

Power to the people as Coalition cools on IPCC

Oz Editorial, 11:00PM October 9, 2018

The big news from the report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change on 1.5C warming is that high electricity prices finally have broken the hoodoo exerted by the Paris Agreement on rational thought among the nation's political decision-makers.

Scott Morrison has declined to follow Donald Trump in quitting the non-binding global compact to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but the Prime Minister has sent a clear message that in a nation responsible for only 1.3 per cent of global emissions, his government will retain perspective on what action it will take. When the latest IPCC report was released on Monday, a full contingent of senior government ministers was prepared to put the interests of consumers ahead of the climate science community dictates.

Mr Morrison said the report — which states coal use must be phased out worldwide by 2050 to limit future warming to 1.5C above pre-industrial averages — would not be binding on us. “Let’s not forget that Australia accounts for just over 1 per cent of global emissions, so there are a lot bigger players than us out there impacting on these arrangements,” Mr Morrison said. Josh Frydenberg said without coal the lights would go out along Australia’s eastern seaboard. Environment Minister Melissa Price said the IPCC report was designed to inform policymakers but was not policy prescriptive. She followed up with a plain-speaking interview on ABC radio saying that climate scientists had “drawn a long bow” on coal and it would be irresponsible to commit to a full phase-out by 2050. Coal is on track to become the nation’s most valuable export this year. “I just don’t know how you could say by 2050 that you’re not going to have technology that’s going to enable good, clean technology when it comes to coal,” Ms Price said.

Such direct language would have been unthinkable only a short time ago but it is exactly what the Australian public deserves to hear. It signals a true contest on energy policy at the next federal election.

In response to the IPCC report, the opposition has stuck to its plan for a higher renewable energy target of 50 per cent by 2030, a 45 per cent cut in emissions by 2030 on 2005 levels, and net zero emissions by 2050. Bill Shorten gave a confused performance, accusing the government of making quicker decisions on the Great Barrier Reef than aged pensions. The reef is the cut-through message for Australia in the IPCC report, which states 80 per cent of warm-water corals will die with warming of 1.5C and more than 99 per cent with 2C. The Opposition Leader muddled the message and, ironically, the IPCC warning could blunt Labor's attack on the Coalition's decision to give \$444 million to the small Great Barrier Reef Foundation, despite clear shortcomings in process.

The muted response given to the IPCC report internationally underscores some uncomfortable truths for the UN body. The 1.5C report is a key part of a strategy to reinvigorate the implementation of the Paris Agreement, which has been ratified but will not take effect until a rule book can be agreed by signatory nations. This is supposed to happen in December in Poland. The threatened withdrawal of the US has been a blow to negotiations. Most problematic has been the loss of US support for the Global Climate Fund, disabling a body that has been central to the Paris deal but now is riven by internal difficulties.

The IPCC's 1.5C report was commissioned in Paris in 2015 and has arrived ahead of the crucial Katowice meeting as an attempt at shock and awe. After appraising 6000 scientific papers, the report has sanctioned a connection between climate change and some extreme weather events, and warns future problems will be much worse with 2C warming than 1.5C. It says actions required to meet the lower Paris target amount to unprecedented changes in all aspects of society. This will include spending \$US2.4 trillion each year until 2035 on renewable energy projects and subsidies.

By IPCC calculations, actions already pledged by signatories to the Paris Agreement still would lead to temperatures rising by more than 3C. A further reality is that many countries are missing their targets. The largest emissions nation, China, has no constraint until 2030 and continues to build new coal power stations virtually unchecked. Global carbon dioxide emissions are back on the rise. Unfortunately for the IPCC, after three decades of crying wolf with alarming predictions, the latest instalment has lost much of its ability to shock

a jaded public. In this report, at least the real intent of the IPCC has been thrust further into the open: a reorganisation of world affairs using climate change as cover to implement the full sustainable development goal agenda. Australia is right to be wary. Mindless alarmism is no substitute for serious discussion about the science, the possible policy responses and the global effectiveness of any action Australia has taken or seeks to undertake in the future.