

Australian PM Gillard's climate change speech—another admission of bankruptcy on the environment

Patrick O'Connor, Socialist Equality Party candidate for Senate in Victoria
24 July 2010

Yesterday's speech on climate change by Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard at the University of Queensland was a conscious fraud, combining a series of lies on the science of global warming with new sound-bite driven measures pitched towards business which do nothing to adequately address the environmental crisis. The affair again demonstrated the degree to which the unfolding official election campaign bears no real relation to the pressing issues confronting ordinary people.

Gillard's speech was aimed at recasting Labor's stance on climate change following the collapse earlier this year of the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) promoted by her predecessor Kevin Rudd.

In the 2007 election campaign, Rudd appealed to people's concern over the environment and opposition to the former Howard government's indifference. However, Labor's policies, including the ETS, were never about resolving climate change and were instead aimed at benefitting big business and finance capital. The proposed carbon trading mechanism was to involve the handover of \$123 billion in compensation to business, including to the worst corporate polluters, while establishing a national market in pollution credits. The Australian financial sector hoped to reap the benefits of establishing Sydney as the regional hub of an East Asian carbon market, potentially including China, Japan, and India.

Rudd's perspective collapsed after two connected developments—the ousting on December 1 of Liberal leader Malcolm Turnbull, who had backed the proposed ETS, and the debacle of the Copenhagen climate summit which finished on December 18.

Tony Abbott's installation as opposition leader followed a campaign waged by sections of business which remained opposed to the ETS—above all the mining industry, which was one of the few corporate sectors poised to incur some costs with the scheme's implementation. Turnbull's ousting foreshadowed the mining giants' subsequent role in the political coup against Kevin Rudd that followed the Resource Super Profits Tax announcement. At the same time as Abbott put an end to the previous bipartisan

agreement on the ETS, the failure of world leaders to agree to a post-Kyoto treaty on carbon emissions made clear that there would be no rapid establishment of carbon credit markets in “emerging economies” such as China. As a consequence, the support for an Australian ETS, which the government enjoyed from big business, suddenly evaporated.

Rudd responded by postponing the ETS until at least 2013, and made its establishment conditional on other major economies enacting similar mechanisms. This remains Labor government policy under Julia Gillard.

Yesterday Gillard stressed her commitment to a “market mechanism”, and, in an outright lie, stated that “the scientific and economic consensus shows that emissions trading is essential to limiting and reducing pollution”. A proposed ETS is to be considered in 2012, when the “dimensions of international action” can be gauged.

Gillard announced that she would convene a so-called citizen's assembly, to involve 150 “ordinary people” working “to examine over twelve months the evidence on climate change, the case for action and the possible consequences of introducing a market-based approach to limiting and reducing carbon emissions”. She declared that the “citizen's assembly” would help gauge progress towards a stronger “community consensus”. This theme was central to the prime minister's speech, with the word “consensus” repeated 27 times.

Gillard's real concern, however, is not for “community consensus” but for big business consensus, expressed through bipartisan agreement in parliament. Numerous opinion polls have demonstrated overwhelming concern over climate change and support for action. Gillard's proposal that the 150 members of the citizen's assembly spend part of their twelve months' work examining the evidence for climate change is especially cynical—the vast majority of the population already accept the scientific evidence. Contrary to the impression given by the prime minister, only an insignificant minority give any credence to the right-wing climate deniers and conspiracy theorists.

Political consensus between the major parties on an ETS is a critical issue for business. The establishment of a national carbon trading mechanism will require major firms to make long-term investment decisions, potentially affecting production techniques, the sourcing of energy, and other important areas. Some of these decisions require planning over years, and even decades, and so it is untenable for business to allow an ETS to be established at the same time as the prospect remains of the scheme being scrapped in the event of a change of government. Gillard acknowledged this reality when she said, “such a major change [as an ETS] cannot be made and unmade on the oscillations of the political pendulum”.

The Labor government calculates that if there is some kind of post-Kyoto international agreement in the next two years, then the weight of Australian business and finance capital as a whole will likely counter the influence within the Liberal Party of the mining companies and other sectional interests opposed to carbon trading, thereby re-establishing political “consensus”.

In the meantime it is business as usual as far as the corporate polluters are concerned. Other new policies revealed yesterday by the prime minister essentially amount to a series of diversions, with none of the measures involving the direct reduction of Australia’s carbon emissions.

Gillard pledged that new coal-fired power stations, though not those now under construction or approved for construction, will have to be capable of being fitted with carbon capture and storage (geosequestration) technology. In other words, heavily polluting coal fired electricity generation will continue to be depended upon and expanded further.

The prime minister also committed \$1 billion over ten years to integrate renewable energy sources into the national electricity grid. But this merely amounted to an overdue explanation as to how the government intends to meet its target, announced by Rudd last year, of having renewable energy provide 20 percent of the country’s power by 2020.

In one remarkable section of Gillard’s speech, she declared: “The science tells us that we need to limit the growth of carbon pollution in our atmosphere to 450 ppm [parts per million] if we are going to have a chance of limiting global temperature growth to two degrees or less. That in turn helps to explain the commitment that the Australian government has made, to cut our pollution levels by at least five percent by 2020 compared to our pollution levels in 2000.”

One could be forgiven in hearing this that the government’s five percent reduction by 2020 is consistent with climate scientists’ recommendations. In fact, the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded that in order to restrict atmospheric carbon concentration to 450 ppm, advanced capitalist economies like Australia required a *25 to 40 percent reduction*. In other words, Labor’s pledged pollution cut would need to be multiplied by between 5 to 8 times to be in line with the IPCC

science.

Gillard did not acknowledge scientific advice that stabilising carbon pollution at 450 ppm merely gives a 50 percent chance of avoiding an average world temperature increase of two degrees Celsius. Nor did she admit that growing numbers of climate scientists are warning that this two-degree benchmark must be reassessed and lowered, given the significant environmental impact of the 0.8 degree temperature rise recorded since the pre-industrial era. Nor was there any recognition of those climate scientists, most prominently NASA’s James Hansen, who argue that the upper limit of atmospheric carbon concentration is 350 rather than 450 ppm.

These issues cannot be raised by the Labor government—nor any of the parliamentary parties—because they point to the impossibility of resolving the climate change crisis within the framework of the capitalist system. Labor and the Greens uphold various market mechanisms, including emissions trading and carbon taxes, which are, at most, capable of delivering incremental reductions in Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions while at the same time making the working class pay for the problem through massive hikes in energy and fuel prices.

Climate change is an international problem requiring an international solution. Under capitalism, which is organically rooted to the nation-state system, each national government places the profit interests of its own corporate elite above the long-term interests of the planet and the population. At the same time the fossil fuel-based corporations work to systematically sabotage any measures impinging on their operations.

To achieve the reduction in required global carbon emissions, nothing less than the complete reorganisation of the world economy is necessary. An internationally coordinated economic plan is needed involving the complete restructuring of the world’s industrial and agricultural sectors, as well as the reorganisation of energy generation, transportation, and urban planning. This can only be achieved through the establishment of a socialist society in which the social requirements of the world’s population, including the need for a stable and habitable environment, are paramount. This in turn depends on the development of a political struggle led by a new mass party of the working class—the Socialist Equality Party.

Authorised by N. Beams, 307 Macquarie St, Liverpool, NSW 2170



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact