

# Australian television program highlights censorship of climate scientists

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An Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) program entitled “The Greenhouse Mafia”, which appeared in February on the “Four Corners” television series, highlighted the Australian government’s censorship of eminent scientists studying climate change and its subservience to business interests that are heavily dependent on fossil fuels. Scientists from the state-funded Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) were specifically prohibited from discussing the potentially devastating consequences of governments’ failure to reduce greenhouse gases.

The first part of the program was an extended interview with Dr Guy Pearse, a speechwriter for former Environment Minister Robert Hill. Pearse had interviewed members of the Australian Greenhouse Network, as part of research for his doctoral thesis. The lobby group, which included representatives from the coal, electricity, aluminium, petroleum, minerals and cement industries, was devoted to countering scientific research on the effects of greenhouse gases.

Pearse alleged that industry and government were so close that company representatives were allowed access to confidential documents, including cabinet submissions, and had direct input into Cabinet submissions, ministerial briefings and costings relevant to greenhouse policy.

While Pearse claimed the industry lobbyists had “hijacked greenhouse policy,” the reality is that the Howard government’s policy has always coincided with the demands of industry. Australia is the only industrialised country, apart from the US, that has refused to ratify the limited Kyoto Protocol, which called for developed nations to cut their 1990 emission levels of greenhouse gases by around 5 percent by 2010.

The energy sector represents some of the most profitable Australian export industries and the government is determined not to do anything to undermine its revenues. In June 2002, Prime Minister

John Howard justified his stand against Kyoto by telling parliament that “for us to ratify the protocol would cost us jobs and damage our industry”. His government’s energy policy is completely in line with that of the Bush administration.

In July 2005, US President Bush launched the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate including Energy, as an industry-friendly alternative to Kyoto. On January 12, the Australian government hosted its inaugural meeting with environment ministers from Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and the US, along with industry representatives. The participating countries were either close US allies or countries such as India and China, which, as developing economies, are exempt from Kyoto.

The joint communiqué put no limits on the energy industry. “It is therefore critical that we work together to develop, demonstrate and implement cleaner and lower emissions technologies that allow for the continued economic use of fossil fuels while addressing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions,” it declared. Howard’s press statement emphasised “new technologies to reduce emissions” but mentioned nothing that would impinge on the mining industry.

Both Howard and Bush have consistently ignored warnings from scientists that the current policies could lead to permanent, damaging changes in the world’s weather. According to the “Four Corners” presenter Janine Cohen: “While industry players claim to have the inside running on greenhouse policy, the scientific experts say they’re being silenced. Calls for reducing greenhouse emissions are landing some of the world’s leading scientists in trouble.” The ABC program included interviews with three former senior CSIRO scientists.

Dr Graeme Pearman, the former CSIRO Climate Director, was directly censored at least half a dozen times for publicly calling for specific targets to drastically cut

greenhouse emissions in order to slow global warming. His research had been into changes in the pattern of tropical storms. He explained that the “frequency of tropical storms, including hurricanes, has not changed. But the frequency of Category 4 and 5, the most extreme, has gone up by about 100 percent.”

Pearman said CSIRO management was “very afraid that there may be consequences to their bottom line if they... are seen to be interfering with government policy.” Senior CSIRO executive Dr Steve Morton admitted he had personally told Pearman not to speak publicly. “Yes, I asked Graeme [Pearman] not to participate in a discussion which clearly had policy prescriptions,” he said.

Barney Foran, a scientist with 30 years of experience at CSIRO, worked on alternative fuels. He told the program that censorship “happens all the time”. He explained that the Prime Minister’s Department had called the CSIRO corporate centre to say “they’d really appreciate it if you didn’t say anything about ethanol.” In August 2005 the Howard government was promoting the use of ethanol as an alternative fuel for automobiles as a way of reducing greenhouse gases. In reality, Howard was assisting the ethanol and related primary industries, with which his government has close ties.

Foran explained the pressures on working scientists. “I guess you’ve always got these powerful force-fields sitting around your work... and if you want your work to continue, sometimes you have to give a bit to live a bit longer in the attempt to get a bigger picture out or maintain your funding,” he said.

The third scientist interviewed, Dr Barrie Pittock, who worked on global climate, was asked to remove material from a government publication warning of the possible impact of climate change and the means for averting it. “I was expressly told not to talk about mitigation, not to talk about how you might reduce greenhouse gases,” he explained. This included not discussing the consequences of global warming such as rising sea levels and the possible inundation of low-lying islands in the Pacific.

In a rather graphic example of the restrictions imposed on scientists, the following exchange took place in the course of the program between the presenter and Kevin Hennessy, a member of the CSIRO impact group, which has the task of discussing the potential impacts of climate change.

Presenter: Some scientists believe that there’ll be more environmental refugees. Is that a possibility?

Hennessy: I can’t really comment on that.

Presenter: Why can’t you comment on that?

Hennessy: That’s, that’s, er... No, I can’t comment on that.

The muzzling of CSIRO scientists follows years of funding cuts to research science and the sacking of senior scientists. The lack of government funds has forced the CSIRO to increasingly turn to industry sources. In addition, the government has installed a number of corporate executives to oversee the CSIRO ensuring that it meets industry requirements.

On February 21, the Howard government appointed Port Waratah Coal Services Chairwoman Eileen Doyle and former BHP Petroleum head Peter Wilcox to the CSIRO board for five-year terms. CSIRO recently announced a shift in its research priorities in line with the government’s “clean coal” proposal, while cutting projects concerning renewable energy research.

So-called clean coal technologies (CCT) have been promoted by the Bush administration as an alternative to cutting coal production in order to reduce greenhouse emissions. CCT involves treating the coal before it is used as fuel but is considered controversial and may have negligible impact on reducing greenhouse gases.

The willingness of former CSIRO scientists to speak out publicly is a measure of the level of concern in the scientific community about the dangers of climate change. In the US in January, James E. Hansen, a senior scientist at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), criticised attempts by Bush appointees to prevent him from publicly discussing the role of fossil fuel emissions in climate change. (See “Bush appointees censor scientists at government agencies”.)

Global warming and the role of greenhouse emissions are complex issues involving diverse factors that arise from the natural evolution of the Earth and its atmosphere and its interaction with modern industrial society. The preponderance of scientific opinion is that greenhouse gas emissions are producing global warming with potentially catastrophic consequences and that policies have to be put in place now to prevent the changes. What is inimical to an informed and objective debate is the censorship of scientific experts to defend the short-term profit interests of polluting industries.



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