The Social Construction of Climate Change

Deconstructing the Climate Change Debate in Australia

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Abstract

Since the 1980s there has been a growing recognition of the significant risks associated with climate change. By 2007, the scientific evidence that anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions were causing global warming was irrefutable. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its Fourth Assessment Report which describes in great detail the biophysical and social impacts of climate change, some of which are already being experienced. Many argue that Australia is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. It is also widely acknowledged that as one of the highest per-capita emitters in the world, Australia has a particular responsibility to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions. However, despite this, Australia’s response to climate change has been largely inadequate, giving rise to a need for research into factors shaping this response.

Research has identified the important role that discourses play in shaping perceptions of climate change and responses to the issue. As a complex and intangible issue, climate change needs to be represented through concepts, terms and the communication of scientific knowledge. Thus people’s understanding of climate change is mediated by the information available to them, the discourses within which it is embedded, and the ways that these discourses construct the issue. The climate change debate is characterised by a wide variety of alternative perspectives with different actors perceiving and portraying the issue and options for addressing it in contrasting often contradictory ways. In this context, it is argued that discursive approaches can provide valuable insight into responses to climate change. These approaches have been used to great effect by scholars exploring climate change discourses in many other countries. However, very few studies have investigated climate change discourses within the Australian context, a gap in the literature that this thesis seeks to address.

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the social construction of climate change in Australia between 1987 and 2007, with a particular focus on 2007, which represented a major turning point in the climate change debate in Australia. It investigates two discourses informing and emanating from the climate change debate and considers how these discourses construct the issue of climate change and options for addressing it. This study was based on the collection of a wide range of media, government, and non-government texts. Drawing on the work of Carvalho (2005; 2008), Dryzek (2005) and Lindseth (2004;
among others, I developed a unique framework for conducting discourse analysis. It comprises four interconnected stages: examining texts, identifying and characterising discourses, assessing their influence, and considering the options and outcomes they give rise to.

This framework is used to analyse two key discourses shaping the climate change debate in Australia during 2007: climate change activism and climate change scepticism. For each discourse the main arguments and messages, actors and their motives, key linguistic and rhetorical characteristics, discursive strategies, and key constructions are identified and discussed. The discourse of climate change activism with its emphasis on the seriousness of climate change and the need for action, was found to be particularly widely supported and reported by the media, achieving prominence through many front page stories, feature articles and editorials. The influence of this discourse can be traced in growing public concern, shifting political rhetoric and a wide range of business initiatives. While there were significantly fewer texts supporting and reporting climate change scepticism, it remained a powerful discourse, providing an alternative narrative and undermining calls for action. The debate about what should be done to address climate change was extremely contentious during 2007, and alternative constructions of international agreements, domestic frameworks, and calls to improve efficiency and reduce consumption are examined.

It is argued that the way in which climate change is constructed has significant implications for responses to the issue. It was found that while the proponents of the discourse of climate change activism were successful in communicating its arguments and messages they were less successful in translating concern about climate change into substantive action to address the issue. It is clear that simply communicating the dire consequences of climate change is not enough. Climate change, and options for addressing climate change, need to be constructed in new and different ways, that resonate with people’s lives and values, to stimulate and sustain meaningful action. This thesis contributes to the scholarship around social responses to climate change in three ways. Firstly, it illuminates the social construction of climate change in Australia. Secondly, it provides a detailed analysis of the discourses of climate change activism and climate change scepticism in Australia. Finally, it proposes a practical model for undertaking the analysis of climate change discourses.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma at any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Karen F. Hytten.

31 May 2013
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABARE</td>
<td>Australian Bureau of Agriculture and Resource Economics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Corporation</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACF</td>
<td>Australian Conservation Foundation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AIGN</td>
<td>Australian Industry Greenhouse Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>APEC</td>
<td>Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APP</td>
<td>Asia Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate</td>
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<tr>
<td>BCA</td>
<td>Business Council of Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOM</td>
<td>Bureau of Meteorology</td>
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<tr>
<td>CANA</td>
<td>Climate Action Network Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CCPP</td>
<td>Cities for Climate Protection Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDA</td>
<td>Critical discourse analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CH₄</td>
<td>Methane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO₂</td>
<td>Carbon dioxide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CO₂-e</td>
<td>Carbon dioxide equivalent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COAG</td>
<td>Council of Australian Governments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COP</td>
<td>Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC</td>
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<tr>
<td>CSIRO</td>
<td>Commonwealth Scientific and Industry Research Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EIT</td>
<td>Economy in Transition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENSO</td>
<td>El Niño-Southern Oscillation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESD</td>
<td>Ecologically sustainable development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOE</td>
<td>Friends of the Earth</td>
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<td>G77</td>
<td>Group of 77</td>
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<td>G8</td>
<td>Group of 8</td>
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<tr>
<td>GCP</td>
<td>Greenhouse Challenge Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>GDP</td>
<td>Gross domestic product</td>
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<td>GHG</td>
<td>Greenhouse gas</td>
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<tr>
<td>H₂O</td>
<td>Water</td>
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<tr>
<td>HFC</td>
<td>Hydrofluorocarbon</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICSU</td>
<td>International Council of Scientific Unions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPA</td>
<td>Institute of Public Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>IPCC</td>
<td>Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change</td>
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<td>IPT</td>
<td>Interim Planning Target</td>
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<tr>
<td>LULUCF</td>
<td>Land use, land use change and forestry</td>
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<tr>
<td>MRET</td>
<td>Mandatory Renewable Energy Target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N₂O</td>
<td>Nitrous oxide</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-government organisation</td>
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<td>NGRS</td>
<td>National Greenhouse Response Strategy</td>
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<td>O₃</td>
<td>Ozone</td>
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<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFC</td>
<td>Perfluorocarbon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ppb</td>
<td>Parts per billion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ppm</td>
<td>Parts per million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF₆</td>
<td>Sulphur hexafluoride</td>
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<tr>
<td>SRES</td>
<td>The IPCC’s Special Report on Emissions Scenarios</td>
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<td>UN</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNEP</td>
<td>United Nations Environment Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNFCCC</td>
<td>United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USCAP</td>
<td>US Climate Action Partnership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WMO</td>
<td>World Meteorological Organisation</td>
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