

The Big Picture

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“News to use & amuse”



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Patterns revealed

Every day for the last few years, I have reviewed the stories in the news on-line. From The Australian through to the Weekly Times and across to Information Clearing House, I've checked the main stories and saved access to those that seemed useful.

After a year or so, clear patterns emerged that are driven by evidence. I didn't start with a theory and then collect stories to match the theory, I just collected stories to see where that took me.

It's become very clear that most of the serious problems that are reported are either directly, or indirectly, due to government. Stories directly due to government are the result of actions taken by government that have led to disaster – such as the overallocation of water in the Murray Darling Basin leading to the collapse of that catchment and its ability to deliver fresh water.

Problems that result less directly from government include the financial crisis, in which regulatory slackness or error has amplified human behaviours that damage wider systems. In that case allowing investment banks to write their own rules and create products that enriched them without regard to the wider consequences.

Given the powers that governments have, it's hardly surprising that they are responsible for so many of our difficulties. The trouble is governments deny their mistakes so they make corrections. Instead they seem to reward themselves more pay and benefits, increase their size and power while diminishing the resources available to the population.

In Australia there are 3 inter-related patterns of government failure:

- total costs are excessive and increasing
- unable to achieve useful results
- huge distortions of representation.

Excessive costs of government

Australia's tax system collects about \$300 billion per year from an economy of around \$900 billion. Australia's 3 levels of government then create a web of regulations that impose further costs on the population that total over \$90 billion per year, that's over 20% of the money remaining available to us. Error (like the MDB) hits us particularly hard as we must pay the costs of the error and pay to fix the problem.

These costs hit lower paid Australians the hardest due to the many 'flat rate' charges made by the various levels of government (e.g. rates, licences, GST) that represent a relatively high % of their income. The pain is amplified by government's handling of essential services that has led to significant price increases that hit households hard again (e.g. power, water, health, food). Selected groups are given tax breaks that add up to over \$50 bn per year

Inability to achieve useful results

Whether it's failing to create a [submarine rescue](#) system, [ignoring safety warnings](#) about gas pipelines, [failures of business regulation](#), or [failures of planning](#), the competence and authority of government is now under serious question.

Of course, inability to produce results leads to further costs for the population. We pay for the failed government efforts, we then pay again as the failure creates costs, then we pay again to clean up the mess.

ABA maintains that Australia simply cannot afford this level of failure, nor can it afford a government that fails to learn from its mistakes.

Distortions of representation

Lobbying asymmetry is created by business having easier access to decision makers than taxpayers and communities, coupled with their access to superior funding, tools and techniques.

There are also severe management distortions created by changes in the priorities of the public services. In the recent past under Howard, many government agencies modified their objectives and mission statements to focus on supporting the private sector and excluded ordinary Australians. In many areas it may be more accurate to describe departments as 'the industry service'.

These problems are compounded by taxpayers and communities having to dig into their own pockets to represent their own interests, while their monies are generously deployed by government to serve private sector interests. In Tasmania, for example, the Gunns pulp mill proposal was a testament to distorted representation with the public left to represent themselves against industry interests enthusiastically embraced by governments and political parties alike.

There is no excuse for these problems. If a government department isn't focussed on taxpayers, Australia or communities why are we paying for it at all?

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The Industry Service

The mission and objectives of an organisation disclose its priorities and interests.

The case of ABARE is an interesting case in point

The Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE), located in Canberra, is an Australian government economic research agency noted for its professionally independent research and analysis.

ABARE describes itself as 'independent'...

Our objective is to contribute to the competitiveness of Australia's agricultural, fishing, forestry, energy and minerals industries and the quality of the Australian environment by providing rigorous and independent economic research analysis and forecasting. [ABARE](#)

This is a taxpayer funded body, but where's the taxpayer in their objectives? Where is any priority given to communities? Do 'competitive' industries have any responsibility to the country?

None of these priorities appears. The role of ABARE is thus to 'contribute to industry competitiveness' without any regard for the impacts that may have on taxpayers. Hence the tools, weight and authority of government is placed behind industry. Taxpayers are left to stand alone.

Should taxpayers have more say? Should their needs be represented?

Given the massive amount of money paid by taxpayers for Australian government (about 50% of GDP), there is a powerful moral and ethical case for taxpayers and communities to always be included as a key part of government priorities.

