The Scary Politics of Climate Change

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Fear of stating the truth

Political actors typically engage in exaggeration to advance their case. The Labor Party exaggerated the likely damage due to the introduction of the GST, despite the fact that Paul Keating wanted to introduce just such a tax. The Coalition is exaggerating the economic effects of Labor's industrial relations policy. Social welfare campaigners often overstate the extent of poverty, hoping that appreciation of the magnitude of the problem will spur the public or politicians into doing something about it.

Environmental campaigns are no different. Environmentalists have often over-stated the effects of environmental decline. The risks of nuclear power, though considerable, have been exaggerated. The dangers of urban air pollution have been inflated. The threats posed by DDT, lead pollution and pesticides, while significant, have usually been presented as much scarier than they actually are. And the likely effects of genetically modified crops have been blown out of proportion.

The purpose of political exaggeration is to stimulate stronger emotional responses, usually fear, and therefore make us more likely to act in the way desired. When your opponents, with the help of professionals, are busily exaggerating the other way the pressure is almost irresistible.

Yet there is one area where the opposite is the case, where the protagonists on one side have for years systematically under-stated the dangers.

Climate scientists and environmentalists have been afraid to talk about the true extent of the dangers of global warming. Those who have looked closely at what the scientists are concluding believe that the truth is so frightening that, if told, it will immobilise people and stop them from acting rather than stimulating them to do more.

There is a cavernous gap between the urgency and the seriousness of the warnings from the science and the political response to it. The concern among the public is way ahead of that of our politicians; but it remains true that the public simply has no grasp of the magnitude of the diaster that looms ahead of us. Nowhere in the world, except perhaps in the United States, is this radical disconnect greater than in Australia. Let me comment first on the science for, I fear to say, almost no one in this room has an idea of just how bad the situation is.

In June the journal *Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics* carried a paper by James Hansen and others clarifying the question of what is dangerous human-induced climate change.[1] Hansen is widely recognised as the world's most eminent climate scientist. The authors concluded that an additional warming of 1ºC above the level in 2000 will have effects that 'may be highly disruptive', using expected sea-level rise as the best indicator of danger.

A 1ºC increase above the year 2000 level means an average temperature increase of around 1.7ºC above the pre-industrial average. The analysis suggests that this 'tipping point' is almost locked in. They acknowledge that avoiding this danger point is 'still technically feasible' but in practice keeping global temperatures from rising by 2ºC is now beyond us.

Even more alarmingly, the following statement is buried in the Fourth Assessment Report of the IPCC's Working Group I, published earlier this year.

> Stabilisation of atmospheric greenhouse gases below about 400 ppm CO_2 equivalent is required to keep the global temperature increase likely less than 2ºC above pre-industrial temperature (Knutti et al., 2005).[2]

A concentration target of 400 ppm CO_2-e equates to a target of around 350-375 of CO_2. The current concentration is 380 ppm. The forcing due to increased CO_2 is being offset by other factors, notably the effect of aerosols, but as these are cleaned up the effects of global warming will be intensified. In short, we are already past the point that locks in two degrees of warming, and will without question go well beyond it. Even three degrees is looking very hard to avoid.

Very few people, even among environmentalists, have truly faced up to what the science is telling us. This is because the implications of three degrees, let alone four or five, are so horrible that we look to any possible scenario to head it off, including the canvassing of 'emerg3ency' responses including the suspension of democratic processes.

I am suggesting that we have to face up to the fact that, due to widespread denial and political inertia, the global temperature will inevitably increase by 2ºC, will likely exceed 3ºC and may blow out to 4ºC over this century. Three or four degrees now seems likely because our political leaders cannot confront the scientific facts, and meet resistance from business and the public to talking about what is needed.

What does this mean for Australia? The prediction of impacts is not a sure science, but here are some of the best estimates from the CSIRO as to what a 3-4 degree global temperature increase would mean for Australia.[3]

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[1] James Hanson et al., 'Dangerous human-made interference with climate: a GISS modelE study', *Atmospheric Chemistry and Physics*, 7, 2287-2312, 2007.
[2] IPCC, Report of Working Group I of the IPCC, 2007. p. 828
http://ipcc-wg1.ucar.edu/wg1/Report/AR4WG1_Pub_Ch10.pdf

- A doubling of the number of very hot days (over 35ºC) in the Eastern states – in other words long and very hot summers will be much more common.

