

Fossils of the Day: Saudi Arabia, Australia and “The Spoilers” at the COP21 Paris Climate Summit

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Theme: [Environment](#)

In-depth Report: [Climate Change](#)

Since the 1990s, Australia has underscored itself as an alternative to the climate change junta, as its officials often seem to suggest it is, focusing instead on the life of immediate gain. It is a code of living with undeniable, selfish benefits, a sort of fossil-fuel Objectivism, as Ayn Rand would have termed it. Be infuriatingly, dangerously selfish; you know you want to. Forget the others; you have to.

This was in evidence with the Kyoto Protocol, which Canberra stubbornly refused to go along with any vaguely communitarian notion about environment and matters of climate disruption. Despite being signed in April 1998, the protocol was only ratified on Dec 12 2007. Even then, it was noted that the document “does not specify the mechanism by which Parties to the Protocol must meet their emission target, thus providing an Annex I country such as Australia reasonable amount of discretion as to the policies and measures it implements domestically to meet its target.”[1]

The Umbrella Group of industrialised states, as it came to be known, has been stalking the climate change scene for some time, stalling and restricting various measures in pursuit of a decarbonized economy. The group, not always harmoniously, comprises Japan, US, Russia, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Canada, Australia, Norway and New Zealand. Given that exports in oil, gas and coal amounts stemming from the group are only growing, some forces of attraction were bound to be felt.

It is one that has proven fractious within its own limits, a front that has been fraying since 2009 when the White House decided to adopt a greener side in a post-Bush world. Ditto a post-Harper Canada. Disagreements have arisen over the issue of compliance, as they always tend to.

The spoiling agents in the group have varied in terms of force and effect. Japan, while not possessing the fossil fuel deposits in the group, has importing ties to three which do. It has been one of the strongest voices to push back G7 commitments on climate change targets.

Australia, however, as it has done in previous rounds, has shown itself to be the problematic child in the climate change classroom, despite dutifully scribbling in its note book a target well below 2°C in terms of temperature rises. In many instances, its delegates give the impression of not wanting to be there. Failing students, of course, rarely do.

In an assessment by Germanwatch and the Climate Action Network Europe, released at the Paris climate summit, Australia joined Saudi Arabia and Kazakhstan at the bottom of a list of 58 nations in its ranking on the Climate Change Performance Index.

The report conducts a range of measures, focusing on actual per capital emissions, emission

trends, the use of renewable energy, energy intensity in the economy, and an overall assessment of climate policies. Australia was bound to get a good serving on this, given its abolition of the carbon emissions scheme, scaling down of the renewable energy target (RET) in June 2015 and such ineffective measures as the Emission Reduction Fund.

It provides a parallel universe to that created by the Turnbull government, which has attempted to sneak in, and out, without much consequence. “This report,” explained Kelly O’Shannassy of the Australian Conservation Foundation, “cuts through the government’s spin to show we are a climate change laggard.”[2]

Admittedly, many of the policies constitute a burdensome inheritance for Turnbull, one fashioned by that most ardent of climate sceptics, Tony Abbott. And Foreign Minister Julie Bishop did surprise some by signing up to a New Zealand-led declaration supporting international carbon markets.[3]

Overall, Canberra’s anti-environment resume won the country the award of fossil of the day, an anti-gong not alien to its diplomats. Bishop, before a forum hosted by Indonesia titled “Pathways to a Sustainable Low Carbon and Climate Resilient Economy” embraced the long held plunderer’s line that fossil fuels remained good. “Traditional energy sources, fossil fuels like coal, will remain a significant part of the global energy mix for the foreseeable future.”[4]

Such language retains its euphemistic flavour, but becomes exceedingly crude as an apologia for white knight antics. Yes, mining, exporting and burning fossil fuels will be good for the poor, even as the process lines the deep pockets of mining companies. “Barring some technological breakthrough fossil fuels will remain critical to promoting prosperity, growing economies and alleviating hunger for years to come.”

This standing flies well in the face of such documents as the Declaration to Keep Fossil Fuels in the Ground, one arrived at by a group of 163 non-governmental organisations led by environment groups and indigenous leaders from 28 countries.[5]

Australia’s lead negotiator at Paris, Peter Woolcott, fears “the weakening of several provisions.” Motivating countries to combat targets was one thing; making them binding quite another. Keep such goals, and the means to achieve them, flexible.

Australia is by no means the only state to be the laggard at the show. Some members of the G77 – Malaysia, Cuba and Venezuela – have made less than subtle efforts to stifle the procedural elements of the summit. On Monday, the delegates wished for the text to be worked on through a big screen. Endorsing such a measure would have kept the negotiators at work for years.

Other threats have also manifested, not least of all Saudi Arabia, who persists in cultivating a Janus-sensibility to environmental reform. Therein lies a formidably aggressive opponent, one who, in advance of COP21 intentionally manipulated the oil price to produce a surge in demand.[6]

On Friday, the OPEC Minister meeting in Vienna, egged on by Riyadh, concluded that there would be no reduction in current levels of oil production.[7] In the words of Saudi Oil Minister, Ali Al-Naimi, uttered in May, ending the use of fossil fuels was something that had to be put “in the back of our heads for a while.”

There are reasons to assume that much of COP21 will be the customary dress one has come to expect from climate change fests. Some momentum, centred around the so-called “high energy coalition” comprising the EU, the US and almost 80 African and island states, has gathered. But the state parties seem less relevant to this show than the giant, technology coalitions and energy deals that are being done on the side.[8] Clean energy initiatives have been, and will take place irrespective of whether states wish to take up a seat on the train of reform.

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Notes:

[1]http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/Browse_by_Topic/ClimateChange/Governance/International/theKyoto

[2]
<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/dec/08/australia-ranked-third-last-in-climate-change-performance-of-58-countries>

[3]
<http://www.smh.com.au/environment/un-climate-conference/paris-un-climate-conference-2015-australia-named-fossil-of-the-day-20151210-gl65w.html>

[4]
<http://reneweconomy.com.au/2015/paris-cop21-australia-digs-in-on-fossil-fuels-sees-coal-as-solution-to-hunger-77211>

[5] <http://amazonwatch.org/assets/files/2015-keep-the-oil-in-the-ground-english.pdf>

[6]
https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/health-science/oil-rich-saudis-find-a-new-ally-in-struggle-to-delay-action-on-climate-change-cheap-gas/2015/01/26/4d277170-9cc7-11e4-bcfb-059ec7a93ddc_story.html.

[7] <http://www.newsweek.com/saudi-arabia-cop21-paris-climate-change-negotiations-402992>

[8]
<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/nov/30/bill-gates-breakthrough-energy-coalition-mark-zuckerberg-facebook-microsoft-amazon>

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