

Robert Hill - Guest Lecture at Bond University

By Rod Weir

This lecture was held by the Institute of Sustainable Development at Bond University.

Robert Hill was the former Minister of the Environment in the Howard government (for 5 years) and also served as Defence Minister. He subsequently was appointed Australia's ambassador to the United Nations.

Currently, he is chair of the Carbon Trust of Australia. This is modelled on the UK Institute of the same name, and is effectively a government agency to facilitate the retrofitting of existing and older buildings to reduce carbon emissions. As Senator Hill pointed out, this is a simple and relatively straightforward way to reduce emissions, which does not require new technology or vast amounts of expenditure, and can be driven by the business community. He seems to have a wide degree of support for his views on the environment across both major parties (the Carbon Trust is a Labor initiative and appointment)

His talk was basically the historical background leading up to Kyoto and subsequently Copenhagen, and some reflection on what has gone wrong as well as some of the positive things that have occurred. He is definitely not a climate change denier, and believes strongly that we have not done enough to mitigate climate change, and that we are now facing a rapid adaptation period. Kyoto took very little account of the new economies (China, Brazil, and India etc) as carbon producers and this was corrected at the Bali conference in 2007.

His UN experience has made him exasperated with the lack of a cohesive International effort. The Americans undermined the Kyoto protocol, as the debate in their Senate would not have allowed the protocol targets to be passed into legislation. At Copenhagen, the UN tried to restore the urgency of carbon caps and reducing emissions, and urged all the world leaders to be there to negotiate. This happened, but had the adverse effect of making negotiations too complicated and unwieldy within the conference timeframe. In the end, Obama was left with the same problem with his Senate as existed at the time of Kyoto, and no binding targets were set. Australia was left with a position not adopted by the rest of the world, and the opposition radically altered its' view (and leader.) Rudd then made the huge error of walking away from the issue he had so strongly supported, and the rest we know.

Hill's view is that Australia missed its big opportunity at Kyoto. The targets which were set, although not ratified, were achieved by restricting land clearing, and he feels that we missed a chance to build on this basis with policies based on capping carbon output.

The current position is that most countries in the world have now shelved plans for an ETS. The Cancun conference in a couple of years time is unlikely to change this substantially.

Individual countries are proceeding at different rates. China is rapidly developing a renewables industry, and now has more of this than anyone else. They are also increasing their carbon outputs substantially.

The United States and most European States are developing some renewables, but nowhere near quickly enough. His final view on this is that without a substantial price on carbon, not much will change.

There were several questions, mostly involving clarifying historical points. One interesting point was would things have been better at Copenhagen without the GFC? His view was no, given the blocking by the US Senate of any meaningful targets, and the impossible situation thus faced by President Obama in trying to lead the conference

There was very little discussion on what should be happening to change the way forward. In summary, we didn't learn much that isn't very common knowledge.