

Australian government announces sham net zero carbon emissions climate target

Patrick O'Connor
26 October 2021

The Australian Liberal-National government yesterday announced an official target of reducing carbon emissions to net zero by 2050.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison secured agreement on the target from the Coalition government's junior partner, the rural-based Nationals, after making a series of promises. These have been kept secret from the population, in an extraordinary move underscoring the government's contempt for basic democratic norms. The terms of the deal no doubt involve the funnelling of additional billions of dollars in public funds to the agri-business and fossil fuel corporate sectors.

The government's official target is a blatant sham, consistent with wider fraud perpetuated by the entire political establishment on the climate change crisis.

Net zero by 2050 is not aimed at making a serious contribution to resolving global warming. In fact, it has been adopted with precisely the opposite agenda in mind—unveiling the target just days before the United Nations COP26 climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland. Morrison hopes his target will reduce mounting international pressure. The government's aim is to allow Australian capitalism to continue to function as one of the world's worst greenhouse gas emitters on per capita and gross domestic product bases.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has extensively analysed, climate change is a global crisis caused by the capitalist system itself. While scientists know exactly what economic restructuring measures need to be enacted, solutions are stymied by capitalism's division of the world into rival nation-states and by the private ownership of the means of production. National governments seek loopholes in any even limited climate mitigation measures, to gain ground over their imperialist rivals, while powerful corporate interests in the fossil fuel sector exert veto power over policies that threaten their profits.

This dynamic will no doubt play out again in Glasgow, as it has before in Paris, Rio de Janeiro, Copenhagen, and other summits.

Australia has long been an outlier internationally on climate policy. On the world stage, successive Labor and Liberal governments have represented the interests of enormous coal, oil and gas, mining, and agribusiness interests.

The 1997 UN Kyoto Protocol provided Australia with a substantial loophole, exploiting anomalous land use statistics in 1990, the base year for emissions reduction calculations, that allowed it to substantially increase carbon emissions while other advanced capitalist countries marginally reduced theirs.

Canberra exploited a similar loophole in the 2015 Paris Agreement, which used 2005 emissions as a baseline for future reductions to be measured against. In that year there happened to be record deforestation and land clearances in farmland areas in the state of Queensland. This meant that in 2005, Australia's calculated emissions were higher than usual.

After 2005, the state government in Queensland passed legislation restricting land clearances and encouraging reforestation. This had the effect of significantly reducing national greenhouse gas emissions, without the federal government having done anything to bring this about.

Morrison now repeatedly boasts that Australia's emissions have declined by 20 percent since 2005—but if land use and agriculture are excluded, they have in fact *increased* by 7 percent.

The government's shift on net zero emissions by 2050 is driven by both international and domestic political calculations.

Since Joe Biden was inaugurated as president in January, US officials have repeatedly insisted that Canberra needed to be seen to be doing more on climate change.

In February, presidential climate envoy John Kerry complained that there were “differences” on the issue between Washington and Canberra and that “we've not been able to get on the same page completely.” Last August, Kerry's deputy, Jonathan Pershing, told the *Guardian* that Australia's commitments were “not sufficient” and that

there would be “a lot more pressure” to act ahead of the Glasgow summit.

The Australian government fears having its exports targeted by the European Union. The EU is enacting a “Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism,” which from 2026 will effectively impose tariffs on exports of carbon-intensive products from countries that do not have a carbon price or 2050 net zero target.

Another form of international pressure that received widespread media attention in Australia were criticisms issued by members of the British royal family after Morrison last month suggested he might not travel to Scotland for the meeting. The Queen was overheard saying it was “really irritating” when heads of government failed to confirm their attendance, while Prince Charles urged Morrison to attend via an interview with the BBC.

Robert Glaser, of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), earlier this month suggested that the Biden administration had used the militarist AUKUS alliance as leverage with Canberra.

“Having committed to sharing sensitive nuclear submarine technology with Australia, Washington now will expect Canberra to contribute more on the climate front,” Glaser stated. “In his recent meeting with the US president, it’s highly likely that Morrison reassured Joe Biden that Australia will sign up to net-zero emissions before the Glasgow climate conference, with the precise timing hinging on sensitive ongoing discussions within the Coalition.”

Whatever quid pro quos were made internationally behind closed doors, Morrison’s net zero commitment is directly pitched to the government’s big business constituency. The government’s revision of its climate policy comes after powerful sections of corporate Australia have thrown their weight behind net zero.

In recent months, numerous corporations have announced their own targets to reduce emissions by 2050 in line with net zero—this includes mining giants like Rio Tinto, BHP, and Fortescue, energy companies including AGL, Santos, and BP, and other companies such as Telstra and Coles. Corporate lobby groups also signing up to the 2050 target are the National Farmers Federation, Meat and Livestock Australia, and the Business Council of Australia, which represents the country’s 100 largest businesses.

This corporate embrace of limited emissions reductions reflects the weight of growing corporate investments in renewable energy, battery technologies, and related environmentally based industries. Technologies in these sectors have advanced considerably in the last decade, sharply lowering costs and increasing potential profits.

One striking expression of the shifting calculations within the ruling elite on these issues was the Murdoch press’s

policy u-turn unveiled this month. After decades of promoting misinformation and conspiratorial pseudo-science on climate change, Murdoch newspaper tabloids in Australia simultaneously announced on their front pages a “Mission Zero” campaign, with 18 pages of print devoted to urging the country to “go for gold” and boost the economy through new renewable energy and other technologies.

For all the fanfare around the federal government’s new target, Morrison has failed to release a single concrete detail on how it is going to be reached. Yesterday he focussed on promoting his new climate policy slogans—“technology not taxes” and “choices not mandates,” which could be summed up as “more profits for corporate fossil fuel polluters.”

The government’s 129-page policy document, “Australia’s Long-Term Emissions Reduction Plan,” mentioned the environmental effects of climate change in a handful of paragraphs. The bulk of the document emphasised the corporate investment and export opportunities that the government is subsidising to the tune of tens of billions of dollars in public funding.

Morrison’s net zero target is almost entirely based on promoting untested new technologies through these subsidies. The government has allocated \$20 billion to a so-called Technology Investment Roadmap, which nominally aims to reduce costs and increase investment in hydrogen energy, “green steel,” energy storage and carbon capture. Earlier this year he allocated another \$540 million for regional hydrogen hubs and carbon-capture and storage (CCS) projects, despite the unproven nature of these technologies. CCS initiatives have been criticised for being ineffective and serving only to prolong the life of destructive fossil fuel projects.

All the measures proposed by the government, and likewise by the opposition Labor Party, are manifestly inadequate responses to the climate change crisis.

Climate scientists Professor Lesley Hughes of Macquarie University and Emeritus Professor Will Steffen of the Australian National University reported in the *Conversation* their calculations of the necessary measures in Australia, based on a per capita extension of the necessary global actions.

They concluded: “We calculate Australia needs to achieve net-zero emissions within 16 years—around 2038—and reduce emissions by 50 percent to 75 percent by 2030. So any way you cut it, net-zero emissions by 2050 is too late.”



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