When the community, Australia and taxpayers are not even mentioned in government department priorities, how can government say that we are being represented?

Take the federal forestry department whose goal is

"to assist our forestry industry to grow, improve and capitalise on new opportunities..." [DAFF](#)

No mention of conserving our forests or using them for any other purpose other than to help the growth of the forestry industry. They could have said 'assure that Australia's forest resources are deployed in the best interests of the country and rural communities' or similar. In failing to do so, the government again makes the choice to ignore taxpayers and communities.

How can we describe these departments as 'public services' if they have no brief or remit to consider the needs of the public, let alone actually act to protect or advantage the public?

The Gunns pulp mill case is an excellent example – impact statements solely written by Gunns, public submissions put to Gunns, public subsidies to help Gunns, approval from a pulp mill supplier – the public couldn't access any tax monies to mount its case and had to use their own funds to challenge the proposal.

Perhaps one answer is to outsource all government departments that are solely focussed on industry.

I included in full 2 really important stories (in my view), the first being Tim Colebatch disclosure of the real meaning of Rudd's climate change 'targets', the second by scientist Ian Lowe on the need for rational climate responses. I hope you enjoy the difference in approach between government & Professor Lowe.

In case you missed it

Financial mess

Workers scared to top up their super [TheAustralian](#)

Grim parallels in crisis of capitalism [TheWest](#)

Governance

Taxing times for Tassie [Mercury](#)

Qld Ministers pile on the perks [CourierMail](#)

Qld Mayors win pay rises [CourierMail](#)

PM's dept heads come from NSW [TheAge](#)

Call for corruption body in Tas [Mercury](#)

Our brave crews deserve better [TheAustralian](#)

Environment/food/water/forestry

Mill approval tipped [Mercury](#)

Govt to drive farmers off land for tree plantations [AgMates](#)

Dry continent demands creative solutions [TheAge](#)

Solar rebate hits homes below \$100,000 pa [Telegraph](#)

Fuel, rent & power increases still to come [SMH](#)

Save the Murray plan cranked up [TheAustralian](#)

Climate

▶ Ingenuity can do what leaders won't [SMH](#)

Clean future starts now (Ian Lowe) [TheAge](#)

Social/shelter

Rudd's vow to homeless [SMH](#)

NSW Council regs raise building costs by 14% [SMH](#)

Homeless & invisible: broken families [TheAge](#)

Health & education revolution

▶ Tassie cancer rate shock [Mercury](#)

Vic medical mishaps blowout [HeraldSun](#)

NSW hospitals struggle with emergencies [SMH](#)

Vic hospitals fudging figures [TheAge](#)

Blast for Tassie education marks [Mercury](#)

Communications/transport/energy

10% Melbourne trains cancelled or delayed [TheAge](#)

Fatal flaws in web censorship plan: report [TheAge](#)

Internet filtering plan may go further [NewsLtd](#)

Bus drivers 'violated' by cameras [SMH](#)

New cars stalled in storage yards [TheAge](#)

Freedom and thought

Kids and corporate speak a scary mix [TheAge](#)

Howard sedition laws to be abolished [SMH](#)

World

War will not bring peace [TheAge](#)

Fashionable Cigarette Marketing Tactic Gets the Boot

Source: Sunday Mail (South Australia) December 14, 2008

Imperial Tobacco has been paying out cash incentives and lavishing corporate entertainment on owners of trendy clothing stores and hair boutiques in Adelaide, South Australia, to get them to sell Peter Stuyvesant brand cigarettes in special displays amid their hip merchandise. In the campaign, which started over a year ago, Imperial offers retailers up to \$2,000 per store per year to display the cigarettes and treats owners to free lunches and a party cruise with food, cocktails and all the free cigarettes they want. Marketing kits promote the brand using the slogan, "It used to be extremely dangerous. Now the only danger is you're not the coolest cat on the block." After the *Sunday Mail* revealed the campaign and kickback scheme, Imperial Tobacco announced it would pull cigarettes out of the boutiques by January 31.

