

OCCASIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL REPORT February 2014

In my Report last November I analysed the impact of action by the newly elected Abbott Government on climate change in Australia and also the findings of the 5th IPCC Report (Sept.2013) on the global environment. Briefly, the IPCC reported that 95% of the world's climate scientists state emphatically that human activity is the prime cause of global warming, that it was imperative that global emissions of carbon dioxide (CO₂) be reduced and the most effective method would be to leave all fossil fuels in the ground and put all our expertise and investment into development of zero emission renewable energy, such as solar energy and wind.

At the World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos in January, Ban Ki Moon put climate change as one of the principal “Global Risks” in 2014 as it has the potential to exacerbate other drivers of insecurity, such as a crisis in food or water supplies or a major impact on health. Ban Ki Moon stressed that **we all need to act together NOW** if we are to successfully deal with climate change and that this is a critical part of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) by 2015. However, despite his urging action along these lines, the final outcome of the Davos Forum seems to have been, as usual, **growth at all costs**.

The adverse effects of global warming and climate change are many and varied, affecting in particular the poorest people in the world – those in developing countries who have the least opportunity to deal with the environmental crises they face. Evidence for rising temperatures all over the world is absolutely clear – Australia has just experienced its hottest year on record and globally 9 of the 10 hottest years on record have occurred since 2000. Furthermore, the rising temperatures have accelerated the melting of arctic ice, with effects on global weather that are still not totally understood but obviously extremely important. (For starters, the cold ice-melt water sinks to the bottom of the ocean, disturbing normal ocean currents and the temperature gradient in the water. Consequently the temperature of the surface water is effected resulting in changes in air movements near the surface....) The final outcome is more extreme weather events, storms, rising sea levels and much costly damage, especially in coastal regions. Rising temperatures also have a major impact on human health and in Victoria last summer, deaths due to heat stroke and heart attacks increased by 140. Global warming also has obvious effects on agriculture due to unpredictable rainfall and high temperatures, whilst bush fires are another indirect result of climate change.

REGISTRATION: AIA No. A0004465H

ABN 182 270 730 59

OFFICE ADDRESS: Level 1, 15 Collins Street, Melbourne 3000

POSTAL ADDRESS: PO Box 18186, Collins Street East, Melbourne 8003

PHONE / FAX: 03 9421 1602

EMAIL: ncwvic@bigpond.com

WEBSITE: ncwvic.org.au

REGIONAL BRANCHES: Central Gippsland, Geelong, Goulburn Valley (Shepparton)

INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIP (Associates)

A price on carbon emissions could help finance a revolution in energy production, and several scientific papers have shown that, ***given political support and social will, zero emission technologies could be our prime source of energy by 2030 at the latest.*** You just have to recall what was achieved when World War II broke out, how rapidly the economy switched its entire effort to the crisis in hand. But this means we have to start the revolution NOW and not in 10 years plus.

Unfortunately, despite the dire consequences of inaction, it looks unlikely that we will see any dramatic revolution in energy production in the immediate future. China plans to build another 400,000 MW of coal-fired power stations over the next decade whilst there are several similar plants on the drawing board in Australia. Furthermore, the Americans are capitalizing on use of ***cheap shale gas***, greatly boosting their manufacturing industries, and profitably exporting their excess coal to be burnt elsewhere, especially in Europe. Of course this shale gas revolution has a serious downside – it requires “fracking” the rocks to release the gas, by pumping water containing chemicals and sand deep underground, with the real risk of contaminating underground aquifers which supply water for agriculture in the surrounding areas. There is also the risk of methane, a potent greenhouse gas, leaking out during the extraction process, and although shale gas may release less CO₂ than coal when used as an energy source, it is doubtful that the end result is any better than sticking to coal. In Europe, development of renewable energy sources is favoured but coal is still needed to fill their energy needs in the immediate future, especially in Germany where the nuclear power plants have been closed down.

In recent decades a large proportion of people in developed countries like Australia have developed a very comfortable lifestyle, strongly dependent on readily available and affordable energy. However, if urgent action is not taken, climate change will inevitably change our lives dramatically. It is the Government’s responsibility to protect its constituency, ensure water and food supplies, protect the health of people during extreme weather conditions, protect property and educate people about potential environmental crises. The community must be prepared for catastrophic events such as floods, storms and violent weather which are often unpredictable. Meanwhile, as part of this program, the Government should be taking positive action to combat climate change and reduce our CO₂ emissions. Every individual action helps, such as saving electricity, water or recycling. BUT it is global Governments that must take the big steps in dealing with this global problem.

What is our Federal Government doing?

The core item in the Government’s platform is Direct Action, where polluters are paid to reduce their CO₂ emissions below their average output. This is funded from the “Emissions Reduction Fund” i.e. funded through general taxation revenue and the aim is to reduce emissions by 2020 to 5% below our level in 2000. However, many analysts doubt if this action will achieve its stated aim, as the funding available is probably insufficient, it is not a long term plan and implementation will require a huge amount of bureaucracy.

Unfortunately all the other actions taken by the Government must be considered to be environmentally negative. For example, the Climate Change Authority and Clean Energy Financing Corporation are to be abolished, and the Home Energy Saver Scheme and the Environmental Defenders Office cut back severely. The Climate Commission, established to provide public with information about climate change and the environment has also been abolished. Furthermore, Australia is the only country in the world that has dismantled a working carbon price (i.e. a tax on CO₂ emissions), a "tax" that was proving to effectively reduce carbon emissions.

More recently the Government has applied for 74,000 ha of Tasmanian old growth and rain forest to be deleted from its Heritage listing whilst the Great Barrier Reef Authority has approved 3 million cubic metres of dredging silt to be dumped in the marine park it is supposed to protect. Rising temperatures and acidification of the water are already having a devastating impact on the health of the reef and on the plants and animals which call it home. Agricultural runoff containing fertilizers and pesticides encourages the growth of plankton and minute plant life favoured by predators such as Crown of Thorns which are also devastating the coral. It is inevitable that turbidity due to the dumped sediment will spread and will also have a major impact on the health of the reef and its niche in the ecological balance of the eastern coastline.

The dredged material is coming from the huge port developments at Gladstone and Abbot Point, which are poised to become the busiest ports in the world. This development will facilitate increasingly rapid growth in export of coal to China and elsewhere for fuel (ie the emissions released when this coal is burnt are not our responsibility!!)

In conclusion, global warming IS happening and is likely to have a catastrophic impact on human life if urgent action is not taken. However, to most people, this eventuality seems to be eons away and it is not surprising that current sporting events, misdemeanours of our politicians and corruption in the Building Union Movement get the Press headlines. The current heat waves, bushfires and severe floods certainly get covered, but there is no deep analysis as to what caused these events and rarely even a mention of "Climate Change". Polls suggest that many people think climate change is probably a reality, and action is needed – provided it doesn't cost them or interfere with their comfortable lifestyle. Society seems to be paralysed when it come to dealing with such a complex issue which somehow doesn't seem to be a person's responsibility. I urge you to be alert, be aware of the risks of inaction when it comes to climate change, pay attention to community groups such as Environment Victoria, whose members are working tirelessly to inform people and to take practical action – you might even consider joining your local action group! I am not an alarmist when it comes to global warming but the threat to our world is real and it is everyone's responsibility to act responsibly. And always smile at other people – it really does help!

Pat Phair