

Global Warming and Climate Change: What Australia Knew and Buried ... Then Framed a New Reality for the Public

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Another book about climate change! There is so much available in relation to climate change that it would be easy for those of us who are concerned with educating about climate change to claim ‘overload’ and ignore Taylor’s book. Those not interested or concerned about climate change could perhaps flick their eyes onto something else. But to ignore ... *What Australia Knew and Buried* would mean both groups remaining ignorant of insights that are critical for us (Australians and humans broadly) to aid our planning for the future, and live in it.

In essence, Taylor first provides a starting point for the ‘uninitiated’ to understand the factors affecting our changing climate and the implications of the estimates of change. For all readers she provides an overview of the history that has led to Australia’s current efforts in managing the greenhouse gases (GHG) that affect climate change. While recognising that some scientists had been expressing concern about rising GHGs before the late 1980s — for example, a 1980 article in *Playboy* magazine (of all places!) — this point in time is used to begin her Australian history of climate change; specifically, when the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and Commission for the Future held public events about greenhouse effects. From that point, she provides an overview of the ‘ups’ and ‘downs’ in Australia’s engagement with climate change discussion and action. Her chronology of the key points of this engagement will give anyone trying to follow the Australian path with a most valuable reference — helping individuals’ understanding of the twists and turns of governments and the public, and/or for explaining all this to others.

Second, Taylor takes the ‘data’ of history a step further by looking into the contexts that have influenced Australia’s responses to increasing GHGs. This is the crucial step that provides the insight into how particular responses have come about. It is this reflection and learning that gives us the opportunity to avoid, or manage, the ‘twists and turns’ that will inevitably appear in future climate change work; or with any environmental or social concern.

With her background in journalism and making documentary films, Maria Taylor brings a lot of ‘life’ to her history, making it a clear and enjoyable account to read, as well as drawing together important, if not enlightening, information. For example, over the past couple of decades the work of Ann Henderson-Sellers, Graeme Pearman and Guy Pearse has been known by some, but it has not generally had a broad readership. Taylor’s synthesis of this work and that of many others provides a welcome opportunity to spread these insights.

The wide range of work, researchers, and writers that Taylor draws on provides the synthesis for the climate change. This material is also the base of her analysis of the factors that have influenced the history. Her analysis is not concerned with the science of climate change, but critically how the science has informed Australia’s actions. The first chapter title, ‘History is what we make it’, and her comment that ‘psychology explains

that knowledge is a social construct' (p. 1) clearly set the scene. Not surprisingly then, her analysis takes as its base the realisation that knowledge and facts, such as that gained from the scientific research conducted into climate change, has had little influence on the thinking of some people. Specifically, if not ignored by some parts of the community, such knowledge has been seen as a threat to their interests.

Through the later chapters Taylor explores elements that influence the way we think about our world generally, and specifically how we think about GHGs and climate change. Key influences relate to the messages we are presented with and what shapes the content and style of the message. The chapter title 'Framing information to influence what we hear' clearly indicates the role of structuring and framing a message to lead to particular outcomes. In this context, the role of Australia's mass media in shaping discussion about climate change is explored through the chapter 'What Australians knew 25 years ago'. As Taylor notes:

In so many ways back in 1989 ... evidence indicated that appropriate action would follow step by step. And it did — on paper. Yet, within 10 years these messages had been reframed into a hazy 'scientific debate' characterised by uncertainty, which confused the public and blocked action. (p. 32)

The summary of the parts played by industry, politicians, scientists, and environmentalists in creating this situation, and reacting to it, makes for insightful reading.

A refreshing aspect of Taylor's writing, probably due to her experience in communicating to the public, is that her chapter titles and subtitles clearly indicate what the reader can expect. Such is the case with the chapter 'Australians persuaded to doubt what they knew', which picks up on the issues of messaging, outlined in her previous chapter. Be it classical or innovative economic arguments, envy of others, or fear of an impoverished lifestyle, a range of fronts were employed to shift the public's thinking. Next, 'Influences on a changed story and the new normal 1990s: values and beliefs' takes us through some 30 pages of historical material. Here we see competing views of the world (such as technological solutions or fixes contrasting with ecological limits, beliefs vs. scientific evidence, self-interest compared to community concerns), supplied with 'ammunition' by pro-market thinktanks, moving the climate-change discussion to a largely economic argument and effectively removing interest in taking climate change action at a government level.

