

A Climate Change Vandal Goes to Paris: Mathias Cormann and the OECD

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The hallmark of any institution is the ability to withstand ironic dysfunction. The United States under the stewardship of that unintentional comic George W. Bush made John Bolton ambassador to the United Nations. Bolton had loathed the body, wishing for it to implode under its own weight. The parliamentary chamber of the European Union, between 1999 and 2020, hosted that most anti-EU of proponents, the bilious Nigel Farage. Hatred for European institutions did not stop the little Englander from drawing a salary and being rather cavalier with his expenses.

The Organisation for Economic Development is the latest institution to encounter its dose of fair perversion. For the first time in its history, its secretary general will be from outside the Americas and Europe. In terms of birth, Mathias Cormann is Belgian. But in terms of pedigree, he is a veteran of Australian conservative politics, having been a cabinet minister and, it should be said, powerbroker, in the Liberal Party.

Very little chance was given to Cormann in his bid. The field of applicants seemed too varied, too strong. His abysmal record on climate change policy was seen as the most obvious handicap. “Governments are not stupid, they have highly intelligent officials and ambassadors who work out what is really going on and advise them,” [claimed](#) Bill Hare, climate change scientist and chief executive of Climate Analytics.

But the former finance minister kept making it through the rounds. Lobbying efforts on his behalf were unsparing. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison rang numerous world leaders. Meetings were held between senior officials and ambassadors. Candidates began withdrawing their bids.

Swiss candidate Philipp Hildebrand, whose pitch focused on climate change, pulled out, citing lack of support. The former EU trade commissioner, Cecilia Malmström, fell at the final hurdle. She had also promised an aggressive approach towards climate change, [declaring](#) that she would use her post to globalise Europe’s carbon-tax scheme on high-emission imports. This was a bit much even for the new climate conscious administration in Washington.

Of the 37 ambassadors to the OECD, a few recorded the view that it had been a “very close race”. France and the UK decided on Cormann but Malmström was unable to secure a unified bloc of voters. Christopher Shorrocks, the UK representative, [told](#) the *Financial Times*

that both candidates had “broad support” but a straw poll showed “Cormann as the candidate with the most support”.

Sending Cormann to the OECD could be seen as a Trojan horse gesture on the part of Australia’s Morrison government. As a front bencher in right wing administrations, climate change was treated as a secondary concern. Suggestions to turn his adopted country towards the goal of net zero carbon emissions by 2050 were denigrated as [the musings of extremists](#).

The Australian Greens leader, Adam Bandt, was almost desperate in trying to convince each of the ambassadors with a vote not to appoint him. His [letter](#) from last November to the voting bloc documented various highlights of Cormann’s time in parliament. He had voted to “repeal Australia’s successful carbon price” in 2014. He had attempted to abolish the Clean Energy Finance Corporation and the Australian Renewable Energy Agency. “As finance minister, he tried to abolish the very same green finance bodies he will no doubt be promoting as evidence of his green credentials for the job.”

The OECD itself has reproached Australia’s climate change policies. In a [2019 report](#), the organisation notes Australia’s “progress in decoupling the main environmental pressures from economic growth” but that it remains “one of the most resource- and carbon-intensive OECD economies”. The country was on track to meet its 2020 climate target but needed to “intensify efforts to reach its Paris Agreement goal of reducing GHG emissions (including emissions from land use change and forestry) by between 26% and 28% below its 2005 levels by 2030.”

Cormann’s lobbying exercise, one well aided by the tax-payer funded services of a Royal Australian Air Force jet, chose to focus on other matters. Here was a European connected to the Asia-Pacific. He was keen to be a “consensus” candidate. If needed, he would waffle about the green agenda. During his campaign, he [proposed](#) that the OECD “provide important global leadership to drive ambitious and effective action on climate change” and “help economies around the world achieve global net-zero emissions by 2050”.

In a [statement](#) released after his selection thanking the organisation, Cormann made the mandatory salute to environmental policy, putting the case that the OECD will continue to “drive and promote global leadership on ambitious and effective action on climate change to achieve global net-zero emissions by 2050.” But it was merely one of a range of other objectives: maximising the economic recovery in the wake of the pandemic, reaching multilateral understanding on digital taxation and, as ever, the promotion of “market-based policies and a rules-based international order”.

His [vision statement](#) similarly talks of the need to “get to zero net emissions as soon as possible. Climate policy responses will increasingly need to factor into long-term planning.” Not exactly the sort of language he was known for when a member of the Australian government.

The narrative of a climate change vandal turned green advocate failed to convince the environmental lobby that campaigned against Cormann as a viable choice. On being notified of Cormann’s appointment, Greenpeace’s international executive director Jennifer Morgan [was aghast](#). “We have little confidence in Mr Cormann’s ability to ensure the OECD is a leader in tackling the climate crisis when he himself has an atrocious record on the

issue, including opposition to carbon pricing.”

It is unlikely that the new secretary general will be able to do much in the way of redirecting climate change policy. The consensus, if it can be called that, is increasingly towards decarbonising the economy even as COVID-19 recovery is pursued. Whether the OECD continues being relevant with Cormann at the helm is the pressing question. Till an answer is provided, activists such as Hare will just have to accept that governments can be monumentally stupid.

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