

Tony Abbott's London speech is another salvo in the interminable climate policy war

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Tonight (Monday) former Prime Minister Tony Abbott will be in London to give a speech to the Global Warming Policy Foundation, titled "Daring to Doubt", in which he will reportedly argue that climate policy is "shutting down industries". (It's not clear if he's bought carbon offsets for the 10 tonnes of carbon that a return flight to the UK will release into the atmosphere.) Whatever talking points and soundbites he presents will inevitably be interpreted as yet another salvo in the Coalition's ferocious and interminable war over energy and climate policy.

The venue is the same one where Abbott's mentor John Howard U-turned on his earlier climate policy U-turn. In a 2013 speech, Howard disparagingly declared that "one religion is enough", despite having belatedly pledged in 2006 to introduce an emissions trading scheme, only to lose to Kevin Rudd the following year.

Who are the GWPF anyway?

The Global Warming Policy Foundation was set up in 2009 by Nigel Lawson, who in the 1980s served as Chancellor of the Exchequer (the UK equivalent of treasurer) in Margaret Thatcher's government, but is arguably more famous these days as Nigella's dad.

The foundation was founded just days after the first so-called "Climategate" emails were leaked. But after complaints, in 2014 the UK Charity Commission rejected the notion that the organisation provides an educational resource, concluding that:

The [GWPF] website could not be regarded as a comprehensive and structured educational resource sufficient to demonstrate public benefit. In areas of controversy, education requires balance and neutrality with sufficient weight given to competing arguments.

Ahead of the Commission's report, the Global Warming Policy Forum was born as the organisation's campaigning arm, free from the regulations that govern charities.

Despite its loud demands for crystal-clear transparency about climate science, and its repeated claims that scientists are swayed by big fat grants, the GWPF is oddly cagey about its own funding. In a 2012 BBC Radio programme, Lawson said he relied on friends who "tend to be

richer than the average person and much more intelligent than the average person”. An investigation by the website DeSmog has dug up some more information.

More recently the GWP Forum has been in the news because it appointed a pro-Brexit oil company boss to its board and because in August Lawson appeared on BBC Radio to attack Al Gore, accusing the Nobel prizewinning climate activist of peddling “the same old claptrap” and adding: “People often fail to change and he says he hasn’t changed, he’s like the man who goes around saying ‘the end of the world is nigh’ with a big placard”.

Lawson wasn’t done. He also claimed that “according to the official figures, during this past 10 years, if anything, mean global temperature, average world temperature, has slightly declined”.

Factcheckers were quick off the mark, and the BBC was chided by, among others, Professor Brian Cox (a year on from bringing his graph to Q&A to try to educate the British-Australian politician Malcolm Roberts).

Days later Lawson admitted that his figures were not from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, but from a meteorologist who works for the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank founded by Charles Koch.

Abbott the weathervane

Anyway, back to Abbott. Digging around in the archives throws up some amusing surprises about him, as befits a man who has been making headline since 1977. In 1994 an environmental campaign to recreate Tasmania’s Lake Pedder found an unusual ally in the newly minted Member for Warringah, who wrote an article in *The Australian* that plaintively asked:

If we can renovate old houses and old cars, rejuvenate works of art, recreate forgotten languages and restore degraded bushland, why can’t we rehabilitate the site of a redundant dam?

Abbott seems not to have been particularly exercised by climate policy during the first decade of his parliamentary career. But once the issue hit the top of the political agenda, Abbott was – in his own words to Malcolm Turnbull – “a bit of a weathervane”.

He helped convince Howard to agree to some sort of ETS proposal during the ultimately futile bid to fend off Kevin Rudd in 2007. In July 2009, in a front-page story in *The Australian* headed “Abbott – we have to vote for ETS”, he was quoted as saying:

The [Rudd] government’s emissions trading scheme is the perfect political response to the public’s fears. It’s a plausible means to limit carbon emissions that doesn’t impose any obvious costs on voters.

However, by September 2009, with Malcolm Turnbull’s leadership on the rocks (remember Godwin Grech?), Abbott made a fateful trip to Beaufort in rural Victoria, and

discovered that the room loved him saying “climate change is absolute crap”. The weathervane had made an abrupt about-face.

As Paul Kelly notes in his 2014 opus *Triumph and Demise*, then-Senator Nick Minchin was crucial in convincing Abbott that there was no serious electoral price to be paid in opposing Kevin Rudd’s Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme.

Turnbull was on the ropes, and Abbott won the leadership ballot by one vote. As David Marr recounts, the party was almost as stunned as the nation. “God Almighty,” one of the Liberals cried in the party room that day. “What have we done?”

The ensuing years need no extended recap, though two points are worth mentioning. The first is the admission by Abbott’s former chief of staff Peta Credlin that the “carbon tax” that was going to be the end of the world... wasn’t a carbon tax.

The second is that former environment minister Greg Hunt recently rebutted the claim that backbenchers prevented further cuts to the Renewable Energy Target under Abbott’s prime ministership.

Backed into a corner

The upshot is that Abbott has, as Philip Coorey recently observed, totally painted himself into a corner on energy and renewables.

Mind you, it may not matter that much to him, given that his apparent aim is not to “do a Rudd” and return to the helm, but simply to drive a wrecking ball through Malcolm Turnbull’s prime ministership – with climate and energy policy as collateral damage.

As Abbott accepts another pat on the back from a roomful of climate deniers in London, we may wonder how long business interests in Australia will tolerate his wrecking, undermining and sniping. There is bewilderment and dismay at the destabilising effect on policy.

Among the business lobby, BHP has evidently forced the departure of Brendan Pearson as head of the Minerals Council in protest at the council’s similarly backward stance. That much is within their gift. But with regard to the Coalition government, those businesses can do little but despair at the handful of recalcitrant MPs who have nominated climate policy as the ditch in which they will die, in service of the culture war.

The hot air just doesn’t seem to be letting up, any more than our hot summers will in the future.