



KELVIN THOMSON MP

Address to Peninsula School World Environment Day Climate Change Forum

5th June 2007

Thank you very much for the invitation, and I also acknowledge Greg Hunt MP my Parliamentary colleague and everyone in the audience. I represent the electorate of Wills, which is in Melbourne's Northern suburbs, and includes Brunswick, Coburg, Glenroy, Fawkner, Hadfield, Oak Park, Pascoe Vale and Strathmore.

Greg Hunt said he did not learn to drive until he was thirty, and that makes him an unusual kid, I was an unusual kid too. I got interested in Australian birds, plants and animals when I was about ten and I set up a little club which studied these things. We got interested in conservation issues, and through our interest in conservation issues I learnt about the political process and became interested in politics. I decided that governments, for better or for worse, make the sorts of decisions that impact on our environment and what kind of world we live in and what kind of world we pass onto our children and to our grandchildren.

Back then the greatest threat to Australia's plants and birds was habitat destruction and the clearing of habitat. People back then thought if only we could set aside 5% of the state of Victoria, or the nation, as National Park we could protect the areas for these species for all time.

And the good news is that that was achieved. The 5% is there as National Park. The bad news is that it takes more, in that there are renewed threats and even greater threats than what we knew about back then. The greatest threat to our birds, our plants and our animals is this thing called global warming.

Now you have had quite a discussion about it already so I don't want to spend too much time on the science of it, but essentially you have the sun's rays coming to the Earth, some of which are trapped by our atmosphere, and they therefore retain heat. This enables life on Earth to be comfortable and endurable. The fact that we have an atmosphere and that we have carbon in our atmosphere is a fine thing. The problem is that the post industrial era has seen a great increase in concentrations of carbon from 280 parts per million to 380 parts per million in the last couple of hundred years with projections that that will continue to rise and skyrocket dramatically.

And the increase in carbon, those parts per million, is causing the greenhouse effect or global warming, also called climate change. And that is bringing with it changed weather patterns. They are varying in different parts of the world. We have a very complex weather system so that in some parts of the world the most significant things might be things like hurricanes, or in Northern Europe flooding, or if you are in the Pacific Islands the increase in sea levels and extreme weather events.

But the major impact it is having in Australia, in particular for Southern Australia, is drought. So we have seen Perth with declining rainfall and declining water availability over a period of 25 years, dramatically declining. So the Perth climate has literally changed as a result, and we are seeing it in Melbourne too.

Melbourne used to be known as the four seasons in one day city. We all carried around umbrellas. But for the last five or six years we basically have not needed an umbrella. You see that happening in Canberra as well. The projections of the scientists are for more frequent and severe weather events including things like drought, including things like floods and cyclones.

In Australia there will be some other specific impacts. We have the problem of coral bleaching. Australia's Great Barrier Reef is one of the natural wonders of the world, but as the temperatures of the oceans around us warm up this is putting stress on the corals. The corals then bleach as a consequence of this and if the water temperatures continue to rise then the coral dies. Many coral reefs around the world are suffering and the Great Barrier Reef is suffering. This is a tragedy and a tremendous shame. It is also a significant economic impact on Queensland which depends, in that part of the world, very heavily on the tourist industry.

We also have the prospect of changes of loss of snow cover in the Alps and loss of snow cover on glaciers. This is a problem right around the world and we can see it also in Australia. There are predictions that we will have tropical diseases such as dengue fever sucked further south as a result of climate change, making living conditions more suitable for dengue fever to thrive.

So all of these impacts are varied but they are very serious impacts. They are serious impacts on our native birds, plants and animals. They are also very serious impacts on us. And for the people who don't care about the plants and animals I am here to assure you that the economic impacts of climate change are serious as well.

There are health impacts that have been documented. Furthermore if we have things like drought then that impacts on our farming community, it impacts on the price of food, it impacts on the availability of water. We have all been experiencing quite serious water restrictions in recent years. So drought is serious and extreme weather events like cyclones are serious. They lead to increases in insurance premiums and things like that.

The forum session referred to a vision for the future. One vision for the future is if we do not do anything. If we do not do anything then the projections are that our carbon dioxide levels in Australia will by 2020 be 27% above where they are now.