New Federal Rule Permits Withholding of Medical Treatments, Information

Source: Los Angeles Times, December 19, 2008

The Bush administration has approved a new "conscience protection" rule that allows health care workers to opt out of administering any form of medical care they feel is objectionable on moral or religious grounds. The new rule will permit emergency room workers to withhold information from rape victims about access to emergency contraception, and will allow doctors in federally-funded clinics to refuse to tell a pregnant woman that her fetus has a severe abnormality. A press release on the Department of Health and Human Services Web site says the law will "protect health care providers from discrimination." DHHS secretary Michael Leavitt said that doctors have a duty only "to provide care that they are comfortable providing." The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops praised the new rules, saying medical workers "should not be required to take the very human life they are dedicated to protecting." The rule is scheduled to take effect the day before President Bush leaves office.

The clean coal bait & switch by Sheldon Rampton

The coal industry's campaign to "make coal sexy again" has included every trick in the book -- even a music video ad featuring supermodels dressed up as coal miners.

David Roberts, an environmental writer for Grist.com, has written a great critique of the coal industry's "clean coal" campaign, pointing out that "it's an *obvious* scam -- easily exposed, easily debunked. Just because it's obvious, though, doesn't mean the media won't fall for it. Indeed, the entire 'clean coal' propaganda push is premised on the media's gullibility."

Roberts notes, as have others, including a recent report by the Center for American Progress (CAP), that "the companies funding 'clean coal' PR aren't spending much on carbon capture and sequestration (CCS) research." They have therefore made no progress in reducing the greenhouse gas emissions that make coal a potent cause of global warming. The concept of "clean coal" was invented to answer concerns about global warming, and its advocates play a rhetorical game of bait-and-switch on precisely this topic. When pressed about how coal can be clean,

Roberts observes, "they revert to the other definition of 'clean' -- the notion that coal plants have reduced their emissions of traditional air pollutants like particulates and mercury (as opposed to greenhouse gases)."

Can The Internet Save The World?

By Barry Saunders

The global economy might be melting faster than Greenland but not all the news is grim. Technological advances mean that democracy and citizen journalism are surging, writes Barry Saunders in a review of the year online

2009 will be an interesting year. Aside from being possibly the last chance to deal with climate change before we have to, well, *deal* with it, there are some interesting, fun, terrifying and worrying things afoot. The economic crisis/meltdown, call it what you will, is showing that the mainstream media has very little time left. We've gone from worrying about cross media ownership laws to suggesting that the only option left to save the *New York Times* is Google or Murdoch. So while the American press refuses public funding, dinosaur car companies are sucking the treasury dry, and governments continue to bail out old industries and business models that do not and can not work any longer.

Is there anything to look forward to? The gnomes running the internet have given us a few reasons to be optimistic about journalism and democracy.

The US is finally stepping up and implementing some of those e-democracy initiatives they've been promising since AOL, and Obama's Change.gov is an encouraging sign that they might actually be serious about it. Obama's good on net neutrality too, which bodes well for continued internet access.

Locally, however, Stephen Conroy is dead keen to slow down the Australian internet so Clive Hamilton can steam open every email to check for child porn prior to delivery, but public opinion, technical implementation and, uh, reality are putting the brakes on his plan. The campaign against the so-called Clean Feed is a great example of how new media technologies are "hyper-empowering" (for lack of a better term) ordinary people. A relatively small group of highly connected people on Twitter sparked a loud online campaign that feed into initiatives by the EFA, the Greens and later on GetUp that has comprehensively upset Conroy's plans. While Conroy will no doubt push onwards, the online environment has allowed these single issue activists to run rings around Conroy and Hamilton's free speech = child porn argument. The outburst on Twitter no doubt contributed to the appearance of @turnbullmalcolm and @kevinruddpm on Twitter.

On the upside, the Rudd Government appears to be making a genuine effort to reach out online. Continuing the previous government's plans to create a consultation blog, they have recently opened up shop online for public consultation. Launching the site at the height of the controversy around the Clean Feed was a ballsy move, and hopefully indicates an openness to discussion. Whether any of the suggestions are implemented remains to be seen, but it is certainly a development that will be watched carefully. The momentum behind it, pushed along by the efforts of Andrew Bartlett and the Greens, as well the American developments, will ensure it won't be as quietly retired as some other public consultation processes.

Online media in Australia has gone from strength to strength.