- A doubling or trebling of deaths among older people due to heat stroke.

- Catastrophic mortality of coral species annually, including a 95% decrease in the distribution of Great Barrier Reef species.

- Loss of more than half of the core habitat for Eucalyptus species. Imagine our country with more than half of the gum trees gone.

- Possible 50 per cent fall in water flows in the Murray Darling Basin. We are already caught up in intractable fights over the water in the system.

- Substantial increases in extreme weather events, including cyclones, bushfires, and storm tides.

In other words, this country will shift into a different and very unpleasant climate, and it will last for hundreds of years.

The story does not end there because climate scientists are now becoming increasing worried about the possibility of non-linear events, or climate tipping points. In a recent paper titled 'Scientific reticence and sea level rise',[4] James Hansen discusses the traditional caution of scientists that has led them to downplay the risks of sea level rise of several metres due to the collapse of the West Antarctic ice sheet. He argues that scientists are more worried about being accused of 'crying wolf' than they are of being accused of 'fiddling while Rome burns'.

Hansen discusses the pressures on scientists to be conservative, noting that journals are more likely to publish their papers if they are cautious and filled with caveats. He argues that the IPCC consensus process naturally favours caution and understatement of dangers.

> There is enough information now, in my opinion, to make it a near certainty that IPCC BAU [business as usual] climate forcing scenarios would lead to a disastrous multi-metre sea level rise on the century time scale.[5]

When the world's foremost climate scientist tells us that unless we act soon to sharply cut our emissions then we are near certain to experience sea-level rise of several metres, I become very afraid. I become very afraid because I see little evidence to sustain a belief that the world can do anything like what is needed.

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[3] B. L. Preston and R. N. Jones, 'Climate Change Impacts on Australia and the Benefits of Early Action to Reduce Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions', A consultancy report for the Australian Business Roundtable on Climate Change February, 2006

[4] James Hansen, 'Scientific reticence and sea level rise', *Environmental Research Letters*, 2(2007)

[5] Ibid., p. 5

I was reminded of this by the reaction to a paper recently released by my Institute on the need to begin tackling greenhouse gas emissions from aviation. The paper made the perfectly reasonable point that, if we are aiming to cut our emissions by 60 per cent by 2050, ALP policy, then if we do nothing about the extraordinary growth of aviation emissions aeroplanes will account for our entire greenhouse gas emission allowances by 2050. As there is no feasible technological solution to emissions from aviation − essentially, they have to burn kerosene to stay in the air − we must consider limiting the growth of the industry.

This argument is now accepted, in principle at least, in Europe, yet our paper sparked a series of extraordinary attacks on us by the industry, notably Virgin Blue, and the Government. Their world view is so inseparably bound up with continued growth that they are simply immune to the facts; they will not countenance them. They will not even propose an alternative analysis. They just deny that it could be true.

In the climate change debate, while the dangers of global warming have been deliberately understated, those opposed to taking action have engaged in absurd exaggeration of the economic costs of cutting emissions. The Prime Minister, various ministers and the fossil fuel lobby have for years claimed that cutting emissions would be economically ruinous, cause massive job losses and destroy our international competitiveness. None of these claims is backed by credible evidence and can easily be shown to be false.

James Hansen reminds us that taking measures to reduce the risks of these catastrophic events will require us to begin immediately to shift onto a radically different energy and greenhouse gas emissions path. At present such a shift is politically unimaginable; yet if we do not imagine it very soon then generations to come will pay very dearly indeed.

While sceptics and conservative newspapers accuse climate scientists of being alarmist, in fact the opposite is the truth: they are too afraid of being accused of being alarmist to state the dangers as they understand them.