The scientists are telling us that we have to cut our greenhouse gas emissions, cut the carbon dioxide, cut the methane, cut the nitrous oxide. In particular our scientists are saying that we ought to be heading for something like 60% cuts by the year 2050 right around the world. If we can't get those sorts of cuts happening across the globe we will see temperatures rise, we will see sea levels rise and we will see parts of the world become increasingly inhospitable and impossible to live in.

And that in turn will fuel global poverty and conflict around the globe. It will fuel wars, we hear about conflict in Dafur.

One of the things that needs to be understood is that you've got the drying up of Lake Chad which is a tremendously important water body in that area. If you have a loss of water and loss of agricultural land then people will fight over what little remains.

So there is one vision for the future, a bleak vision for the future, if we fail to take steps to tackle global warming and fail to act on what scientists have made perfectly clear for many years now.

There is a bleak future if we don't do anything; there is also a much more positive future. But that requires action.

The sort of action it requires is in the first place international action: collective international action. The global warming problem is not specific to Australia. It's not specific to China. It is everybody's problem and we need to deal with it collectively.

The best effort at dealing with this collectively was done through the United Nations Framework on Climate Change, through the Kyoto protocol. That is why Labor has supported the Kyoto Protocol and why we have been critical of this government's failure to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. The three countries that failed to take the next step of ratifying it were United States, Australia and Kazakhstan. Everyone else ratified the Protocol. We are out of step with collective international action to address global warming.

What we should be doing is ratifying the Kyoto Protocol and putting pressure on other countries including the United States, to do likewise. You never hear that from the Government, you never hear them putting pressure on the United States or putting pressure on China or India or anybody else to take action to contain their own greenhouse gas emissions.

So we need international action.

Secondly, we need to do something about our own emissions. It's true that that percentage of emissions that come from Australia are about one and a half per cent of the world's emissions, but as a per capita user we are up there with the best of them and many other countries can say exactly the same thing, we only emit one and a half per cent of the world's emissions. So if we take that attitude we won't get anywhere. We need to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

In order to do that, we ought to introduce an emissions trading regime. To have a proper emissions trading regime you need to have a target. It's not fair dinkum unless there's a target. It's not good enough for the government to say we will announce a target after the next election. That's the same thing as saying 'we are going to change the funding formula for schools, after the next election we will tell you what it is'. Or 'we are going to change the private health insurance arrangements, after the election we will tell you what it is'. It's not good enough. You need to know what the target is going to be.

Labor has set a target, a 60% cut in emissions by 2050, which will enable us to put a price on carbon and get the benefits that emissions trading can provide. So it's very important that we do that and it's important that we are fair dinkum about that.

The third thing that we need to be serious about is renewable energy. Now, the government has had a renewable energy target but it has been too modest. It has driven some projects. You can see those wind energy projects springing up around the place which weren't here before, but it has been too modest. The share of renewable energy has essentially been flat lining at under 10%. Now other countries are up there at 15%, 20%. People have been critical of China, but they have a renewable energy objective of 16% by the year 2020. So these sorts of initiatives need to be undertaken. Labor has said we will have a substantial increase in the renewable energy target. And in doing that we will be able to make the energy industries of the future move in the direction of wind, of solar power, of geothermal and the like. If we are serious about a carbon constrained future we need to move to renewable energy and lifting the renewable energy target is a clear sign of whether a government is fair dinkum or not about these things.

There are other initiatives as well which I think are important. Clean coal is important. We have talked about the \$500 million initiative in that area and also for motor vehicles, Labor will allocate \$500 million for getting clean, green motor vehicles so we are not running them in the way that we are now which is giving rise to green house gas emissions. Not that we have to take our cars off the road. The government talking about this sort of stuff is just a scare campaign. We simply need to change the fuels by which our motor vehicles are operated and allow us to move to a carbon constrained future.

Final thing from me is, don't feel like there is nothing you can do, or that this problem is too big for us. I believe that people have immense capacity to do good things both individually and collectively. If we work together in this country and work together with other countries around the world, then this is a problem that with human ingenuity we have the capacity to solve.

Thank you very much.