Crikey has brought a number of top notch bloggers under its wing, and now houses the best [psephological analysis](#) in Australia as well as [the best media writer](#). Political blogs such as [Larvatus Prodeo](#) are attracting enough readers to sustain themselves, while [crowd-funded journalism initiatives](#) in Australia are also generating interest. While online journalism is still a developing area, the prospect of independent journalism which has a more stable source of sustenance than intermittent grants and volunteers is getting closer. The scope of online journalism is widening as its legitimacy is consolidated: [Inside Story](#) is publishing quality feature journalism, the Poll Bludger and Possum over at *Crikey* are doing hard data analysis and [Wikileaks](#) is taking on corrupt governments, banks and cults. Could it be that [churnalism](#) is pointless now that PR people are targeting bloggers directly. Maybe those journos who've been stuck rewriting press releases for years will finally be able to stretch their wings.

Governmental and societal transparency is on the up, too. Aside from the Change.gov and similar initiatives, science bloggers and journalists are using the web to tear down woolly thinking, dogma and straight out BS. [Counterknowledge.com](#), [Badscience.net](#) and [Pharyngula](#) are must-reads for the critical thinker, giving it to charlatans, hucksters, cultists and crappy journalists with both barrels. In a time where ascientific garbage is being provided as medicine, where abstinence and creationism are being taught in schools and churches use "lawfare" to silence critics, they are a pleasant ray of enlightenment.

The work of [Theyworkforyou](#) and [OpenAustralia](#) in opening up the mechanisms of the governmental web to make them useful must also be celebrated. The volunteers at OpenAustralia have done some amazing work making Hansard usable and interesting, and convincing various government departments to fix their systems so other people can do the same. Working both sides of the fence, using technical knowhow and negotiation, they've done an incredible job making impenetrable websites navigable. Similarly, the Creative Commons people have contributed, creating licencing systems that make this kind of collaboration possible. The adoption of the CC licence by [the ABS](#), [various geographical data agencies](#) and [Change.gov](#) is indicative of the power of their work.

So, there you go. There's lots of stuff to play with. Lots of people to talk to on twitter. Cheap publishing platforms. Access to public data. Opportunities to use your knowledge to better Australia. Places to publicise your work and your ideas, to show them directly to the PM, the Leader of the Opposition, the Government and the public.

Get among it.

John Faulkner: Captain transparency

Canberra correspondent Bernard Keane writes in New Matilda:

The 2010 election will be held under significantly stronger funding and disclosure requirements if John Faulkner has his way. Faulkner this morning released the Government's long-awaited [Electoral Reform Green Paper](#) and declared that it was critical that reforms be in place prior to the next election.

The paper, prepared by a team of officials from Prime Minister and Cabinet, Finance and the Australian Electoral Commission, has been delayed from mid-year due to extensive consultations with State and Territory governments and their respective electoral authorities. However, Faulkner stressed that there had been no discussions with any political parties so far, including

the Labor Party. They would, he said, be consulted in the future and were welcome to make submissions on the Paper.

The Paper contains no recommendations but canvasses a number of fundamental reforms in electoral funding and disclosure, including:

- Bans or caps on donations and external funding of political parties
- Different regulation for different types of donors, such as corporation, NGOs and individuals
- American-style links between public funding and restrictions on private funding
- Greater rigour in disclosure, including relating to "associated entities" and third parties, and electronic reporting
- Caps on, and disclosure of, election expenditure, and possibly expanding the definition of expenditure to activities not currently caught
- The regulation of third party participants such as trade unions, and their expenditure on political activities
- Greater financial transparency of political parties, including disclosure of their balance sheets and disclosure by branches and campaign committees
- Expansion of the definition of "associated entities" controlled by political parties
- Greater harmonisation of Commonwealth, State and Territory laws to reduce confusion

Faulkner stressed that while he had personal views on most of the Green Paper issues, the Government was looking for genuine consultation, including with the Coalition. However, he attacked Malcolm Turnbull for failing to explain why the Coalition had stymied reforms currently before Parliament to reduce disclosure thresholds and ban foreign donations. Those reforms should have already been in place, Faulkner said.

The Government is seeking submissions by late February and has also invited comments on what should be canvassed in a second Green Paper in 2009, relating to issues such as electoral enrolment.

In Faulkner's view there are serious problems with the current framework that mean Australia is well behind international best practice and that there are growing questions about the integrity of governments and their decisions. "Accountability and transparency are crucial to integrity in government," he said.

