



US Senators detail a climate science "web of denial" but the impacts go well beyond their borders

Australians have been both helpers and victims of the fossil fuelled web of climate science denial being detailed in the U.S Senate

Graham Readfearn

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By the middle of this week, about 20 Democratic Senators in the US will have stood up before their congress to talk about the fossil fuelled machinery of climate science denial.

The Senators are naming the fossil fuel funders, describing the machinery and calling out the characters that make up a "web of denial".

"The web is so big, because it has so much to protect," said the Rhode Island Senator Sheldon Whitehouse, who bookended the first evening of speeches.

The senate heard how fossil fuel companies such as ExxonMobil, Peabody Energy and the billionaire oil brothers Charles and David Koch had funnelled millions into groups that had spread doubt about the causes of climate change.

In a resolution also being tabled, the upper house will be asked to acknowledge that the fossil fuel industry had done just what the tobacco industry had done – "developed a sophisticated and deceitful campaign that funded think tanks and front groups, and paid public relations firms to deny, counter, and obfuscate peer-reviewed research" and "used that misinformation campaign to mislead the public and cast doubt in order to protect their financial interest."

Groups like the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), the Heartland Institute, the Committee for a Constructive Tomorrow and many, many others are under scrutiny for the way they have attacked the science linking fossil fuel burning to climate change while accepting cash from fossil fuel interests.

Whitehouse also took time to describe the large body of work in peer-reviewed journals that have examined the funding, the networks and the tactics of organised climate science denial. Climate science denial is itself a live area of academic research.

Already, groups being named in the speeches are reacting. The CEI called it “a McCarthy-style attempt to shut down the democratic process”. When Senator Chuck Schumer said those who had participated in the web should be “ashamed of themselves”, Steve Milloy said he had “never been prouder.”

But the impact of climate science denial – the decades of policy delays, the confusion among the general public and the deliberate politicization of the science – does not stop at the US border.

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Australia has been a consumer, a contributor and a victim of the web of climate science denial.

Australia has long provided personnel and contributors to the efforts of several of the key groups being named in the US Senate.

The late Dr Robert Carter, once of James Cook University, was an advisor and active contributor to several of the groups, including the Heartland Institute and the Science and Public Policy Institute (SPPI).

Malcolm Roberts (the wannabe One Nation Australian Senator) and bloggers JoNova and her husband David Evans have all written reports for the SPPI that claim human-caused climate change is some sort of elaborate hoax.

Retired Australian meteorologist William Kininmonth is also an SPPI science advisor.

Australian politicians have flown over to the United States to speak at conferences for climate science denialists hosted by the Heartland Institute – the group that once compared the acceptance of human-caused climate science to the values of terrorist and mass murderer Ted “Unabomber” Kaczynski.

Former Family First Senator Steve Fielding, current Liberal Senator Cory Bernardi and the current Nationals MP George Christensen have all spoken at Heartland’s conferences. The conferences themselves have been enthusiastically sponsored by several Australian groups over the years.

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Australia’s role in the web of denial has been running since the 1990s, when groups like the CEI flew staff to Australia to firm up opposition to greenhouse gas regulations around the world.

Partnerships were formed with groups like the Melbourne-based Institute of Public Affairs, which has hosted and supported many visits from US-based climate science denialists.

Once here, those speakers will write columns for newspapers, do radio and television interviews and travel around the country to give talks.

In 2011 when the Gillard Government was trying to introduce laws to put a price on greenhouse gas emissions, the stopgillardscarbontax.com enlisted [Pat Michaels](#), of the Cato Institute, as a science advisor. Cato is another member of the web of denial. Michaels once estimated that about 40 per cent of his funding came from the petroleum industry.

The impact of all this on the Australian public and the way the media covers climate science is clear.

There remains a split among Australians about the cause of climate change, despite multiple studies showing that more than 90 per cent of climate scientists are in agreement that it's the burning of fossil fuels that's driving up temperatures, fuelling weather extremes, raising sea levels, melting ice sheets and killing corals (and that's just a few of the impacts).

The public becomes doubtful and the media, so often looking for controversy and conflict, has been a conduit for the fossil fuelled messages.

The fossil fuel companies, meanwhile, retain a grip on their so-called "social licence to operate."

When Senator Whitehouse said the web of denial is "so big, because it has so much to protect" we might also think that we have so much to lose.

In failing to unravel the web of denial and by allowing our public discourse to be polluted by fossil fuelled PR outfits, ideologues and pseudo-science, who knows how much time we may have lost.

Twenty five years?