

BOOK REVIEWS

Running From the Storm: The Development of Climate Change Policy in Australia
Clive Hamilton. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001, 154 pp.
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Australia's formal role in the international climate change debate has irrevocably damaged our environmental standing. In the late twentieth century, we took pride in our national parks, had a high level of environmental awareness and were improving our record for conservation. We had, for instance, stopped whaling and emerged as a global champion of ocean sanctuaries. Our role in climate change diplomacy during the last decade has cost us this positive self-image. Most Australians are now aware we are responsible for higher per capita carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions than the citizens of any other nation. And although we are concerned and support actions to reduce these emissions, we know that our government, alongside that of the United States of America, has consistently and successfully opposed binding targets to redress upward emission trends.

In *Running From the Storm*, author Clive Hamilton traces international efforts since the Earth Summit in 1992 to adopt and implement agreements to stem atmospheric CO₂ concentrations. At the heart of this policy furore is the Kyoto Protocol. When the Kyoto Protocol negotiations concluded in December 1997, only two nations failed to make a commitment to stabilise or reduce their emissions: Australia and Iceland. The European Union and United States undertook to reduce emissions to 7% and 8% respectively below 1990 levels by 2008. Australia's delegates won "special treatment" through dogged lobbying. Their efforts were at odds with opinion polls which demonstrated 90% of Australians were concerned or very concerned about global warming.

Hamilton is uniquely qualified to offer an insider's analysis of Australia's response to climate change. He is the founding Director of the Australia Institute, an independent policy think-tank established in 1994. The institute's website (<http://www.tai.org.au>) hosts more than one hundred research publications and submissions on issues including population, youth affairs, taxation and sustainability. His wide-ranging perspective ensures this exposé of climate change policy addresses related issues of global trade and governance. More than this, he is and has been one of the climate change debate's most strident, informed and persistent advocates. Love him or hate him, Clive is known and respected among conservation, government and industry circles for his critical insight and strategic analysis concerning this and other key social and environmental issues.

Perhaps the best thing about the book is Hamilton's "insider" perspective of the murky business of public policy. Throughout the 1990s, Hamilton earned respect as a resourceful and savvy operator known for his passion and integrity. These qualities were evident when Hamilton appeared on the ABC to expose the deal that secured the Democrats' support for the controversial Goods and Services Tax. Hamilton had been a key advisor to the Democrats during negotiations but broke ranks when his advice about the negative environmental consequences of the new taxation arrangements

was ignored. His account of this and other chapters in the contemporary climate change campaign intentionally sheds more light on the political dimension rather than the purely scientific. As the author admits, “few people are impartial”. Hamilton could hardly be accused of impartiality, having actively lobbied Senate inquiries and international negotiations for more than a decade. This experience has left him with a healthy contempt for the Prime Minister and his ministers that enlivens this account. Despite this (admitted) partisanship, Hamilton’s account of greenhouse policy options is rigorously referenced. He draws primarily on studies undertaken by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a body comprising 2500 of the world’s leading climate scientists. This reliance on “consensus science” is particularly noteworthy, as the Australian government’s own position has often been based on modelling by the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (which Hamilton exposes as oil industry-funded).

Hamilton’s extensive and convincing reference material includes confidential documents accessed under Freedom of Information. These covert government and industry documents contribute to the sense of conspiracy endemic to such polarised environmental disputes. *Running From the Storm* cuts a swathe through the ranks of the determined opponents of mandatory emission reduction measures. The creative and influential fossil fuel lobby includes the Climate Change Coalition of powerful anti-Kyoto business groups and the “extremist” Lavoisier group instigated by the Managing Director of Western Mining Corporation, Hugh Morgan. Hamilton provides startling examples of “industry capture” in which public servants oppose measures to constrain emissions more actively than the industries whose emissions are under scrutiny. It appears the cards have been stacked in favour of industry to such an extent that each employee of the greenhouse-polluting and foreign-owned aluminium industry is subsidised by tax payers by as much as \$70 000. Even more telling is the account of the partisan and vested interest stance of politicians such as Senator Parer who became Australia’s Minister for Resources and Energy despite his chairmanship of and investment in coal companies.