Any real change, however, will depend on Faulkner's capacity to convince the Greens, Nick Xenophon and Steve Fielding of the benefits of reform. The Coalition has so far shown no inclination to reverse any of the Howard Government's assaults on funding disclosure and, under a cynical opportunist like Michael Ronaldson, who has carriage of the issue within the Opposition, there's unlikely to be any.

One word undoes the PM's greenhouse claims

Tim Colebatch [TheAge](#) December 23, 2008

WE ALL think the Rudd Government's emissions trading scheme will cut Australia's greenhouse gas emissions by 5 per cent relative to 2000 levels — right?

No, we're wrong.

Treasury modelling estimates that even with a cleaner, more effective model than the one now adopted, Australia's emissions in 2020 would *rise* 5.8 per cent above 2000 levels. We would pump out more emissions in 2020 than we do now.

It's an ugly reality that exemplifies why the Government's model is doomed to fail. It promises change, but tries to shield everyone from all the points that drive change.

As I have argued before, the problem is not the targets themselves. If we were to cut our emissions in 2020 to 5 per cent below 2000 levels, that would be a rapid cut of 25 per cent in emissions per capita from current levels. A cut to 15 per cent below 2000 levels, promised if we get a good international agreement, implies a cut of 33 per cent per capita between 2006 and 2020. If we achieved that, it would be real progress towards the ultimate goal of halving global emissions.

The problem is that with Rudd's decision to shield companies and households from the changes the scheme is meant to drive, it's unlikely that Australia will reduce its emissions. Yet that is what he promised to do.

There's a crucial point we all overlooked. Labor has not committed Australia to cut its emissions by 5 per cent, but to cut its *emissions allocation* by 5 per cent. And that is very different. In 2000, Australia emitted 553 million tonnes of greenhouse gases. In 2020, the Government will *allocate* permits for 525 million tonnes of emissions. But even before last week's changes weakened the scheme, Treasury estimated that Australia would *emit* 585 million tonnes.

The key to it is that the scheme allows companies to use unlimited numbers of permits from other countries instead of our own. And the permits we import will be subtracted from our emissions tally.

They would come from other Western countries or (more likely) from developing countries, under rules such as the Kyoto Protocol's clean development mechanism (CDM), which allows Western companies to buy permits for emissions saved in developing countries by using cleaner technology. A noble idea, unfortunately it has proved easy to rot.

The Garnaut report proposed a tighter test, but the Government refused. Permits from CDM and "joint initiative" projects in countries with emission reduction targets are expected to be plentiful and cheap. That's why Treasury estimates that emissions trading will prove cheap.

On Treasury modelling, even with constraints that will no longer apply, Australia in 2020 would import permits for another 46 million tonnes from other countries. And by 2050, Rudd pledges, Australia will reduce emissions by 60 per cent from 2000 levels, to 221 million tonnes. But Treasury projects that in fact Australia would cut its emissions by only 24 per cent, to 420 million tonnes, and buy 199 million tonnes of permits overseas.

Moreover, its modelling assumed Labor would limit the use of foreign permits, to supply at most half the cut in emissions. But Rudd threw out that constraint, allowing an even larger share of our "emissions cuts" to be bought overseas.

What's wrong with that? Nothing, so long as it really cuts emissions. But we have seen China sell "certified emissions reduction" permits for phasing out hydrochlorofluorocarbons, which it has to do anyway under the Montreal Protocol. The ease of rorting is one reason why economists such as Jeffrey Sachs plead instead for a carbon tax.

The Government's spurned climate change adviser Ross Garnaut spelt out eloquently in Saturday's *Age* how its scheme would waste the revenue from emissions trading in unjustifiable and/or extravagant compensation payouts to interest groups, rather than using it to drive change. It's a sad picture of a weak Government that crumbles under pressure from big business.

The net effect will be to reduce emission cuts in Australia, so the targets are achieved by buying dubious overseas permits. The scheme won't be a write-off, but it will be rorted, and it will not achieve what it claims to do.

Labor has tried to deflect criticism by focusing on the cuts in per capita emissions. That would be fine if the cuts really happened, and if, like Garnaut, it proposed that contraction and convergence to a global per capita emissions target by 2050 be the framework for an international agreement.