In order to avoid the worst of these forecasts the world will have to dramatically cut greenhouse gas emissions. Given our very high emissions, Australia will have to do even more. A recent paper by Andrew Macintosh at the Australia Institute asked how much of our 'carbon budget' for the entire century have we have consumed already, if we set the objective of limiting global emissions so as to stabilise concentrations at, say, 550 ppm (itself a target that is too high).[6]

Assuming emissions are allocated on a per capita basis using 2000 population levels, by 2010 Australia is likely to have consumed nearly half of our total allowed emissions for the entire century, leaving 54 per cent to be distributed over the remaining 90 years. To stay within the 550 ppm budget, CO_2 emissions would have to be approximately 42 per cent below 2005 levels by 2015 and more than 90 per cent below by 2021.

[6] Andrew Macintosh, *Australia's 21st Century Carbon Budget: How much have we consumed?*, Australia Institute Research Paper No. 45, July 2007

In saying these things I know that there is a good chance that the aggressive voices of the denialists, along with our environment minister Malcolm Turnbull, will attack me for being alarmist. It's no fun being trashed in public, yet Hansen is right to believe that the responsibility to the truth, and to future generations, is far greater than any fear of personal vilification.

The continuing campaign of denial

Let me now make some observations on the continuing campaign of disinformation being conducted by climate change sceptics. Perhaps naively, I thought that now that even the Government has done a U-turn the sceptics would accept defeat and retire to lick their wounds. But, no; they have ramped up their attacks with the explicit objective of trying to bamboozle the public about the science of climate change thereby creating the impression that the scientists cannot make up their minds. Let me refer to three of the more egregious instances where sceptics have distorted the facts.

The ABC: The Great Global Warming Swindle

First, let me comment on the ABC's decision to screen the denialist documentary *The Great Global Warming Swindle*. Most people are inclined to take the view that, although they doubt the views put forward in it, it's fair enough for a different view to be put. That is how the ABC defended its decision. But a bit of background may change this.

A few years ago the ABC screened a two-part British documentary about environmentalism entitled *Against Nature*. According to the publicity material, the documentary characterised 'environmentalist ideology as unscientific, irrational and anti-humanist'. *Against Nature* created a furore after it was broadcast in Britain, not least for its extraordinary claims that modern environmentalism has its roots in Nazi Germany and that self-interested environmentalists are responsible for enormous suffering in the Third World.

The screening of *Against Nature* here and in the UK was a considerable coup for right-wing groups that view environmentalism as a threat to capitalism and freedom. But the most remarkable feature of the documentary emerged only after it was shown in Britain. It was revealed that the program makers were linked to an obscure political group named the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP). A Trotskyist splinter group, the RCP published a controversialist journal titled *Living Marxism* (later *LM Magazine*), which frequently ran bitter attacks on environmentalism, describing it as a middle-class indulgence or a neo-colonial smoke-screen.

The journal also took contrarian positions on other international issues, including opposing sanctions against the apartheid regime in South Africa, support for the Bosnian Serb forces and the Hutu militias and opposition to the ban on land mines. Several of the people interviewed in *Against Nature* had links to *LM Magazine* and the RCP. The producer and director of the documentary, Martin Durkin, also had close links to the party.

All of this would be history except for one fact. Martin Durkin is also the writer and director of *The Great Global Warming Swindle*. Durkin has a sorry history of swindling people himself. After *Against Nature* was screened in Britain the television regulator demanded that Channel 4 broadcast an apology because the film distorted or misrepresented the views of environmentalists and scientists who had been persuaded to appear on it.

In another Durkin documentary promoting genetic engineering, two scientists complained that their views had been misrepresented with one saying she felt 'completely betrayed and misled'. A researcher hired to work on a Durkin documentary arguing that breast implants are good for women resigned saying that the program makers had ignored the facts and made misleading claims.

Sure enough, some of those who appeared in *The Great Global Warming Swindle* felt cheated. Professor Carl Wunsch, a leading researcher on ocean circulation and climate, wrote: 'I feel angry because they completely misrepresented me'.

Earlier this year, *The Times* reported that when two eminent scientists collaborating with Durkin on his next film emailed him with concerns about the way the science was presented in *Swindle* they received an expletive-filled tirade. Dr Armand Leroi, from Imperial College London, was called a 'big daft cock' and told to 'go and f*** yourself'.