Perhaps with experiences of journalism in mind, Taylor reserves a full chapter to the role of the (Australian) media in 'Influences on a changed story and the new normal 1990s: media locks in the new narrative'. Commercial pressures, digital formats, loss of diversity, and emphasis on drama are among the critical factors that she discusses as influences on the media, and hence how they have affected the reporting and discussion of climate change. Drawing on many of the themes identified in earlier chapters, 'Influences on a changed story and the new normal 1990s: scientists' beliefs and public scepticism' looks into the mechanisms that were used to engender both scepticism about the possibility of climate change, and uncertainty about the extent of change. These elements are given further exploration in 'In search of certainty and applying uncertainty' where Taylor focuses on how pressure on climate scientists and their research led to carefully qualified reporting. This, plus restrictions placed on the ability of some (usually government) scientists to report on climate change forecasts, leads Taylor to conclude:

Combined, these influences resulted in a level of public confusion that paralysed further calls for action from the grassroots up while the path was cleared for business as usual ... in sum a vision of growth that was guaranteed to increase (GHG) emissions. (p. 165)

Taylor acknowledges that this climate change ‘story’ has been seen, in part if not in full, in other Western countries over the past years. While her reflections on what can be learned from the Australian experience in ‘Dicing with the climate: how many more?’ have an Australia context, her conclusions surely have international relevance. Flowing from the themes of earlier chapters, it is not surprising that she focuses on influences such as values (the ‘climate change culture wars’, p. 171), message framing, and how ‘beliefs and values trump evidence’ (p. 178) to identify critical issues and themes. In essence, identification of these issues become her conclusions, rather than developing proposals to direct future climate change action.

What is my conclusion then? For anyone concerned to bring about positive changes for the environment, and society (isn’t that all of us?), then *Global Warming and Climate Change: What Australia Knew and Buried* is a ‘must-read’. Why? because it provides critical insights into how change (whether regarding climate change, what we eat, or approaches to education) can be facilitated or how it can be undermined. The influences that Taylor discusses can be seen at government levels, but with a bit of looking we can also see them operating at a more local level (in an organisation, at school, and ‘communities’ generally). Further, Taylor has not taken a simplistic, even reductionist, approach. She has not tried to look for a single influencing factor; rather, she has taken an holistic (systemic) approach and has clearly shown the ways in which several systems (or networks) and interconnections have had combined effects.

So, for educationists, change-agents, policy developers and the like, Taylor’s book is initially a valuable overview and reference for climate change activity in Australia from around 1990 to 2015. She provides 26 pages of references, which should satisfy the needs of most readers, and while an index would have made chasing particular information easier, the chapter headings and subheadings give good directions to topics. Further, for teachers and academics, there is no shortage of material that can be used with secondary and tertiary students — for reviewing the policies and politics associated with climate change, and for exploring the influences on attempts to bring about change for environmental and public benefits.

Even if you know a fair bit about the climate change history and politics in Australia, like my reading of *Global Warming and Climate Change: What Australia Knew and Buried*, you will be reminded of all the aspects we need to work with when planning any change. Those without this background will be fascinated, if not horrified, to see how the climate change agenda was hijacked and the community manipulated. I suspect all of us will be angered by what has happened and liberated by Taylor’s insights, to make sure that climate change activity from now on leads quickly to reduced GHG levels.

Reviewer Biography

Ian Thomas is an Honorary Associate Professor at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, and before his retirement taught into undergraduate and postgraduate environmental policy programs, as well as writing on environmental impact assessment, environmental policy, and environmental management systems. In his research, Ian has investigated the issues of embedding environmental education and sustainability education in the curricula of universities, examined the status of tertiary environmental programs, and investigated employment of graduates from these programs. His recent research has focused on capacity building of academics to support Education for Sustainability curriculum, and the graduate capabilities sought by employers in relation to sustainability.