But when Penny Wong addressed other environment ministers at Poznan, she did not mention per capita emissions. Why? Because Australia's per capita emissions are the sixth highest in the world — and under Garnaut's framework we would have to make (or buy) the sixth biggest cuts.

Yet there is no other viable way for the world to cut emissions to levels that would end global warming. The greenhouse gases that threaten environmental catastrophe are not those already up there, but the far greater volume to be emitted in future, mostly from developing countries.

We need real leadership — not this. *Tim Colebatch is economics editor.*

Clean future starts now

• Ian Lowe [TheAge](#) December 31, 2008

"CURRENT global trends in energy supply and consumption are patently unsustainable — environmentally, economically, socially ... What is needed is nothing short of an energy revolution." I have said similar things myself, but this quote is from a new "World Energy Outlook" by the International Energy Agency.

The change is as amazing as if the Pope were to support contraception or the Business Council to call for stabilising the population. Until last year, the energy agency was still deep in denial about the problems of climate change and peak oil, and was talking about world energy use doubling and an increasing use of coal.

The agency's conversion is only the latest and most dramatic example of a new global attitude. The changes leave the Federal Government suddenly looking out of touch, its recent climate change announcements more like a white flag than a white paper.

The Government's weak emissions trading scheme design is not just a surrender to the big polluters, but appears to give up on saving precious national icons such as the Great Barrier Reef, Kakadu and the Murray-Darling river system. It is also bad news for the economy, as Professor Ross Garnaut wrote in these pages recently.

It is dishonest to claim that our per capita pollution reductions are comparable with those of Europe. Increasing population is not being forced on us by Martians, it results from 20th century policies to boost immigration and encourage larger families. The Earth's natural systems don't understand how many Australians there are, only our total impact. As global citizens, we should curb the growth in our numbers and set serious targets to cut pollution.

The UN's 2007 Bali conference noted that countries such as Australia need to reduce greenhouse pollution by 25 to 40 per cent to give the Earth a fighting chance of avoiding dangerous climate change.

The latest science is more alarming. Until recently, methane levels in the air had been stable for a decade, but there has been a surge. Unpublished research shows the methane is coming from the Arctic. This is the sign climate scientists have been warning about, a possible tipping point.

Temperatures have increased more at the poles than in the tropics. Warming is releasing methane from tundra, increasing warming and causing further methane releases, possibly setting in train an unstoppable surge in temperature. We need an urgent and concerted approach to cut greenhouse pollution.

Global changes have been striking. The World Economic Forum's Dubai summit on the global agenda concluded that responses to the financial crisis need to be integrated with policies that take into account climate change, energy security, food and water.

Global think tank the Club of Rome has been warning for 35 years about the inevitable consequences of uncontrolled growth. It convened a conference last month that concluded the climate and financial problems interlock and demand an integrated approach. The IEA recognised the science when it called for an energy revolution.

Now US President-elect Barack Obama has named as his energy secretary a scientist who has called for a super-grid to harness solar and wind energy. This move to "green infrastructure" is at the heart of Obama's plan to repair the US economy.

Diplomats are working on talks between Obama and Chinese leaders before the UN's 2009 Copenhagen conference, which must produce a framework to slow climate change. China has shown it is serious by closing 2300 small coalmines, improving energy efficiency by 7 per cent and planning to expand solar and wind energy massively.

What should we be doing? We should join the energy revolution, rather than try to prop up old technologies. Kevin Rudd has set an inadequate target to cut emissions just 5 per cent by 2020, offered billions in subsidies to overseas-owned big polluters and done little to encourage growth of local clean-energy technologies to power our future.

The plan has to go to the Senate, where it faces a rocky road. I expect the Greens to oppose it because it doesn't do enough. The Coalition is hopelessly divided between climate change deniers, Howard-era dinosaurs who don't get it, and a minority who understand the scale of the problem. They may also oppose the scheme. That would force the Government back to the drawing board.

If enough of us make clear to our MPs we want serious action, the Prime Minister could develop a stronger scheme. Next year will be critical. I am not exaggerating in saying the survival of civilisation is at stake.

As a scientifically and technologically literate country, we must recognise that a green economy is vital. That makes economic sense as well as being environmentally responsible. We have to go green if we want to get out of the red.

Professor Ian Lowe is president of the Australian Conservation Foundation.