Durkin has been forced to cut his latest documentary by a third, taking out the more scandalous and indefensible claims. As for the various 'facts' in *Swindle* put forward to support the thesis that global warming is a giant conspiracy carried out by scientists who want to boost their research funding, every one has been refuted by eminent scientists. For example:

- the idea that the troposphere has warmed less than the earth's surface (which would be inconsistent with global warming) emerged in the 1990s but was shown to be based on some incorrect data measurements;

- the claim that volcanic eruptions emit more carbon dioxide than burning fossil fuels is simply untrue; and

- the central contention of the documentary − that the observed warming is due to increased solar activity − has been thoroughly considered and rejected by the consensus process of climate scientists.

The concoction of scientific distortions in *Swindle* led Britain's most prestigious scientific organisation, The Royal Society, to respond publicly by declaring: 'Those who promote fringe scientific views but ignore the weight of evidence are playing a dangerous game'.

Durkin and the other climate denialists hide behind the respectable veil of scientific scepticism. But there is a sharp distinction between healthy scepticism and cynical manipulation of the facts. *Swindle* is not a contribution to scientific debate but dangerous

mischief-making in an area where the stakes could not be higher. According to the world's best scientists, if we do nothing millions of people in poor countries will die from crop failures and diseases attributable to human-induced global warming.

In defending his decision to purchase *Swindle*, the ABC's director of television, Kim Dalton, claimed that we should be listening to 'a full range of views'. Does he really believe that? Would the ABC broadcast the lunatic conspiracy theories of Lyndon LaRouche in order to 'hear all voices'? (Incidentally, the LaRouche organisation loves *Swindle* and is actively promoting it on university campuses.)

In making judgements about documentary programs shouldn't Mr Dalton require a modicum of credibility and adherence to minimal journalistic standards, as well as looking for good entertainment? If a film-maker is known to have a history of bitter complaints from people he has interviewed, and been censured by the regulators for dishonest practices, does that not ring an alarm bell in today's ABC? In truth, the ABC has been conned by a very clever propagandist.

The Australian Verballing the Dr Pachauri

Now for my second case. In *Scorcher* I discuss at some length the role of the media in the global warming debate and particularly the role of *The Australian* newspaper, which for years under the editorship of Chris Mitchell had been conducting a sustained war on climate science and the Kyoto Protocol. Mitchell was notorious among environmentalists in Queensland for his anti-green views while editor of *The Courier-Mail*.

Mitchell has not simply turn over editorial space and opinion pages to climate change sceptics and denialists, he also allowed the news pages themselves to become a parody of dispassionate journalism, a phenomenon that reached a climax in the lead-up to Al Gore's visit last year and included serious distortions of the reports of the IPCC. In Scorcher I am particularly critical of the reports and opinion pieces by the newspaper's environment writer Matthew Warren, whom I noted joined the paper last year from his previous position as a PR operative for the NSW coal industry.

However, with the sharp shift in political opinion on climate change in Australia, coupled with the fact that Rupert Murdoch last year switched sides in the global warming debate, I had expected *The Australian* to start playing a straighter bat on the issue. After all, News Ltd and *The Australian* had announced that they were to go carbon neutral. How wrong I was.

On August 9th *The Australian* carried a front page story that opened with the following statement:

> The head of the world's leading climate change organisation has backed the Howard Government's decision to defer setting a long-term target for reducing greenhouse emissions until the full facts are known.

The story, by Matthew Warren, reported the alleged opinions of Dr Rajendra Pachauri, the chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, who was visiting Australia.

Those of us who know Dr Pachauri and his opinions, including his strong support for the Kyoto Protocol, were very surprised indeed that he would endorse the position of the Howard Government on climate change. If it were true then in the last few months he must have had a radical change of heart.

It was no surprise therefore to learn that Pachauri was very displeased at what he called the "total distortion" of his views. He wrote to Chris Mitchell conveying his deep disappointment:

> Nothing that I said in my telephone interview with Mr Matthew Warren implied or even remotely conveyed that I supported or opposed the Australian Government's policies on climate change.[7]

Contrary to normal editorial standards, the newspaper refused to publish his letter correcting the misrepresentation of his views. The letter and the paper's refusal to publish have come to light because the ABC's *Media Watch* program covered the story.[8]

Warren contrasted the ALP's setting of a long-term emission reduction target with the alleged opinions of Pachauri to suggest that the head of the IPCC preferred the Government's approach. This is highly embarrassing to Pachauri who was forced to respond to questions, including one from a diplomatic official, about his reported views, causing him to declare unequivocally in his letter: "I did not even by remote implication endorse the policies of the Australian Government on climate change".

