

SMH – 5 April 2024 - Split inside conservative green group over new nuclear agenda

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By [Nick O'Malley](#) April 5, 2024

Former NSW energy minister Matt Kean has resigned from a ginger group founded to promote action on climate change within the Coalition, over what he says is a shift away from its original principles to become a nuclear advocacy organisation.

Kean says the Coalition for Conservation's rhetoric on nuclear energy has shifted since the former president of the Nationals, Larry Anthony, whose lobbying firm SAS has represented fossil fuel companies, joined the organisation as chair, and the energy millionaire Trevor St Baker came on as a member of its advisory board.



Former NSW energy minister Matt Kean has resigned from a ginger group founded to promote action on climate change within the Coalition. *CREDIT: DOMINIC LORRIMER*

"It went from an organisation focused on a diverse range of clean energy solutions to an organisation singularly focused on nuclear energy," Kean told this masthead.

The group's chief executive officer and founder Cristina Talacko said she regretted Kean's decision to step down as an ambassador but rejected his view that its advocacy for nuclear undermined its conservation mission.

"It's important to recognise that many conservative individuals and organisations worldwide, including those in the US, Canada, and the UK, support nuclear energy as a means to reduce our footprint on nature. To suggest otherwise is simply absurd," Talacko said in a statement.

She said the Coalition for Conservation "operates independently of any funding from nuclear suppliers or the nuclear industry.

"We make no apologies for our efforts in seeking alternative approaches to minimise environmental impact and will continue to support behind-the-meter solar, small grids, and good renewable projects that are placed in the right sites avoiding farming and forest land destruction as well as nuclear as part of the transition."

Kean launched the organisation at a function in 2016 on behalf of Talacko and remained actively involved as the group engaged with a range of international conservative political figures who advocated for action on climate.

Australian Conservation Foundation chief executive Kelly O'Shannessy said the ACF had supported the Coalition for Conservation when it was founded and helped it set up some of its early conferences, but it opposes the group's shift towards nuclear and no longer has anything to do with it.



Cristina Talacko speaks with former European Parliament MP Stanley Johnson during an event at the Glasgow climate talks in 2021. CREDIT: GETTY

O'Shannessy said it was the foundation's view that the small modular reactors being advanced by the organisation are decades away from commercial deployment, and advocating for them delays the transition to renewable energy.

The group has also lost the support of Environmental Leadership Australia.

At its outset the group appeared to have only loose ties with senior members of the federal Coalition, but since it started advocating for nuclear and opposing renewables, its standing appears to have increased.

Talacko travelled to the Dubai climate talks late last year with seven Coalition MPs, including energy spokesman Ted O'Brien, Bridget McKenzie, Andrew Bragg, Perrin Davey, Dean Smith and Kevin Hogan.

Talacko said the MPs' travel was paid for by the Coalition for Conservation.

While in Dubai, O'Brien appeared at a side event hosted by the group and the World Nuclear Association and gave a speech endorsing nuclear energy for Australia.

In February, Talacko was part of another delegation that included O'Brien which travelled to Canada to visit Ontario Power Generation. Coalition figures often cite Ontario as a state that is successfully integrating nuclear energy into its power system, but OPG is also a business seeking to export its technology.

The company's head of new nuclear growth, Gary Rose, posted on LinkedIn in February: "Today we had an opportunity to share with a delegation from Australia information regarding OPG's New Nuclear/SMR program. The world is watching the great things that are happening here in Ontario."

Last year Rose told a podcast: “My job is to look at what other nuclear opportunities exist ... we're also supporting new nuclear deployment in places like Poland, Estonia and a number of other discussions going on with a number of different countries like Australia, Czech Republic and others.”