

Climate views have moved on

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The Gillard government hopes Australians will change their minds this week, when the introduction of the carbon tax doesn't result in sudden and startling changes to the economy or their standards of living. But a close reading of Lowy Institute polling since 2005 suggests the government's hopes may be misplaced.

Our polling tells a strong story: that Australians supported tough action on climate change, and were prepared to pay for it, when they thought it was a real and pressing problem. But as they've come to see climate change as less of a problem, with no global solution in sight, they have steadily turned against action and are less willing to pay to address it.

When we began polling in 2005, Australians ranked improving the global environment equal second (with protecting jobs) as a foreign policy priority, more important than combating terrorism, countering the spread of nuclear weapons and stopping illegal migration.

In 2006 addressing climate change was thought to be the No 1 foreign policy priority and in 2007 the most important domestic policy priority.

In this mood, Australians supported strong action on climate change. In 2006 more than two thirds of the people we surveyed agreed with the statement, "global warming is a serious and pressing problem. We should begin taking steps now even if this involves significant costs."

There was daylight to the next most-supported proposition, with less than a quarter agreeing global warming would have gradual effects and should be dealt with gradually, using low-cost measures. Just 7 per cent opted for the wait and see option.

People were reasonably willing to contribute through electricity bills. In 2008 we asked people how much they were prepared to pay. The largest number (almost one-third) said they would be prepared to pay up to \$10 a month, another fifth said they'd pay between \$11 and \$20 extra a month, and 19 per cent said they'd pay more than \$21 a month. Seventy-one per cent were prepared to pay something towards dealing with climate change, compared with 21 per cent not prepared to pay anything at all.

That was Kevin Rudd's first year as prime minister. Two-thirds of people we asked said his decision to ratify the Kyoto Protocol as one of his first actions in office hadn't solved the problem of climate change but was a step in the right direction. The following year, 60 per cent of people said the problem of climate change had become more urgent, while 80 per cent said that the prospects for a solution were either steady or improving.

Then things started to change. Australians' attitudes on climate change have shown remarkable variation over the nine years of Lowy Institute polling. In 2008, people still saw climate change as the second biggest threat we faced, on a par with terrorism, but dealing with climate change had slipped to fifth most important foreign policy goal, down 9 per cent from 2007. In 2009 it had slumped to seventh, down 10 per cent from 2008 and 19 per cent from 2007. Climate change dropped to the fourth most worrying threat, down 14 per cent from its 2008 levels.

People were losing their confidence in the government's ability and willingness to address the issue. When we asked people for their opinion on the most convincing option for reducing carbon emissions

in 2008, the fewest were convinced by one of the government's most preferred options: carbon capture and storage. Renewables, biofuels, hydroelectric and even nuclear were considered more convincing. In 2008 51 per cent were not confident that the government could address climate change; by 2010 people gave the Rudd government a mark of five out of 10 for its handling of the issue. By last year, three-quarters of those we polled believed the Gillard government had done a poor job in addressing climate change.

Falling confidence in the government's handling of the issue drove further declines in the seriousness with which people took climate change. In 2010 and 2011, dealing with climate change ranked third last among 12 foreign policy priorities, down 29 per cent since 2007.

The majority of commentators argue the failure of the Copenhagen climate talks in December 2009 led to the sudden falls in support for action. Our polling suggests otherwise. In 2010, 72 per cent of respondents still thought Australia should act to reduce its carbon emissions even before a global agreement.

Our figures show two factors behind the erosion of public support for climate change action. The first is a steady slide of concern about the problem - from 75 per cent seeing it as a foreign policy priority in 2007 to just 46 per cent last year. The second is growing alarm about the economic impact of climate action, particularly as the global economy lurches from crisis to crisis. By this year's Lowy Institute poll, the number of people who thought global warming serious enough that we should act now even if it involves significant costs had fallen to 36 per cent from 68 per cent in 2006.

On the other hand, those supporting gradual, low-cost action had climbed to 45 per cent from just 24 per cent in 2006.

There was strong opposition to the carbon tax and eventual emissions trading scheme. When we asked the 63 per cent of respondents who opposed the carbon tax legislation why they did so, 52 per cent said it was because it would result in job losses, compared to 38 per cent who said it was not necessary to act before other countries.

This combination of public perceptions is bad news for the government's hopes of a poll bounce now that the carbon tax has come into effect. The situation has exactly reversed from 2005-2007. Now, as they're less and less concerned about the problem, they resent the financial impact of dealing with it more and more. This means that even if the economic impact of the carbon tax is less severe than Tony Abbott suggests, there won't be a whole lot of returning warmth for a government whose major piece of policy is seen to be addressing a problem that most people don't see as a priority.

A big question is whether the slide in public concern about climate change is permanent or cyclical. This year we asked people whether they'd become more or less concerned about climate change since the debate began in Australia. Despite the marked decline in support for climate change action, only 7 per cent said they'd become less concerned about it; 58 per cent said they felt the same, while 38 per cent said they'd become more concerned.

Scientists are predicting a return to the El Nino weather pattern by the end of the year, resulting in hotter, dryer weather and possibly drought conditions. If this coincides with an improvement in the global economy, we could see a return to strong support for action on climate change, and a willingness to bear any associated costs.

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