

Double Glaze Matters

APRIL 2011

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The Carbon Tax

...Jobs will be lost... but they will be replaced by other jobs...

It has been with some concern that I listen to the argument on the Carbon Tax. The government seem to have made some progress since Ross Garnaut talked about the compensation that people will receive, but the opposition still make headway with their catch phrase of "a great big tax on everything".

The comment from the unions "we do not want to see a single job lost" indicates that they have missed the point and that the government are not (or cannot) be honest about what is happening.

The carbon tax is not an end in itself. It is a means to an end — to reduce emissions. It will act in three ways.

The first is to increase supply of renewable energy. If coal fired power stations have to pay a carbon tax but wind and solar generators do not, the latter become more competitive and will attract more investment.

Secondly it will reduce demand. If we pay more for electricity, gas and petrol we will use it less.

Thirdly it will change the way we do things. Industry will move away from carbon intensive industries (coal, iron, aluminium etc) and move towards less carbon intensive industries, or

change the way they work in these industries.

This is where the unions miss the point. Jobs will be lost in these industries but they will be replaced by jobs in other industries. Renewable power will require many more workers than the coal fired power industry. That's why it is more expensive!

It is worth looking at where we will be in 30 years time. Assuming we actually get on top of our emissions (say a 75% reduction), some things will probably have gone. I would expect to lose 100% of our brown coal burning, 75+% of our coal exports and 50+% of our air transport.

We will have better insulated homes and we will heat them with renewable electricity. We will have just as much transport, but it will be powered by renewable electricity. Food will be sourced more locally and we will be less consumer oriented. Things will last longer and we will not be able to afford changing purely for the latest fashion.

Other more subtle changes will have occurred. We will have to address population growth, we will all need an international view of things rather than national. And growth for the sake of growth will have disappeared.

So things must change. Hopefully a carbon tax will encourage those changes sooner rather than later.

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What Chance Failure?

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What if we fail to address climate change? This is the scariest thing about climate change and the thing that worries me most. There are several reasons why this problem is so hard to fix.

Firstly, Climate change is the first world wide problem faced by humans. Individuals can't solve it, countries can't solve it, only the world can solve it. Unfortunately any individuals interest are best served if they do nothing and let everyone else solve it.

Secondly, the effect of climate change is so far removed from the cause of climate change that the average person is not able to connect their driving a car today to climate impacts over the next 50 years.

Thirdly, humans are not good at looking beyond a 10 year horizon. In the case of those that are starving, it may be a one week horizon. People are willing to risk future generations for their short term comforts.

And finally there is just too much doubt about what climate change means. There are several links in the argument, and by rejecting one link you can reject the whole argument:-

- CO₂ levels in the atmosphere are rising.
- The increase is due to humans
- The increased levels of CO₂ will increase temperatures.
- The increase in temperatures will cause catastrophic problems.

It is probably the last of these links which is the weakest. It is very difficult to say with any great confidence what the effect will be of a few degrees in temperature. After all being a couple of degrees warmer sounds a good idea to those in Melbourne.

Today I will concentrate on the third link "The increased levels of CO₂ will increase temperatures". The question is how much. Models give a range of temperatures even for the same CO₂ levels. But what worries me most is tipping points - The idea that we could get "positive feedback" where the temperature increases dramatically without additional CO₂ added to the system. There are several possible tipping points that have been suggested. We don't know if they will occur, but if they do the effect will be catastrophic. What's more, there could be other runaway situations that we do not know about.

Some potential tipping points are:

- Higher temperatures will melt the ice caps which will then absorb more heat and so cause higher temperatures.
- Melting of the Tundra will release more methane that will cause more melting of the Tundra.
- Temperature differences between different areas will modify the ocean currents, causing even greater temperature changes.
- Carbon take up in the oceans will cause acidification of the oceans which will damage shell fish which stops them from absorbing carbon from the water.

We are effectively conducting a huge scientific experiment where we have no idea of the potential results. We have no Plan B.

Next month I will talk about the potential for enormous sociological change from relatively small changes in climate.