaven and earth (and billions of dollars, pounds sterling and euros) to contain it, why can they not do the same in response to a global environmental emergency? His answers embrace institutional, ideological, and interest-laden factors together with the issue of who controls the public argument.

It can be argued that all these factors have a common denominator: the fundamental flaws in liberal democracy. The market economy, now the linchpin of western culture, is fused with liberal democracy, such that each is dependent upon the other for survival. Together they have developed a liberty for the individual that has environmentally destructive consequences. The liberty to negate these consequences is constrained [5].

This article discusses some of the psychological aspects of this situation and introduces the idea of authoritarian action led by experts to address the ecological emergency.

### The short-term fix

In psychological terms, a financial emergency immediately threatens self and the understood and valued way of life. This carries more danger to self than the future and ill-understood threat of ecological crisis. Human psychological mechanisms profoundly influence the primacy of self-preservation and the need to procreate that determines our quest for goods, status, and power. Humanity's inability to think long term is related to

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His most recent book (co-written with Joseph Wayne Smith) is [The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy](#) [3], (Praeger, 2007)

**openDemocracy** writers debate the [politics of climate change](#) [6]:

Stephan Harrison, "[Glaciers](#)

the brain's evolutionary need to adapt to the conditions of a local environment (see EO Wilson, *The Future of Life* [17] [Little, Brown, 2002]). Our ancestors had to think short term with an emotional commitment to the limited space around them and to a limited band of kinsmen. This is the Darwinian priority of short-term gain that bestowed longevity and more offspring upon a cooperative group of relatives and friends. As a result, we ignore any distant possibility not yet requiring examination.

If we imprint these responses upon the cult of liberal democracy as it operates today, it is possible to explain the illogical happenings that have brought us to current governmental responses - or indeed non-responses. An illustration close to home is the responses of the John Howard government in Australia, now facing the challenge of an election campaign [18] - though similar responses are documented in the United States and to a lesser degree in Britain. Two recent detailed studies are used to document the permissive infiltration of government processes by the fossil-fuel industries (see Clive Hamilton, *Scorcher: The Dirty Politics of Climate Change* [19] [Black Inc. Agenda, 2007] and Guy Pearce, *High & Dry: John Howard, climate change and the selling of Australia's future* [20] [Penguin, 2007]).

### **The behavioural block**

The mechanisms used by industry to reinforce its interests are intensive lobbying, financial support for think-tanks and government decision-making bodies, interchange of staff between industry and government bureaucracy and the writing of cabinet papers. In its eleven years of power, the Howard government has been united with industry in believing that the threat [21] to Australia was not from climate change but from possible actions to alleviate [22] it that might harm industry, exports and the rule of government.

During this period, a closely woven network of individuals with the intent of denying climate change [23] and delaying any government responses to it has been in continuous operation. The network involved many government politicians, some members of cabinet, and conservative think-tanks [24] linked financially and ideologically to their counterparts in the US. Clearly, it is doubtful if this could have happened if the government was not ideologically receptive. Government was fervent in denial of climate change, scientists were suppressed, research was terminated and disdain was expressed for expert opinion. The total denial of access to those who could explain the problem contrasted with an open-door policy for fossil-fuel lobbyists.

The functions of the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics [25] (Abare), a government resource, merit particular discussion. This organisation prepares and researches figures for government and industry yet it is supported financially by polluting industries. It prepared the model that underpinned the Howard government's greenhouse study and the

and geopolitics [7]" (27 May 2005)

Saleemul Huq & Camilla Toulmin, "Climate change: from science and economics to human rights [8]" (7 November 2006)

Simon Retallack, "Climate change: the global test [9]" (10 November 2006)

Tom Burke, "Climate change: choosing the tools [10]" (21 December 2006)

John Elkington & Geoff Lye, "Climate change's right and wrong fixes [11]" (2 February 2007)

Dougald Hine, "Climate change: a question of democracy [12]" (2 March 2007)

Andrew Dobson, "A politics of global warming: the social-science resource [13]" (29 March 2007)

Oliver Tickell, "Live Earth's limits [14]" (6 July 2007)

Andrew Dobson, "A climate of crisis: towards the eco-state [15]" (19 September 2007)

Mike Hulme, "Climate change: from issue to magnifier [16]" (19 October 2007)

polluters oversaw this process. Abare produced reports that stressed the dangers of cutting emissions.

On 16 August 2006, John Howard told parliament [26]: "According to Abare, a 50% cut in Australian emissions by 2050 would lead to a 10% fall in GDP, a 20% fall in real wages, a carbon price equivalent to a doubling of petrol prices, and a staggering 600% rise in electricity and gas prices. They are the calculations of the Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics" (see Australia, House of Representatives, "Question without notice", Hansard, 16 August 2006). The report was embellished by John Howard. To give the impression that deep cuts in emissions would mean by 2050 an economy 10% smaller than today and with 20% lower wages, Howard's numbers excluded the words, "compared with business as usual". Despite the fact that the report was prepared to support him, he felt the need to embellish it.

