

“Australia will never be the same again”

Article by Christine Milne

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Australia seems to be a continent of contradictions. It is one of the countries most affected by climate change, currently fighting terrible bushfires, and yet it is also one of the worst-performing countries when it comes to climate action. Ambitious environmental legislation put into place by the Greens was turned over in 2013 and nothing serious has replaced it since. We spoke to Christine Milne, Global Greens Ambassador and former Leader of the Australian Green Party, about the bushfires, Australian climate policy, and the future of the Green Party.

Green European Journal: Not a day goes by without headlines on the terrible bushfires in Australia. Yet, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has argued that these bushfires are nothing new to Australia. Is that the case?

Christine Milne: This is not bushfire-as-usual. The country is burning. Thousands of people have lost their homes. Communities are breaking down. This is extinction. More than an estimated billion animals have died. We are experiencing an ecological catastrophe. Back in the days, those areas that were burned down could recover and regenerate over time, but the reality now is that the gaps between bushfire events have shrunk so that recovery is not possible. Life in Australia is never going to go back to the way it was. Australia is irreversibly changing.

How is the political leadership responding to this climate catastrophe?

They are not up to the job. We have a government that refuses to accept global warming and its effect on the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events. They have argued that Australia is a country of floods and fires and that it's normal. But this is not normal. Thanks to their attitude there has not been any planning for climate adaptation or an emergency response. To the contrary, the current government abolished the National Climate Change Adaptation Facility, which we Greens supported and funded when we were holding the balance of power.

When this climate catastrophe was unravelling in Australia, the Prime Minister was on holiday in Hawaii. When Sydney was surrounded by fire and places were burning down, the Defence Minister was vacationing in Bali. They have not been there for the country in this hour of need. Australia is not handling this emergency well.

What do Australians make of this?

People are angry. When the Prime Minister comes to visit, some of them tell him to leave and never come back. There have also been calls for a royal commission to look into how this catastrophe has unfolded. At the moment, it is difficult to see how the government will recover from this. But one fundamental difference between Australia and European countries is that we have a high level of concentrated media ownership by Rupert Murdoch, who is all out backing the government.

Serious debate is needed, particularly on Australia's climate policy. Unfortunately, only the Greens are insisting on stronger Australian climate targets and shutting down coal-fired power stations and preventing new coal mines or gas fields. The Labor opposition is just as enthusiastic about coal mining and gas exports as the government is.

It's contradictory, Australia is one of the countries most affected by climate change and yet it does not seem to have an ambitious climate policy.

It's simple: Australia is a resource-based economy. Its national income depends on the extraction of minerals and its business community is dominated by resource industries. There is also no national body that investigates corruption, there are massive political donations by large resource corporations, and there is the Murdoch media. So there are a lot of vested interests associated with coal, gas, oil and resource extraction in Australia who essentially own the political process.

What about the climate movement? All over the world people are taking to the streets demanding climate action. To what extent is this having an impact?

The climate movement is huge in Australia. We have had hundreds of thousands of people rallying. In my hometown alone, around 20 per cent of the population took to the street during the Global Climate March. But Australia's elections are decided by a few marginal seats, which tend to be dominated by resource-heavy industries. So you can have millions of people marching in the streets but it'll make no difference because millions of dollars from the fossil fuel industry are flowing into Australian politics. The average person in Australia is completely opposed, for example, to the opening up of a huge new coal mine – the Adani coal mine – in Queensland. And no matter the opposition, the coalition government and the Labor party support this mine. They just do not listen to the people and that's why there is such a growing level of disaffection and distrust in politicians in Australia, just like there is in so many other countries in the Western world.

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The major political parties in Australia have no effective climate policy. The Liberal-National coalition government ripped up our emissions trading scheme in 2014. The Liberal, National and Labor parties stuck to a minimal target of 5 per cent greenhouse gas reduction on 2000 levels by 2020. By 2030 the government only wants to reduce emissions by a weak 26-28 per cent below 2005 levels and worse still intends to cheat by carrying over excess Kyoto credits to achieve it. It has no intention of raising ambition as the Paris Agreement requires. We have no market mechanism to bring down emissions and our environment legislation is so weak that new huge coal mines and gas fields continue to be opened up for export, driving planetary warming.

In 2010 the Greens won the balance of power and enabled a Labor minority government. How did you translate that electoral success into policy action?

Holding the balance of power, we were able to push through many of our key policy demands. One condition for our support for the Gillard government was a price on carbon which we delivered with a comprehensive emissions trading scheme and a market price on CO2 to be linked to the EU price in 2015. We put into place a 10 billion dollar fund – the clean energy finance corporation – which has been a major driver in the transition to renewables. We also established the Renewable Energy Agency, which spearheaded research and development on renewables and we developed a carbon farming initiative. And our policies led to environmental success. The Australian Capital Territory is now the first region outside of Europe to source 100 per cent of its electricity from renewables. Our policies brought emissions on a downward trajectory. In fact, the International Energy Agency described the clean energy package that we drove forward with the Labor government as template legislation. But unfortunately, the Liberal-National coalition government has abolished, compromised or backtracked on many of our policies. They have demonstrated what happens when you abolish an emissions trading scheme – emissions go

back up again.

The 2010 election was a historic milestone for the Australian Greens. You were kingmaker and translated your vision into concrete policy. But it must have been a long road travelled. Where do the Australian Greens come from? What are your political roots?

The Australian Greens began in the state of Tasmania. In fact, that's where the Greens globally began. In the 1970s the Tasmanian Labor government was intent on building yet another hydro scheme, drowning Lake Pedder, a magnificent alpine lake with a huge beach. Public opposition to this project was massive. Out of this campaign the political party United Tasmania Group formed in 1972 to contest the election. That was the first Green Party in the world with a concrete set of principles: ecological protection, social justice, participatory democracy and peace and non-violence. These four pillars continue to be the foundation of the Greens. Not long after the United Tasmania Group formed, Petra Kelly [who would become one of the founding members of the German Green party in 1979] came to Australia and witnessed huge protests against the demolition of a heritage area in Sydney. These protests consisted of a combination of environmentalists and trade unionists. The unions put forth a policy that would not allow any worker to take his or her machinery into the area to demolish this heritage area. That policy was called the "green bans". That combination of environmentalists and organised labour was what inspired Petra Kelly to take up the colour Green as a political party identification and contest the European elections as a Green party. That's where Green started.

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Soon after, Green parties were established in other Australian states and in 1992 the Australian Greens formed as a federation of green parties from all six states and two territories of Australia. In the 2019 federal election we secured 10.4 per cent of the vote and hold nine Senate seats out of 76 in the Upper House of Parliament, which is elected on proportionality, and one MP in the House of Representatives, where we have preferential voting. In the states and territories, we currently have 23 elected members and in the Australian Capital Territory, we are in the balance of power with the Labor government and we have the energy ministry. In addition, we have more than 100 local government representatives. So, the Greens are well represented in the Australian political system but would have a greater presence if there was proportional representation.

As Greens, you want Australia to move away from a resource-dependent economy based on coal and gas. Yet, those sectors employ a lot of people and support a lot of families. How do you engage with voters on this issue – what's your economic platform?

Australia can rapidly transition to a 100 per cent renewable energy economy. Unlike European countries we have a vast landmass, we have fantastic potential for wind and solar resources, we could be a renewable energy powerhouse. We could easily transition to a fully renewable economy, electrify agriculture and transport and create lots of jobs in rural areas. The opposition tells people in every coal mining town that Greens will put them out of a job. But that's not true. We are offering jobs. In fact, the people that are putting the coal workers on the streets are the resource companies themselves, as they are pursuing autonomous mines from pit to port. We have driverless trucks, driverless drills, driverless trains, driverless ports – everything is automated. There are large mines in Queensland and Western Australia being entirely run by experts in Brisbane and Perth working in computer centres.

You paint a bleak picture, a kind of Davis vs. Goliath battle, with the Greens and the environmental movement fighting against the big resource industry and media interests. Who are your allies in this fight and what's your strategy to affect change?

Once you talk to the Australian people and explain to them what's happening, they are very supportive and that's why we are getting ten per cent of the vote. For Greens to get to the next ten per cent, we will need those small and medium-sized businesses, which support the new green economy, in actually pushing the green agenda. The problem is that many of them still vote for the Labor party because they don't believe the Greens can ever form a government due to our electoral system. Therefore, one of our priorities is to stop corruption and shift to proportional representation, which would allow the Greens to form governments in various constellations.

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As in the rest of the world, Greens are supported by educated people living in urban areas ranging in the age group 18 to 30. But we also have to break out of that demographic and persuade older people and rural Australia to vote for us. When I took over the Green leadership, I went on a tour of rural Australia, because I was brought up on a farm and entered politics supported by farmers. And when I talked to rural Australians, it wasn't the green policies that were a barrier for voting Green but it was our social policies, and in particular our policies on gay rights, marriage equality, refugees and redistribution of wealth because rural Australia tends to be socially more conservative. One major battle we have to win is against the Murdoch media, which is anti-Green and sensationalist.

In Austria the Greens have for the first time joined the government together with the conservatives, adopting a government programme that's ambitious on climate policy and tough on refugees. Could you ever see the Greens supporting a Liberal-National government?

As long as they are climate deniers, that is impossible. There is no way the Australian Greens could support a Liberal-National party government opposing global action on climate and promoting expanded fossil fuels. That's the key difference between Europe and here. In Europe, there is an across-the-aisle acceptance that you have to do something about climate change. Here in Australia, we have a government of climate deniers. Labour is also difficult. They say they support renewables and a higher level of climate ambition but when it comes down to it, they support new coal mines and new gas fields. But when Greens are in the balance of power, change has been possible.

How do you see Australian politics and the Greens moving forward?

Our country is burning. Political business as usual is not acceptable anymore – it will kill us. Politics in Australia has to change, and I believe that people have now started to realise this. There has to be a coming together to develop an appropriate response that will keep people safe in the future. In order to survive on this continent, we have to think differently. We have to deal with water differently, we have to do agriculture differently, and we need to manage our land differently. In that context, Green politics is at a point where its ideas can finally be turned into political action. So, we need to go out and talk to people about our ideas, our proposals and our thinking.

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My concern is that the government will move in a radically different direction. Its immediate response was the Donald Trump response: Global warming is not responsible for this firestorm in Australia; Australians are responsible for it because they didn't sweep the forest floor. We already have had several people in the government blaming the Greens for the fires. They argue that because the Greens campaign for national parks and protected areas, these forests have burned and worsened the situation. They are likely to run a big campaign on this arguing for the need to destroy the remaining forests, so they don't burn in future. That would be catastrophic for Australian ecosystems and wildlife.

But the likelihood is that the Government will splash cash for rebuilding and the buzz word will be 'adaptation'. Meanwhile there will be no 'mitigation' with business as usual on new coal and gas.

We need the rest of the world to help us and demand that Australia combat this climate catastrophe with increased emission reduction ambition and a rejection of fossil fuel exports. And in this regard I particularly appeal to the Greens. We are one political family globally, we have lots of Green ministers in Europe who participate in the UNFCCC climate talks and trade negotiations. We can affect the necessary change, if we all share information and strategy and work together.



Christine Milne AO is the Global Greens Ambassador. She was appointed following a long career in Green politics in Australia (1989-2015) serving in the national Parliament as Senator for Tasmania and Leader of the Australian Greens. She is Patron of the Smart Energy Council of Australia, Ambassador for the Invasive Species Council, Board Member of The Climate Mobilization and Advisory Board Member of Solar Heads of State, Climate Accountability Institute.

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