As we have come to expect, *The Australian* not only refused to publish Pachauri's rejoinder but refused to admit any error. Warren claimed that his editors had changed his story to make it appear that Pachauri supported the Government's position.[9] This claim lacks credibility. Warren himself wrote in the article:

> Despite widespread criticism of the Government's decision last month to defer its decision on cutting emissions until next year, the chairman of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change said yesterday he agreed with the approach.

Well, Pachauri said nothing of the sort. One of two things must have happened. Either Warren reported Pachauri accurately and Pachauri, realising his mistake, subsequently tried to change his reported position. Or Warren tricked and misrepresented Pachauri who felt compelled to correct the record. Given Warren's track record in reporting the global warming issue, I'd suggest that only a fool would accept the first option.

The Australian plays hard-ball on the politics of climate change. Like the creationists who believe that victory requires them to destroy the theory of evolution, *The Australian* promotes a form of anti-scientific fundamentalism that has less regard for scientific method than the most committed constructivist on any university campus.

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[7] Letter by Dr Pachauri to the Editor-in-Chief of *The Australian*, reproduced on the Media Watch website.
[8] ABC TV Media Watch, 20 August 2007
[9] Media Watch, 20 August 2007

Since the publication of *Scorcher*, and an ugly series of exchanges before publication in which the newspaper issued various legal threats to the publisher, *The Australian* has rarely missed an opportunity to attack me.

No informed person can consider *The Australian* newspaper to be a serious journal of record.

Michael Duffy's denialist tango

My third case is that of Michael Duffy, who has been writing sceptical opinion pieces in the *Sydney Morning Herald* for years. He often gives air time to denialists on his ABC Radio program Counterpoint. The decisive shift in international opinion on global warming has not caused him to go back into his box, let alone recant his sceptical views. Instead he has ramped up his attacks, clutching at every straw provided by the small but effective network of professional denialists in the United States.

Writing in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Saturday 18th August, he reproduced the latest snippet of denialist "evidence" to argue that all of the climate scientists have, for more than a decade, got it wrong. This time the triumphant disproof arises from a correction to the temperature data for the United Sates, which is regularly calculated by NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies. The correction was necessitated by some errors in the assumptions about the location of various meteorological stations in the United Sates.

Duffy suggested that the Goddard Institute deliberately tried to keep the change quiet because it undermined the case of what he calls "climate change orthodoxy", and claimed that "the discovery that it got one of the central data sets of global warming science and debate wrong is embarrassing and disturbing". He said that the new data showed that 1934, and not 1998, was the hottest year on record. He concluded by suggesting that "maybe we and our weather are not as unusual as some want to believe".

In truth, Duffy's piece, like stories carried by denialists around the world, was a massive distortion.[10] Duffy's piece was written in a way that suggested that the data correction undermined the temperature record for the whole world. In fact, the data correction applied only to the United States and has had no detectable effect at all on estimates of mean global warming.

The corrections to the US temperature data affect only the years since 2000, reducing them by an average of about 0.15ºC. Previously, both 1934 and 1998 were identified as the hottest years on record with the difference between the measured temperatures for the two years hard to detect statistically. The correction saw the earlier year just pip the latter one, but again the difference was not statistically significant. (Using the old data 1998 was estimated to have been 0.01ºC higher than 1934; with the new data is was 0.02ºC

[10] See, in particular, James Hansen's response. "The Real Deal: Usufruct & the Gorilla". August 2007. http://www.columbia.edu/~jeh1/realdeal.16aug20074.pdf

lower.)[11] There is no evidence to suggest that the new data will change the trend. The conclusion of real climate scientists is as follows:

> Sum total of this change? A couple of hundredths of degrees in the US rankings and no change in anything that could be considered climatically important (specifically long term trends).[12]

Duffy, having spent most of his opinion piece arguing that the data errors represent a severe blow to the whole global warming case, is forced to admit at the end of his piece that the impact of the data change on global mean temperatures is imperceptible. But he reveals his bias by declaring "strictly speaking this is correct". No, it is not correct strictly speaking; it is just correct. The data correction makes no perceptible impact on measured increase in global warming and do nothing to cast doubt on the science of climate change.

