

Talking point

An inconvenient issue

AUSTRALIA took a crash course in climate change last year. But did we pass the final exam?

After initially posing as a green dream team, the Rudd Government has toned down its rhetoric and opted for solid policy.

Australia will reduce its greenhouse gas emissions, but not at the speed some scientists believe is needed to save the planet.

Climate change, a diabolical issue for any administration, will pose a major challenge for the Rudd Government next year. If the economic crisis really takes hold, voters and businesses may resist action being taken on the environment.

On the other hand, the Government is now vulnerable to criticism that it is not taking brave action when it is desperately needed.

Climate change has gone from an obscure fad to a defining issue in contemporary politics, all in a few years. How Labor handles this challenge will help define the Government's success — and, possibly, influence the outcome of the next federal election, due in 2010.

After taking office in late 2007, the Government signed the Kyoto protocol and was applauded at UN climate talks in Bali. It then set Australia on a course to cut greenhouse gas emissions. This meant drafting an emissions trading scheme, which effectively puts a tax on carbon pollution to encourage

Climate change is fast becoming a political headache for Kevin Rudd, says CATHY ALEXANDER

people to pollute less. The scheme is due to start in July 2010.

First came a rough draft — a green paper — which indeed was fairly “green”.

Then came other advice. The Government's climate adviser Ross Garnaut called for a tough, broad-based scheme with few exemptions, aimed at cuts to emissions of five to 25 per cent by 2020.

Treasury released a massive modelling exercise which indicated that reducing emissions would not dramatically hurt the economy. It also showed there was little economic difference between reducing emissions quickly and slowly.

A growing body of scientific evidence pointed to climate change advancing faster than previously thought.

Then, completely unscripted, came an economic crisis which has blown efforts to fight climate change off course.

The UN's annual climate summit, held in Poland in early December,

took place in this toxic economic environment. Little progress appeared to be made on forging a post-Kyoto pact. A deal is due to be struck at the UN's summit at Copenhagen in late 2009.

So as the mood soured on climate, the Rudd Government released its big greenhouse plan on December 15. The plan included the crucial 2020 target, which the Government set at five to 15 per cent.

That's more than most countries, but then, on a per capita basis, most have much lower emissions than Australia. Scientists say emissions must fall by at least 25 per cent. The European Union is willing to cut emissions by up to 30 per cent. Prof Garnaut says 25 per cent should be on the table.

The Government says it's aiming for an atmospheric concentration of CO₂ of 450 parts per million. But to do this, Australia must cut emissions by 25 per cent.

As a result of this numbers war, environmentalists are howling at the Government's target.

The Emissions Trading Scheme was also altered to be more generous to business and is now something of a tax churn. Almost all the money earned goes back to businesses and households as compensation and free permits.

So there's been plenty of movement from the Government on climate change and we now know what Australia will do about it.

What happens next? The plan needs parliamentary approval. There will be a barney in the Senate, but it seems likely the Coalition will ultimately support the plan, because blocking it would force the Government to negotiate with the Greens.

If the economy goes into freefall, it's possible the Coalition will succeed in delaying emissions trading.

But the climate issue is likely to be more of a problem than a plus for the Coalition. It will be an acid test of Malcolm Turnbull's leadership because the Coalition has struggled to unite around a climate policy.

Mr Turnbull and some front-benchers want action on climate change, but some backbenchers, especially among the Nationals, think the threat has been overstated and emissions trading is a bad idea.

Also on the climate agenda for 2009 is the progress of UN talks. Will Australia push for strong climate action — or hold it back? Can an agreement be reached? Will US president-elect Barack Obama be a game-changer?

The Australian Government is also due to deliver on its renewable energy target, requiring 20 per cent of electricity to be generated from renewable sources by 2020.

Renewable energy will also benefit from the Government bringing forward its \$500 million green energy fund to stimulate the economy.

So climate change is adding up to a potential headache for the Government next year.

How things play out will depend on just how deep the economic crisis goes, what Obama does, what weather events hit Australia, what the scientists say, and the public mood.

If the financial crisis forces business closures and job losses the public's desire for action on climate change could be neutralised.

Another risk is that voters may decide the Government has gone weak on climate. All it could take is a spate of heat waves, bushfires or storms to panic the public.

Communication is another serious challenge for the Government. Climate change is hard enough to understand, let alone emissions trading. The scheme's complexity means many voters don't have a basic understanding of it and how it's supposed to help.

The major voices on climate change are Mr Rudd and Climate Change Minister Penny Wong, neither of whom are known for plain speaking. Senator Wong is smart and has made few errors, but the Government has struggled to communicate its messages simply.

Perhaps Environment Minister Peter Garrett could write a song about emissions trading — “I got my cap, I got my trade, that's how the planet will be saved.”

AAP

Cyan Magenta Yellow Black



Fresh

Island Fresh Produce	Delicatessen Specials	Meat Specials
 <p>Nectarines 3⁹⁵ kg</p>  <p>Green Grapes 6⁹⁵ kg</p>	 <p>BBQ Chicken 7⁹⁹ ea</p>  <p>Cabana Sticks 9⁹⁹ kg</p>	 <p>Chicken Breast Fillets 14⁹⁹ kg</p>  <p>Topside Roast 8⁹⁹ kg</p>
 <p>Premium Grade Carrots 1kg Carrots 1⁸⁵ bag</p>  <p>Washed Potatoes 2kg Washed Potatoes 4⁵⁰ bag</p>	 <p>Epping Sausages 3⁹⁹ kg</p>  <p>Cafe Ham 13⁹⁹ kg</p>	 <p>1st Grade Beef Mince 8⁹⁹ kg</p>  <p>Scotch Fillet Steak 21⁹⁹ kg</p>
<p>500g Salted/Unsalted Cashews 7⁹⁹ pk</p>	 <p>Prem. Boneless Ham 13⁹⁹ kg</p>  <p>Saveloys or Cocktail 7⁹⁹ kg</p>	 <p>Legs of Lamb 8⁹⁹ kg</p>  <p>Porterhouse Steak 15⁹⁹ kg</p>

Specials available from Festival IGA Supermarkets Only.

Specials available only while stocks last. Some items may not be available at all stores. We reserve the right to correct any printing errors. We reserve the right to limit the sale of special items to normal retail quantities. Specials available until 04/01/09.