

If government listened it would cut carbon tax

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Politicians often get accused of pursuing a populist agenda driven by the polls. That may or may not be true, but what if the government actually did what we wanted? The eighth annual Lowy Institute Poll, out yesterday, suggests our policy in some areas would be strikingly different.

For one thing, the climate change legislation would be scrapped. Two-thirds of Australians say they are against the government's legislation introducing a fixed price on carbon that will then lead to an emissions trading scheme, with nearly half (45 per cent) of us strongly against the policy.

Perhaps most worrying for the Gillard government, a majority (57 per cent) are in favour of a future Coalition government removing the ETS if it wins the next election, with this majority holding across all states, age groups, income levels and both genders. Even 38 per cent of the Australians who say they always or sometimes vote for the Greens are in favour of removing the emissions legislation.

Policy settings on international ownership of farmland would also be dramatically different if the public had its way. A large majority (81 per cent) are against the commonwealth government allowing foreign companies to buy Australian farmland to grow crops or farm livestock, with a majority (63 per cent) strongly against.

And India would not be getting any Australian uranium, with a majority (61 per cent) against selling uranium to that country.

Australia's parliamentary secretary for Pacific Islands Affairs, Richard Marles, would be forced to eat humble pie. He was affronted last year when a Lowy poll in Fiji revealed Fijian public opinion was in some instances at odds with the Australian government's assumptions. Unfortunately for Mr Marles, a large majority of Australians also believe government policy settings on Fiji are wrong, with 79 per cent in favour of the Australian government restarting ministerial level contacts with the government in Fiji -- contacts that have been cut off in response to the 2006 coup in Suva. So, are there any government foreign policies we, as a collective, agree with? Actually, yes. We are keener than ever to get our soldiers out of Afghanistan, with a record 65 per cent of us opposed to Australia's continued military engagement there, meaning Julia Gillard's April announcement of an early withdrawal is likely to be a popular one. And interestingly, there is majority support for the Prime Minister's mooted suggestion that Australian special forces stay on, after major combat operations are scheduled to end, to work alongside the US special forces in more limited counter-terrorism operations.

The November 2011 announcement that up to 2500 US Marines will be based in northern Australia is also popular, with three-quarters of Australians in favour. Nearly half of us (46 per cent) are in favour of increasing that number above 2500, and if either China or Indonesia objected to an increase in US forces, those in favour move into the majority (51 per cent in the case of China and 54 per cent for Indonesia).

And if Ms Gillard was looking to curry favour with the electorate, there is one world leader in particular who might be able to help her out. He may be struggling at home, but Obamania is alive and well in Australia.

We prefer Obama to his Republican rival Mitt Romney to become the next US president by a staggering ratio (80 per cent compared with 9 per cent), which is an even greater margin than his last line-up against Senator John McCain four years ago, when the preference was 73 per cent to 16 per cent.

But for any politician looking to kick off a populist foreign policy agenda, there's a slight hitch: we sometimes change our minds. In 2006, for example, two-thirds of Australians said global warming was a serious and pressing problem and we should begin taking steps to tackle it even if this involved

significant costs. This year, just over a third of us say the same thing. That makes it tricky to make long-term policy on issues as complex as climate change, although it does suggest it would have been sensible to explain the policy we now have a little better.

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