Duffy will probably argue that healthy scepticism is good for the debate; but his is not healthy scepticism, it's denialism that has contempt for the truth. I have not checked them all but I am willing to bet that not once has Duffy written a piece about climate change in which he announces that new evidence *strengthens* the evidence for climate change. It's all one-way for Duffy, who has in the past used Michael Crichton, the popular novelist, as an authority on climate change science.

Reviewing Crichton's novel *State of Fear*, Duffy wrote approvingly: 'Crichton believes green groups have invented this crisis to attract members and money. For the greens, no crisis means no cash'. He concluded: 'So next time there's a sweltering day, think about *State of Fear* and just lie back and enjoy the heat'.[13]

I'd like to suggest that next time there's a sweltering day, think about Michael Duffy as one of those who has worked hard to slow down global efforts to tackle the most severe threat facing humankind.

Mr Turnbull's Lies

The most dangerous man in Australia today is Malcolm Turnbull. While out in public spruiking the Government's concern about global warming, alternately aggressive and oleaginous, in private he is happy to say that he is a climate change sceptic. I know this for a fact. His public life is mired in deception. Often he becomes so tangled up in the lies he feels he must tell that one almost feels sorry for him.

For in essence, Mr Turnbull is a propagandist.

Propaganda often works through fabrications so audacious that opponents are shell-shocked and unable to respond. This technique has been adopted by Mr Turnbull in his frequent claim that Australia is 'leading the world' in the response to the climate crisis.

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[11] See the Real Climate website where this is explained. http://www.realclimate.org/
[12] http://www.realclimate.org/
[13] Michael Duffy, 'Putting the heat on global warming', *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 December 2004.

To counter the widespread view at home and abroad that Australia is a pariah nation in global efforts to tackle global warming, the Federal Government has relentlessly campaigned to persuade voters that the opposite is the case. To succeed it must somehow undo the hold of the facts, and for every fact it has developed a counter-position.

The first fact that had to be countered was that Australia did extraordinarily well out of the Kyoto negotiations in 1997. After playing diplomatic hard-ball, Australia was conceded a very generous deal at the Kyoto conference. Environment minister Robert Hill, who led our delegation, was feted by his colleagues; indeed, he received a standing ovation at the first Cabinet meeting after his return.

Yet the Howard Government soon began to transform an agreement that it hailed as a great victory into a bad deal that would wreck the Australian economy. This repudiation of a gift from the rest of the world created widespread resentment, and a deep unease among an Australian public proud of its progressive international reputation.

The desire to counter the lingering smell left by its repudiation of Kyoto led to the formation in 2005 of the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate, known as AP6. Although pushed by the USA and Australia as an alternative to Kyoto, AP6 was soon seen as a smokescreen to obscure our withdrawal from global citizenship. The deception was exposed from the outset by US Republican Senator John McCain, tipped by many to be the next Republican presidential candidate, who described it as 'nothing more than a nice little public-relations ploy'.

The Government's various voluntary greenhouse programs with industry also fit the criteria of publicity stunts with no real effect. When, early in its term, the Government commissioned a review of its flagship Greenhouse Challenge Program, the results showed that only a sixth of the emission cuts claimed for the program were real. Now the Government refuses to allow any independent scrutiny of its programs.

Yet it has continued to proclaim that it has 'world-leading' greenhouse programs.

The only policy that has had a significant effect on greenhouse gas emissions ─ the Mandatory Renewable Energy Target, which led to an investment boom in wind power ─ has been scrapped, with a senior minister privately describing it as 'too successful'.

The comprehensive failure of the Howard Government to take effective measures to cut Australia's emissions is well-understood by experts and policy makers abroad. When a team of German researchers asked hundreds of experts around the world to score industrialised countries according to their commitment to tackle climate change, Australia ranked second last, with only the USA doing worse.