Although climate change is consistently identified as a leading environmental concern, Australians remain largely misinformed or ignorant of the causes and solutions to this vexing issue. For example, we tend to believe Australia’s size and the distance between cities account for our high per capita fuel consumption. In fact, we just drive a lot within our city limits in fuel-guzzling cars. The climate change debate is fiercely contested and complicated by myths and misunderstandings. In part, this is due to an intense and largely successful decade-long public relations campaign: a campaign that has effectively recruited people who are otherwise respected and authoritative figures in environmental education. Hamilton names backyard garden proponent Don Burke and Professor Stuart Harris of the Australian National University, for instance, as witting or unwitting supporters of the government’s public relations “spin”. Public relations companies have helped us feel good about schemes such as “green power” that salve our conscience for a price, while contravening the internationally accepted principle of “polluter pays”. Public misunderstanding about climate change may also be attributed to the complex and shifting jargon involved in this debate. In this respect, *Running from the Storm* offers an excellent “Who’s Who”, unravels acronyms and gives the reader an “Idiot’s Guide” to the Kyoto Protocol and its “Australian clause”, the Framework Convention on Climate Change, Emissions Trading and Renewable Energy.

Environmental educators raise students’ awareness of environmental science, issues and concerns in the hope that this will contribute to an informed and engaged citizenry. Our efforts must fall short of the mark, though, as fewer than six percent

of Australians regularly participate in campaigns to improve social or environmental conditions (Baum, Modra, Bush, Cox, Crooke and Potter 1999, p. 17). Despite the opportunities for community members to participate in environmental decision-making ensured by our political system and culture, we tend to rely on representative democracy to do the work for us. On the issue of climate change our leaders have thus far demonstrated spectacular disregard for widely held values.

The book is a find for environmental educators. I wish my teachers had access to books like this. My high school geography and science classes were strong on nomenclature and glossy nature pictures but weak on politics. This imbalance is addressed in Hamilton's demystification of both the science and politics of climate change. He provides both educators and students with an important lesson in *real politic* by sharing ripping yarns about Australia's protracted climate change policy struggle. As Hamilton traces the genesis of lack-lustre government interventions such as the Greenhouse Challenge Program and the environmental aspects of the Goods and Services Tax (GST), the reader is rudely awakened by the failure of the Howard Government to maintain separation between its political and public service arms and the resultant inaction. Inevitably, we also feel a growing respect for environmental advocates like Hamilton, who must draw on extensive knowledge, networks, strategic thinking and endurance in order to influence the policy process.

Following George Bush Jr's ascension to the U.S. presidency, he was quick to announce in March 2001 that America would not ratify the Kyoto Protocol. Small wonder, as oil companies bankrolled his campaign. Although the Protocol contains loopholes that exempt Australia from decisive action, we duly followed suit. Hamilton argues that this decision deserves the international derision that followed and that our part in the debate just gets worse. An Australian delegate at a London conference responded to Pacific Islanders' concerns (80% of the Marshall Islands may disappear under rising ocean levels) by suggesting that it would be cheaper to evacuate these islands than to ensure Australia's compliance with Kyoto emission targets. Even more spectacularly, environment minister Senator Robert Hill expressed support in 2000 for the construction of nuclear reactors in developing nations to exploit the Kyoto Protocol's "clean development" mechanism. The Australian position is increasingly out of touch with the industries it supposedly protects. Global business leaders meeting for the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2000 identified global warming as the greatest threat facing the world.

To re-establish our international environmental standing, Australia must bite the bullet on climate change. Our reliance, during this decade of regulatory intransigence, on voluntary and "no regrets" measures to stem the upward trend in CO₂ emissions has failed as it might have been predicted to. After all, no other nation has reduced emissions without also adopting regulatory and market-based instruments. We can, according to Hamilton, readily reduce CO₂ emissions while improving efficiency and fostering new sustainable industries.

Hamilton cuts deep and wide. His grasp of this issue and intimacy with Australian public policy makes *Running From the Storm* a must-read for environmental science students, advocates, politicians, political scientists and concerned citizens.

References

- Baum, F., Modra, C., Bush, R., Cox, E., Crooke, R., & Potter, R. (1999). Volunteering and social capital: An Adelaide study. *Australian Journal on Volunteering*, February, 13–22.

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