

Climate issues move to centre stage in the US

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The former US vice-president Al Gore says Australia and the United States are the "Bonnie and Clyde" of climate change. If Bonnie (Australia) changed its policy, it would put pressure on Clyde (the US) to do the same. In light of the Prime Minister and Treasurer hinting at a future carbon-trading scheme, Bonnie seems to have done the U-turn Gore was looking for. But couldn't Bonnie be simply getting in ahead of an inevitable policy shift by Clyde?

It would be naive to think that Australia could pressure the US to take action on climate change. Domestic forces in America have always been more influential than outside forces.

The US, like Australia, has no set limits on greenhouse gas emissions yet makes up 25 per cent of the world's total, by far the largest of any nation. There is no doubt the November 7 takeover of Congress by the Democrats will make a big difference to US climate policy.

One of the most important implications will be changes to the powerful Senate committees which investigate the issues and policies. The US Senate's environment committee was chaired by one of the most conservative Republican senators, James Inhofe, who just this month issued a press release titled "60 Scientists Debunk Global Warming Fears" and has previously said climate change is "the greatest hoax perpetrated".

The Democrats' win in Congress will likely see pressure for a catch-up with what some states are doing. In California, for example, the Republican Governor, Arnold Schwarzenegger, recently cleared the way to introduce a carbon emission trading scheme and a goal of reducing greenhouse pollution by 25 per cent by the year 2020.

The climate change debate in the US has shifted to centre stage in part because it can be connected to the fight against terrorism. Moderates can see how limiting greenhouse gas emissions through a carbon price signal could, in parallel, reduce domestic oil consumption and start to erode the 60 per cent foreign oil dependency.

Continuing inaction from the Bush Administration will not appeal to moderate voters, who the Republicans desperately need to woo back over the next two years. One of the key claims for inaction is that limiting greenhouse gas emissions through the Kyoto Protocol or otherwise will hurt the US economy (sound familiar?). Yet in Britain emissions fell 14 per cent between 1990 and 2004 while their economy grew by 41 per cent, one of the fastest paces in the Western world.

In late 2003 Democratic senator Joe Lieberman and Republican senator John McCain put forward a climate bill that would limit greenhouse emissions in 2010 to 2000 levels. It was voted down 55-45, but the changing of the guard in the Senate means this bill would be more likely to pass if resubmitted.

Other events since 2003, such as Hurricane Katrina last year and its \$US200 billion clean-up bill, have violently brought the importance of a stable climate into the living rooms of every US citizen.

But arguably the most important influence on the White House is from within its own political base. Rupert Murdoch has made an about-face, declaring "what is certain is that temperatures have been

rising and that we are not entirely sure of the consequences, and the planet deserves the benefit of the doubt". If Murdoch has shifted on climate change, the Bush Administration will not be far behind him, since Murdoch's Fox News channel is the bread and butter of the conservative Republican base.

As to what Gore said, it seems the counter-factual is more how the Bonnie and Clyde relationship is in reality: that is, if the US moves on climate change, then Australia must move. Ahead of the release of the report this week by the nuclear panel chaired by Ziggy Switkowski, the Prime Minister and Treasurer made the first steps in pre-empting the inevitable move.

They either know something we don't or have seen the writing on the wall from within the US over recent weeks.

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