

Climate Change

a bigger threat than terrorism



The world should make no mistake: in 2005, global warming is a real and present weapon of mass destruction.

Its current, day-to-day effects - along with frightening predictions of its future impact - demand concerted and immediate action, both at home and internationally.

The response to the Asian tsunami disaster on Boxing Day, 2004, was nothing short of extraordinary.

The speedy and generous global aid effort - including that pledged through the special UN summit held immediately after the tsunami - showed just how much we can achieve when we put our heads together and come up with practical solutions to address human suffering and environmental devastation.

It is now time for us to show similar resolve on the issue of global warming.

Recently, I wrote to the Prime Minister, Premiers and Chief Ministers seeking a special meeting of the Council of Australian Governments, or COAG.

The sole topic on the agenda should be the drawing up of a comprehensive, ambitious national response to the terrible threat posed today by climate change.

Why the urgency?

A series of international reports has recently revealed that the metabolism of the world's economy is on a collision course with the metabolism of our planet.

It is vital that governments across the world start giving climate change the attention - attention backed by genuine action - that they have been recently giving the threat of global terrorism and the results of the tsunami.

It is time for leaders to get together and boldly state their determination to unite and "prevail" against the threat posed by climate change.

I am hopeful the world's inaction on climate change will end in 2005.

I am encouraged by the fact that Tony Blair has promised to use Britain's chairmanship of the G8 and its Presidency of the EU to strengthen the international focus on global warming.

This month (February), Blair kickstarts his campaign to tackle climate change by convening an international science conference

on the issue, followed by a meeting of G8 environment and development ministers in March.

Solid progress at these events should see global warming become the centrepiece of July's G8 summit.

There are other reasons why 2005 should see real progress.

The Kyoto Protocol - which Australia and the United States still refuse to sign - came in to force in February 2005, and most developed-nation signatories are committed to reducing their carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions under that plan.

Kyoto is not perfect, but it does provide a framework for participating nations to cut emissions by 5 per cent by 2012 and to trade emission quotas.

For all of Kyoto's flaws, Australia must be part of it because it is the only international climate change treaty there is.

We can then work to improve the treaty from the inside - making it a more formidable weapon.

The fact is that our atmosphere is the thinnest, most dynamic organ of our planetary system.

Yet, every day, we continue to recklessly pump enormous quantities of CO₂ into that delicate atmosphere.

Every tonne of coal we burn results in the release of three tonnes of CO₂.

The release of greenhouse gasses in the 20th century saw the temperature of the surface of our planet rise by 0.6 per cent of a degree Celsius.

That may not sound like much, but it is quite enough to have a tangible - and devastating - impact.

Over just the past six years, the effects have been stunning.

We have seen the hottest summer in European history, for example.

It was a summer so extreme it killed 19,000 people - the sort of season that, in a stable climate, we would see only every 50,000 years.

We're also seeing:

- the melting of the Larsen-B ice shelf in Antarctica;
- the thinning and melting of the Arctic ice cap; and

- the melting of Greenland's majestic glaciers at ten times the rate predicted.

In Iceland, last November, a major report was released by the influential Arctic Council on the impact of global warming.

This report - the product of four years of scientific assessment by nearly 300 researchers - claims our planet's northern icecap is warming at twice the global rate.

It predicts the Arctic will lose 50-60 per cent of its ice distribution by the end of this century and that, by 2070, the Arctic may no longer have any ice in summer.

The outlook for Australia

As a result of climate change, the outlook is a particularly worrying one for Australia.

A hotter atmosphere is a more energetic one, so we can expect more extreme summer heat, fiercer storms and cyclones, longer and more intense droughts, and more devastating floods.

Climate change has the potential to have a major impact on the daily lives of all Australians, and the list of risk areas is chilling.

It includes:

- changes in agriculture production and loss of high-production lands;
- increased flooding intensity;
- increased bushfire risk;
- higher rates of heat-stress morbidity; and
- species loss.

Put simply, it is becoming increasingly clear that climate change will strike Australia earlier - and more severely - than other developed nations.

And for South Australia

In South Australia, the State Government has undertaken a number of initiatives to reduce our CO₂ emissions.

Arising, in part, from the ground-breaking work done by Adelaide Thinker In Residence Herbert Girardet, we are pursuing, for example, the following programs:

- mandatory plumbed rainwater tanks on all new homes from July 2006;
- a five-star energy rating for housing built after July 2006;
- a four-year extension to the current solar hot water subsidy;
- use of solar power by 250 South Australian schools by 2014; and
- progressive installation of solar power to Government buildings, including Parliament House.

Perhaps one of the most successful environmental projects has been One Million Trees.

In response to Herbert's recommendation, we expanded that program to the planting of three million trees by 2014.

We are well on the way to reaching that goal, and I was honoured to plant the 500,000th tree - in Adelaide's west parklands - in September 2004.

The burgeoning wind power industry, the drive to achieve zero landfill waste, Adelaide's Green City Program, and the Water Proofing Adelaide Project, are just some of the many other environmental initiatives occurring in our State.

Still, if Australia - as a nation - is to do its part, we need a national policy on greenhouse.

To attract investment in renewable energy, we - as a nation - need to provide financial incentives for electricity generators to move away from dirty, coal-fired electricity to alternatives such as biomass, solar, wind energy and hydro power.

We should also encourage the commercial development of emission-free "hot rock" technology, which is currently being trialled in the South Australian desert.

A renewable energy industry in Australia could be worth billions of dollars, create thousands of jobs in regional areas, and put Australia at the forefront of renewable energy in the Asia Pacific.

Yet the Federal Government seems paralysed, continuing to refuse to ratify the Kyoto Protocol.

Some sceptics have said my plan for a special COAG meeting is a pointless exercise because of the Howard Government's intransigence on Kyoto.

But recent, encouraging comments by the Federal Minister for the Environment, Senator Ian Campbell, hold out the prospect of a bipartisan solution of the kind that last year saw us reach an historic agreement to rescue the River Murray.

Guided by the best science available, we owe it to our children to work with determination and a rare unity of purpose to tackle climate change.

