

More than half of federal Liberal MPs 'don't trust' climate science: think tank



Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, sixth in the second row, at the G20 meeting in Hamburg on July 7, where climate change was a major topic of discussion. Anadolu Agency



AFR, Aaron Patrick, 17 July

The majority of federal Liberal MPs are not convinced the science behind climate change is settled and support reductions in emissions of greenhouse gases for political reasons, according to an prominent conservative think tank.

John Roskam, the executive director of the Melbourne-based Institute of Public Affairs, said he hadn't conducted a formal count but found most Liberal politicians shared his doubts about what many experts say is the greatest global threat to mankind.

"More than 50 per cent are solid sceptics and more than 50 per cent feel they need to be seen to do something," he said in an interview. "The science is not settled."

The overwhelming majority of climate change scientists accept the atmosphere is warming and humans are responsible. The burning of fossil fuels contributed to an increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide from 280 parts per million before 1800 to 396 parts per million in 2013, according to the Australian Academy of Science.



Former prime minister John Howard said at a US Studies Centre forum last Thursday that he is becoming more sceptical about climate change. Daniel Munoz

Not convinced

But many right-wing politicians, commentators and voters aren't convinced the scientists are correct, or suspect the consequences of global warming are being exaggerated for ideological or economic reasons. Some Liberals unenthusiastically support climate change policies in the hope scientific opinion will shift in future years, Mr Roskam said.

The most senior Liberal expressing doubt is former prime minister John Howard, who remains an influential figure in conservative circles. "I have become increasingly more of a sceptic on climate change," Mr Howard told a forum organised by the United States Studies Centre at the University of Sydney last Thursday. "I was never a paid-up enthusiast."

Liberal MPs' doubts about climate change science explain why many are reluctant to favour renewable energy over coal, which is cheap and abundant in Australia..

A protest over climate change, which experts say is the greatest global threat to mankind, drew thousands of people on to the streets of Melbourne in 2015. Eddie Jim

Their scepticism is making it harder for Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's government to produce an energy policy that can get passed by the Senate.

'Climate theology'

The Coalition backbench is "deeply sceptical about climate theology," the former chief of staff to Prime Minister Tony Abbott, Peta Credlin, wrote in the Daily Telegraph last week. "Make no mistake, even his strongest supporters in Cabinet understand that climate change remains Malcolm Turnbull's kryptonite," Ms Credlin wrote..

Institute of Public Affairs executive director John Roskam, left, next to now-Melbourne MP Tim Wilson in 2016. Supplied

A failure of its energy policy would be a huge political blow to Mr Turnbull, who lost the Liberal Party leadership in 2009 because of his support for a carbon trading system. Tim Wilson, a Liberal backbencher from Melbourne, said it was silly to ask if he believed in climate change science, which has found that each of the most recent three decades has been warmer than all preceding decades since 1850. "Science is not something you 'believe' in," he said in an email. "It isn't a belief structure. That's religion. I accept the scientific evidence of anthropogenic contributions to a changing climate."

Overstated

Environment Minister Josh Frydenberg, who has said he accepts human activity is making the atmosphere warmer, declined to comment.

One senior Liberal Party official, who is not a climate sceptic, said Mr Roskam's 50 per cent estimate was probably too high. He put the true figure at 25 per cent, and said the sceptics were mostly Liberals from suburban, regional and country electorates. Mr Roskam said 90 per cent of Nationals MPs were probably sceptics too. A spokesman for Nationals leader Barnaby Joyce didn't respond to a request for comment.

Some of Mr Turnbull's conservative critics cite his belief in global warming as evidence he is too left-wing for the Liberal Party. "[I had] a long discussion I had with Turnbull on climate policy many years ago in which he dismissed my view that human activity had not caused global warming and refused to examine several highly questionable aspects of the dangerous warming thesis," Melbourne conservative Des Moore wrote in an email newsletter three weeks ago.

Internal split

The split within the Liberal Party is illustrated by its own think tank, the Menzies Research Centre. Executive director Nick Cater is a climate sceptic and vociferous critic of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, a United Nations body established to provide an objective assessment of global warming. "The IPCC is a serial embellisher," Mr Cater wrote in *The Spectator* in 2015. "It never passes by a chance to inflate, embroider or lay it on thick. "In such a climate of uncertainty, scepticism is the only rational response."

The think tank got a new chairman last month, businessman Kevin McCann. As a chairman of Origin Energy he backed the introduction of a carbon pollution reduction system under the Rudd Labor government, a push that failed. "We support the policy decision that an emissions trading scheme is to be at the heart of the Government's plans and that a trading scheme is the best mechanism to move to a low-carbon future," Mr McCann said in 2008.

Asked for the think tank's current position on climate change, Mr Cater replied in an email: "Should we have one?"