

## COP24 sees Australia walk climate tightrope amid 'Paris Rulebook' deadlock

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[Photo: COP24 is being held after the release of a landmark report that said drastic steps are needed this decade to limit global warming to 1.5C. \(AP: Czarek Sokolowski\)](#)

The COP24 Climate talks in Poland have been extended through the weekend, as nations remain deadlocked over how to implement the Paris agreement. The aim of the annual United Nations conference is to determine what collective action the world takes on climate change.

More than 100 ministers and more than 1,000 negotiators from around the globe have been hammering out the so-called 'Paris Rulebook' with an eye to defining how pledges will be put into action.

In the thick of it all has been the Australian delegation, which has been walking a tightrope between the Paris obligations and support for fossil fuels.

In a defining moment at COP24, protesters disrupted a pro-fossil fuel event on Monday that had been organised by the Trump administration.

On stage, the only non-American panellist at the event was Australia's Ambassador for the Environment, Patrick Suckling.

"Fossil fuels are projected to be a source of energy for a significant time to come," Mr Suckling said. "It's critical that new solutions for lower emissions are encouraged and employed."

Fossil fuel event 'damaged' Australia's credibility

The Director of the Climate & Energy Program at the Australia Institute, Richie Merzian, believes Australia jeopardised its influence in the COP process by appearing at the US event. "Everyone picked up on the fact that Australia was on the panel with the Trump appointees," Mr Merzian said. "I think it even made the New York Times and the Washington Post. "It really damaged, I think, Australia's credibility here."

But the CEO of the Minerals Council of Australia, Tania Constable, disagreed with Mr Merzian's comments. "Let me lend the Minerals Council's congratulations to the negotiating team," Ms Constable said. "I don't think it has been provocative for Australia to participate with the US on that panel."

Climate policy expert Professor Frank Jotzo said it is not worth making too much of it. "It's really a rather small storm in a minor teacup," Dr Jotzo said. "It's obvious that coal will play a major role in a climate conference that's held in Poland — I mean Poland is often described as the Australia of Europe. "[It is] the largest coal producing and coal consuming country in Europe, and so the issues surrounding the transition from that industry are very present."

'Prickly but productive'

The main goal of COP24 is to reach an agreement on how emissions will be verified, how developing nations will be helped to reduce greenhouse gases and, crucially, whether developing and developed countries will have to play by the same set of rules.

Australia's former top climate diplomat, Howard Bamsey, said that behind the scenes Australia is playing a constructive role as Chair of the influential Umbrella Group. "Australia generally has been innovative, assertive, prickly, but very positive on the whole and at the moment I think that continues, even though the headlines aren't showing it up," Mr Bamsey said. "We've got to be there to influence the basis, the rules on which this new global economy is based, and that's what this COP is about."

COP24 comes in the wake of the landmark IPCC 1.5 degree Celsius report, which said the world needs to take drastic steps this decade to limit global warming to 1.5C.

In the early days of COP24, the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait blocked the conference from officially "welcoming" the report, instead demanding it merely be "noted".

Australia was conspicuously silent on the debate, but Mr Bamsey said entire agreements could hinge on subtle phrasing, and even punctuation. "To most sensible people, that kind of stand-off over two words like that looks ridiculous," he said. "But there is huge symbolic importance on those two different words, and eventually, the impact of decisions around those sorts of arcane questions will be felt in the real world."

As Australia's lead negotiator at a number of previous COPs, Mr Bamsey knows what it is like to go for days without sleep towards the end of a climate conference.

"People will wonder what's going on behind these rooms, no longer smoke filled, but they're still pretty smelly, because people have been there two or three days without sleeping," he said. "This COP looks like another one of those where it will go down to the wire."