

Immoral, illegal and plain wrong to write off our emissions

Fergus Green and Greg Picker

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As the Australian debate over the emissions trading scheme rages in Parliament, it is striking that so many Australian MPs and commentators argue that because Australia is directly responsible for only about 1.5 per cent of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, we should not take steps to reduce them. This position is impractical, irresponsible, immoral and illegal.

First, 1.5 per cent might not seem like a lot, but it makes us the world's 16th largest emitter. The 15 countries above us produce just over two-thirds of the world's emissions.

Emissions reductions in those 15 countries will, of course, be essential to tackling climate change, but even if they all reduced their emissions to zero, that would still leave one-third of the problem unchecked. And if Australia's emissions are "too insignificant" to bother reducing, then by logical extension the emissions of the 175 or so countries that emit less than we do are also too insignificant to worry about.

It therefore behoves those who advocate Australian inaction on the basis of our "small" contribution to explain why they only support fixing two-thirds of the problem.

Second, we have a political responsibility to reduce our emissions. As well as belonging to the Major Economies Forum, made up of the world's 17 highest emitters, Australia is a member of the G20 group of nations, which we helped elevate to the central organ of global political-economic power.

Our seat at the tables of world power gives us a prominent voice in global affairs. But with political power comes political responsibilities, and climate change is a key concern of both of these institutions.

To disavow our climate change responsibilities on the basis that we are too small and insignificant would be as good as saying to the world that we should not be taken seriously.

It would also be a slap in the face to our allies and our neighbours. Tackling climate change is a central domestic and foreign policy priority of the Obama Administration, so shirking our responsibilities on this issue would damage our relations with our closest ally. It would also inflame our regional neighbours, from China to South-East Asia to the Pacific islands, all of whom are gravely threatened by climate change and expect Australia to provide leadership.

In a world in which climate change policy is a mainstream concern, those who say we should do nothing are effectively advocating isolationism.

Third, refusing to reduce our emissions on the grounds of their purported insignificance is immoral. Emissions, wherever they occur, contribute to the problem of climate change, and climate change causes harm to people, communities and ecosystems. Every tonne of greenhouse gas is doing damage — mostly to others. The simple fact that we produce emissions therefore creates a clear moral imperative to reduce them. To the extent we cannot reduce them, we should pay for them.

This is not a revolutionary idea: "polluter pays" is a basic tenet of market economics, moral philosophy and environmental law that has informed Australian and international policymaking for decades.

The fact that any actions Australia takes to reduce its emissions would not be sufficient to avoid climate change (unless other countries take similar steps to reduce their emissions) is morally irrelevant.

The size of any individual's contribution to a problem does not diminish their responsibility for it. Similarly, the inadequacy of other countries' responses to climate change does not justify our own.

Our moral responsibility is heightened by the fact that our emissions per person are among the highest in the world. Australia may produce 1.5 per cent of the world's emissions, but it is home to only 0.3 per cent of the world's population. If one assumes that every person in the world has an equal right to deplete the world's atmospheric resources, we are using five times our share.

But even that does not take into account the fact that current levels of world emissions are unsustainable. Australia's per capita emissions are even more egregious when compared with what our fair share would be in a world that is sufficiently carbon-constrained to avoid the worst effects of climate change.

Moreover, while some 1.5 billion people around the world lack access to electricity, Australia is a wealthy, developed country. This fact increases the moral burden on us to reduce emissions, as those with greater resources should contribute more towards the provision of public goods that benefit everyone — including a safe and stable climate.

Finally, Australia has ratified the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which commits us to implement national policies to reduce our emissions. Failure to do so would violate our international legal obligations. The punitive consequences of such a violation may be minimal, but failing to live up to our international commitments makes it harder for us to argue that high-emitting developing countries, such as China and India, should also undertake binding obligations — which is precisely what we are expecting them to do.

None of this necessarily means that the carbon pollution reduction scheme is the best way to reduce our emissions: the merits of particular policy proposals is a separate question. But wouldn't it be nice if our politicians could at least agree that there is a problem to which we should respond?

Fergus Green and Greg Picker are the authors of a new Lowy Institute Analysis, *Comprehending Copenhagen: A Guide to the International Climate Change Negotiations*, available at www.lowyinstitute.org.