But we need not rely on expert testimony to disprove the level of Howard Government fabrication. There is a simple and incontrovertible test of whether Australia is a world leader or a world laggard: are we reducing, or at least slowing the growth, of our greenhouse gas emissions?

Since the Howard Government came to power, Australia's emissions have increased by 19 per cent, a growth rate more than *double* the average of all other industrialised countries. And the Government itself expects them to grow by another 25 per cent by 2020. This is at a time when the world's climate scientists say we must *reduce* our emissions to avoid the worst effects of global warming.

Among industrialised countries we have the tenth highest level of emissions, higher than the total emissions of Italy and France, each of which have three times the population of Australia. Nor can we avoid the fact that we have the highest levels of greenhouse pollution per person in the industrialised world.

Shifting blame

In the propaganda technique of the big lie there are rules that are inevitably followed: be audacious; never admit fault or wrong; never accept the possibility of alternatives; and, repeat the fabrication so often that people end up accepting it as truth.

This is how the Australian Government has approached climate change over the last decade, an approach now articulated with renewed vigour by Mr Turnbull. Its strategy to avoid responsibility has two prongs ─ displace and defer.

It has repeatedly displaced responsibility from itself, first by fingering developing countries as being 'exempted' from the Kyoto Protocol (itself a lie as almost all developing counties have ratified the treaty). 'We won't act until they do', the Government has insisted. More recently it has shifted the blame specifically onto China ─ there is no point us acting if China 'pollutes the environment to its heart's content', in the words of Alexander Downer.

The Europeans have also been blamed; they are just pretending to cut their emissions to impose a cost on Australia, goes the argument. Most recently, the bizarre policy of allocating $200 million to reduce logging in the Third World is another attempt to shift responsibility from the need to reduce fossil emissions at home. At the 2005 Montreal climate negotiations the Australian delegation actually helped close down discussion of limiting deforestation, saying that it was premature to address incentives for reduced deforestation.

The second prong of the strategy is to defer action. While imposing no effective measures to cut our emissions now, the Government has put its faith in the development of 'clean coal' technologies and nuclear power, the most important features of which are that neither would have a significant effect on our greenhouse emissions for at least 15-20 years.

While the urgency of the problem demands that Australia begins to cut its emissions now, the Government's response is to shift responsibility to other countries or to future generations.

Seductive lies

With no basis in fact, Mr Turnbull's claim that Australia is a world leader should be seen as an epic lie of the kind that becomes possible only for those who hold a fervent belief in a greater cause that justifies a falsehood of this magnitude. In this case, the belief is that Australia's future is tied inescapably to exploiting our coal reserves, an objective that has been set out in a number of official papers.

The burning question is whether Mr Turnbull can succeed in his grand deception; whether, by repeating it often enough, people will begin to believe it.

Expert liars, whether con-men, psychopaths or unscrupulous politicians, know that in the public mind the facts are often a weak defence in the face of persistent and passionate fabrications by figures of authority, particularly when they know that the lies they are telling are one's that the listener wants to hear.

It is worth remembering that in the 1930s the leaders of Europe, still traumatised by the Great War, wanted to believe that the rise of fascism did not mean war, that it was possible to appease an expansionist dictator and live in peace. Winston Churchill was one of the few with a clear-eyed understanding of Nazi aggression, yet his warnings were ignored.

For much of his two-decade campaign, Al Gore has been presenting the scientific facts on global warming while most have wanted to cling to more comforting beliefs. But the accumulation of evidence has finally penetrated the public's preference to look the other way and has even overwhelmed the climate sceptics.

The story of Winston Churchill shows that the truth frequently gains a momentum of its own. The question then is how much damage will be done before it prevails. In the case of climate change the answer is 'a great deal'. The ten years lost will translate into enormous additional human misery later this century. If Mr Turnbull perseveres with the lies the misery will only accumulate, and add to the imbalance on his karmic ledger.

Since coming to power, so many lies have been told by the Howard Government about climate change that the rational stance now is to assume that everything it says is untrue. The Government's systematic falsehoods on climate change have recently ceased to seduce the public. Why? Perhaps it is because the stakes are now seen to be too high. Perhaps it is because the consequences of continuing to accept them are too awful. In the end there is a limit to the gullibility of the public. Over climate change the limit has now been reached.