These actions can be analysed in the context of conservational psychology and behavioural change (see O Hernández & MC Monroe, "Thinking About Behavior", in BA Day & MC Monroe, eds., *Environmental Education and Communication for a Sustainable World: A Handbook for International Practitioners* [27] (Academy for Educational Development, 2000). Behaviour change is seen as a gradual process involving several stages. In the pre-contemplation stage the person or group does not know or does not consider adopting ecologically sustainable behavior, such as the acceptance and response to climate change. The contemplation stage sees the person thinking about these issues and considering adopting such behaviours. The person may then progress to preparation for action and then to the action stage.

In Australia, the Howard government has spent eleven years in the pre-contemplative phase, with its kinsmen industries in self-preservation mode and with an unsullied market ideology. In 2007 Howard still showed little acceptance of the effects of climate change. When asked what life would be like in Australia if temperatures around the world rose by 4-6 degrees Celsius, he said. "Well, it would be less comfortable for some than it is now" (see "Howard 'no idea' about climate change [28]", *The Australian*, 6 February 2007). Public opinion has now forced him reluctantly into contemplation and into some action but he has employed actions that still fit within his ideological concerns. Proposals involve "aspirational" targets and clean coal that do not threaten the market ideology. This behavioural change cannot progress further because there is conflict of interest between the understanding of the science and the commitment to an unfettered market that supports political power and material existence.

### **The systemic flaw**

The John Howard [29] government has acted with integrity according to its own value-system. That value-system includes the righteousness of access and policy-making to those who support conservative government and free markets, and the exclusion of those experts who might endanger the system. The corruption of democracy is justified by the cause. Furthermore, the ideological *kraal* has become secure from contaminating thought by the politicisation of the public service which feeds government with what it wants to hear and by the interposition of politically appointed staffers.

This conflict between system and appropriate action is expressed in two statements by Tony Blair:

\* "Making the shift to a sustainable lifestyle is one of the most important challenges for the 21st century. The reality of climate change brings home to us the consequence of not facing up to these challenges" (quoted in Tim Jackson, ed., *The Earthscan Reader on Sustainable Consumption* [30], Earthscan, 2006)

\* "If we were to put forward a solution to climate change, something that would involve drastic cuts in economic growth or standards of living, it would not matter how justified it was, it would simply not be agreed to"

The conflict - the fusion of democracy and market - cannot survive without economic growth, and neither can the politician (see David Shearman, "[Kyoto: One Tiny Step for Humanity](#) [31]", Online Opinion, 4 March 2005). George W Bush after seven years of denial and sabotage of climate science has reluctantly moved forward from the pre-contemplative stage but is constrained [32] by the same paradigm: "We must lead the world to produce fewer greenhouse gas emissions, and we must do it in a way that does not undermine economic growth or prevent nations from delivering greater prosperity for their people."

The big leap forward in behavioural change has to be an acceptance that economic growth in its present form threatens our survival. It is not a simple matter of changing to renewables which will bring an explosion in employment and continuing growth. Climate change is but one of a network of factors destroying the ecological services which support the world's burgeoning population. It is questionable whether the leaders elected through liberal democracy have the ability to understand these complex issues, and indeed the commitment to act upon them.

Plato recognised the problems that would befall democracy. The needs of the populace would not be resisted by those who sought power; power is best exerted by those (experts) who did not seek power.

Clearly expertise is needed in this complex world issue, but how do we get there in the face of "mediocracy"? The first step is to float the issue; and indeed we find that some intellectuals are thinking this way, though cautiously - so as to avoid being labelled as revolutionary.

[Václav Havel](#) [33], former president of the Czech Republic, says: "I don't agree with those whose reaction is to warn against restricting civil freedoms. Were the forecasts of certain climatologists to come true, our freedoms would be tantamount to those of someone hanging from a 20th-storey parapet" (see "Our Moral Footprint", [New York Times](#) [34], 27 September 2007).

[Tim Flannery](#) [35] (in *The Weather Makers: Our changing climate and what it means for life on earth* [36]) contrasts the freedom of humanity with the need for a more directive leadership.

The case for an authoritarianism of experts has been explored with the philosophical conclusion that continuing absolute liberty cannot be preferable to life (see David Shearman & Joseph Wayne Smith, *The Climate Change Challenge and the Failure of Democracy* [37], Praeger, 2007). It may well be non-western states (including [China](#) [38]) will find ways to deliver while the west continues to display its extreme liberty with ineffectual debate and a surrender to powerful interests in its grinding democratic institutions.

[Australia's election: ingredients of change](#) [40]  
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Australia ended eleven and a half years of John Howard's conservative government when Kevin Rudd's Labor Party scored a very emphatic victory (to use the outgoing prime minister's description) on 24 November 2007. Howard was the second longest

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