

To Senators on the Senate Select Committee on Climate Policy,

Your task in this inquiry is to examine the environmental adequacy of the Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) as part of the Federal Government's Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme (CPRS).

Acknowledging that there is an economic cost of effective climate action - though a far greater one for inaction - the reference for your deliberations must be the established science of climate change, and your findings must consider how, given that science, the ETS and CPRS help us to avoid irreversible climate tipping points, or, as I strongly argue, push us closer towards them.

I ask you to remember that, while economic cycles come and go, in human terms the effect of crossing tipping points lasts forever.

The current proposal of a 5% reduction on 2000 emission levels by 2020 falls drastically short of the now conservative scientific position that a cut in the order of 25-40% on 1990 levels is required by the same year. Earlier this month, an emergency climate summit hosted by the University of Copenhagen found that the more severe projections of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change were being achieved far earlier than anticipated. That is to say, we are accelerating towards irreversible climate tipping points even more quickly than scientists had expected.

Along with the rapid increase of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, we are seeing in Australia direct evidence of the expected severe climate impacts - including floods in Queensland and the devastating Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria.

It is a telling reflection of government inaction at state and federal level that the terms of reference for the bushfires royal commission fail to direct the commissioners to consider climate policy or make recommendations on potential policy contributions to decreasing bushfire risk over time (see 'Royal commission must face climate change', ABC Unleashed, 18 March 2009).

This vital issue should not be left to the discretion of commissioners to include, and it falls within your brief in considering the environmental adequacy of the ETS. The lag between climate inaction and its tragic consequences is being drastically reduced.

These considerations give the lie to attempts by this government to sell its climate policy as a balance between competing interests. Senator Wong and Prime Minister Rudd have both put forward the line that the government will be attacked from the Left for doing too little and from the Right for doing too much, when the only true yardstick is the climate and the impacts stemming from the crossing of tipping points.

Unfortunately, it is not only the unambitious proposed reduction targets that flaw this ETS. Big polluters - those whose curtailed contributions might punch a formidable hole in our emissions - are inappropriately compensated in the scheme. They have long known the risks of climate change and their complicity in them. We now have them lobbying - in many cases secretly and unaccountably - to protect their 'quarry vision' (as Guy Pearse terms it), partly by appeal to job losses that would follow the demise of their industries.

Yet the CSIRO and others have shown that there are new jobs in a more sustainable, greener Australia, and it is to these we must turn as the economic crisis offers the opportunity to reshape our nation. If there are to be job losses in the transition away from emissions intensive industries, let the compensation be directed to supporting and retraining workers, not to the coffers of corporations who maximise their own profits as they socialise the environmental impacts they create.

Finally, I ask you to consider the contrast between the prime minister's stance on international leadership regarding the global economy, and his climate defeatism as we head into post-Kyoto international negotiations in Copenhagen this December. If the prime minister can urge the G20 to concerted international action on so-called 'toxic assets' that undermine the international flow of credit, why can he not act with leadership on the vital shared issue of climate - the impacts of which will be disproportionately felt by the world's poorest people?

As you progress with your deliberations on the environmental adequacy of the ETS, I ask you to consider the matters raised here, and the possibility of your individual contributions to a better climate outcome for Australia and the world.

Sincerely,

Darren Lewin-Hill