

A Second Chance for the Odd Two Out to Address Climate Change

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China is now a leader in the fight against climate change. This week Australia and the US can join in, writes Don Henry.

WHEN Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and the United States close the first meeting of the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate on Thursday, will the world be any different? After all, technology development agreements between developed and developing countries are not new.

Late last year, under the Kyoto Protocol, two private Chinese chemical firms and the World Bank launched the single biggest project to cut greenhouse gas emissions, and the European Union and China have already signed an agreement to develop new and existing clean energy technologies.

The regional partnership can draw on these and many other examples of international agreements and policies that are successfully addressing climate change. It will need to do this in a way that will "complement, but not replace, the Kyoto Protocol", as the agreed vision of the partnership says.

China takes its participation in the Kyoto Protocol seriously. It has embarked on a renewable energy program that has stunned many analysts. China is the global market leader in solar hot water use and accounts for 60 per cent of the globally installed capacity. In the past three years, China has created access to electricity for a million people in remote regions through renewable energy. Also, China recently announced it has set a target to ensure 15 per cent of its energy comes from renewable energy by 2020, and has set the goal of halving the energy intensity of its economy over the same period.

As a developing country that has ratified the Kyoto Protocol, China participates in the "clean development mechanism" which gives a financial incentive to countries that have ratified Kyoto to receive clean technology. A report to the World Bank estimates this existing 'carbon trading' market is worth \$3.7 billion a year.

Japan dominates the global solar photo-voltaic cell market as a result of its Government's policy to support a domestic "New Sunshine" solar roofs program.

Australia's mandatory renewable energy target was initially successful in stimulating the use of renewable energy here - its renewable energy industry now accounts for \$5.7 billion in annual sales, including more than \$400 million in exports, and directly employs more than 20,000 people. Unfortunately, by not strengthening the target, the Government will oversee a decline in the proportion of electricity Australians receive from renewable energy by 3 per cent over the next 15 years.

In the US, federal government inaction has forced local and state governments to implement their own solutions to climate change. Twenty states have adopted standards that require a percentage of their energy portfolio to come from renewable sources, and 11 require a 25-30 per cent greenhouse pollution reduction for new cars. And 188 mayors - representing almost 40 million Americans in 38 states - have signed the US Mayors Climate Protection Agreement, pledging to meet the Kyoto target on reducing global warming pollution.

We no longer can delay reducing greenhouse pollution. Record temperatures, devastating droughts and ferocious bushfire and hurricane seasons show us the impact that changes in climate can have. We have to act now and with great urgency if we don't want to hand on far more dangerous climate change to our children.

The approach of the US and Australia is to encourage voluntary action and investment in researching technologies that might reduce emissions in the future. This failed to reduce significantly greenhouse emissions. By 2010, energy emissions by Australia and the US are projected to increase by about 40 per cent of their 1990 levels. The US has contributed 30 per cent of the world's greenhouse pollution - more than the world's developing countries combined. After US citizens, Australians have made the second-highest per capita contribution to greenhouse pollution. On average, each Australian has contributed nearly 10 times more to greenhouse pollution during the past 150 years than a person in China. Australia and the US this week have a second chance to clean up their acts. If they agree to immediately deploy clean energy technologies, large reductions in greenhouse pollution can be achieved. If not, they will again have missed an opportunity to join the rest of the world in taking action to address climate change.

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