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Why I'm not outraged at the Govt's latest climate backsliding

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Prime Minister Christopher Luxon with US President Donald Trump in South Korea last week.

COMMENT: The Government's latest climate rollbacks underline New Zealand's long history of a lack of genuine desire to cut emissions, writes Geoff Bertram.

The Government's recent moves to [halve the methane target, ditch agricultural emissions pricing, unlink the ETS from international targets, scrap Climate Change Commission advice](#) on emissions reductions plans, and [significantly weaken corporate climate reporting obligations](#), have been widely condemned by scientists, policy experts, and environmentalists.

We should all be outraged. But I feel a strange lack of outrage at the latest climate policy moves. Instead, I'm experiencing a feeling of weary resignation.

New Zealand has actually been on this track for decades now. The present Government is just explicitly acknowledging what has always been true: that this country's authorities, in thrall to the political power of large corporate vested interests including agriculture, have at no stage applied genuine ambition to tackling carbon emissions, as distinct from making repeated loud and superficially impressive rhetorical statements.

National ducked at the start, in 1991-1993, when former Environment Minister Simon Upton tried to get a carbon tax and instead got "voluntary greenhouse agreements" which amounted to nothing.

Labour turned and ran in 2003 when Federated Farmers killed the "fart tax", and again in 2005 when Winston Peters blocked another weakly-promoted carbon tax.

Labour then dropped the ball in 2008, when the NZETS was designed to fail by officials and lobbyists intent on exploiting to the hilt the Kyoto loophole on forestry LULUCF and the superficially heavy economic argument about leakage (code for subsidising the big polluters).

National's weakening of the NZETS in 2009 had no actual effect on policy outcomes. The NZETS was already a dead letter with its lack of any cap, its huge free allocations to the big polluters, and its pie-in-the-sky promise about bringing agriculture in - a promise continually deferred, up to and including this year.

In 2013 New Zealand walked away from any binding commitment for the second period of the Kyoto Protocol, and in 2016 signed up to Paris in the knowledge that its Nationally Determined Contribution was unenforceable and could be changed at any time.

The Zero Carbon bill went through Parliament in 2019 only after key mechanisms had been compromised away by former Green Party co-leader James Shaw in his desperation for a PR win: the definition of "net emissions" in the bill was carefully tailored to mislead the public while allowing accounting fiddles, there was no actually binding obligation for the Minister once section 5ZM had been written in; and the Minister's ability to flood the market with printed NZUs killed any prospect of the price getting to the social cost of carbon.

The first and second Emission Reduction Plans came nowhere near making a serious dent in gross emissions, and the Climate Change Commission was destined for oblivion once it ceased to provide cover for the Government's lack of ambition.

In 2021-22 the Commission was strongly defending the Government's position against a legal challenge in the High Court. But by 2024 it was forced into starting to tell truth to power, from which point, I'm predicting, it will be doomed to follow the Productivity Commission into the dustbin of history.

The revised NDC announced with much fanfare in 2021 was never likely to be met by reducing gross emissions, given the absence of serious policies to achieve that. Nor, if you looked at the forestry predictions, was it likely to hit the target-net-emissions goal unless a radical shift took place. So the 2021 NDC always hinged on importing offshore credits, and as the fiscal cost of doing that has come

into view, the Government has been hastening to prepare its escape from the commitment, either by rewriting it or by walking away from the Paris Accord altogether, in Donald Trump's wake.

The latest move to "decouple" the NZETS from Paris is window dressing only - the NZETS has never been properly coupled to Paris.

What is unravelling at the moment is not a serious policy position - only the tissue of accounting devices and carefully curated "spin" that have been used under both National and Labour to conceal the absence of serious policy. As the underlying truth comes more into public view, it will be interesting to see whether there is any voter resistance to the pervasive power of big corporate interests and right-wing politics. Perhaps that will be tested next year, if any political party puts its hand up for really tackling the issues.

But my lack of real outrage right now reflects two things far removed from the grubby detail of New Zealand climate policy.

Number 1: the world has collectively condemned itself to a damaging future ordained by Big Oil and Big Coal, and New Zealand's defection from playing its part in emission reduction has not made any critical difference. We have just joined and encouraged other countries in betraying future generations.

Number 2: the economics of renewable energy are running too strongly for the pathetic efforts of Shane Jones, Simon Watts and Donald Trump to halt the tide of market forces. The world's energy system will eventually go 100% renewable even as the global community suffers massive damage from global warming, because the first is economically irresistible and the second is now inescapable.



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