REVIEW ARTICLE

CLIMATE CHANGE IN AUSTRALIA, OCEANIA AND THE WORLD

Hans Baer

Climate change continues to be a major concern in Australia and in Aotearoa New Zealand, while many South Pacific-island countries face the threat of total or partial inundation due to rising seas spurred by climate change. This essay examines seven recent books that are relevant to these regional and global concerns.

The 2019-2020 megafire

2019 was reportedly the hottest record year in Australia, following a three-year drought. Starting in June of that year, a megafire impacted large portions of southeastern Australia, with more than 2000 fires aflame in New South Wales by December and other fires alight in South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria, finally petering out in early 2020. Originating from a seminar on the megafire in late 2021, Peter Christoff (2023) has edited an anthology titled *The Fires Next Time*, chronicling its impacts, the responses and implications for megafires in the future.

Part 1 ('What happened') comprises two chapters. In the first, Tom Griffiths observes that Australia has a long history of bushfires; and he asserts that Australia scholars of fire need to work at three temporal scales: (1) the 'deep-time environmental and cultural history of the continent'; (2) the century-scale history of [European] invasion'; and (3) the 'long future

Baer, H. (2026)
'Climate Change in Australia, Oceania and the World'
Journal of Australian Political Economy
No. 96, pp. 165-84.

of climate-changed nature and society' (p.49). Like others, Griffiths argues that 'Indigenous cultural philosophies and practices have much to offer all Australians' (p.48), arguing that we must 'allow Indigenous fire practitioners to take the lead' in addressing how to combat bushfires.

In chapter 2, Michael Grose, Andrew Dowdy, Andrew King and David Karoly report that the Australian land mass warmed by 1.44 (+/-0.24)º C between 1850 and 2011-2020, with most of this warming occurring since the 1950s (p.56). They add that the 'Black Summer Fires released around 715 million tonnes of CO_2 into the atmosphere' (p.61). They acknowledge that Australia's fire weather 'has become more dangerous owing to human influence on the climate system' (p.76) but don't point to the differential responsibility in this regard, both within and outside of Australia'.

Part 2 ('Impacts and responses') has five chapters, beginning with an assessment of 'emergency responses and the fire services' by Greg Mullins. This observes that Australian bushfire fighting requires cooperative arrangements between various land management agencies, including national park services and forestry agencies, volunteer services, and urban services, based in various states and territories. His call for a bipartisan approach in mobilising against climate change is unfortunately hampered by climate denialism within the Coalition and by the Labor government continuing to approve new fossil fuel projects, despite its claims to be taking serious actions on climate change by gradually shifting to renewable energy sources, especially solar and wind.

In chapter 4, Brendan Wintle and Libby Rimpff assert that actions based on inadequate information failed to protect the biodiversity of native animals and native plants prior to and immediately after the 2019-2020 megafire; and they say that, facing the inevitability of more megafires, good planning to protect biodiversity is essential. Then Robyn Eckersley in chapter 5 picks up on the earlier theme of divided responsibilities for fire management between Commonwealth, state, and local governments that all too often result in uncoordinated efforts. She says that, unfortunately, *responsibility displacement* (p.142) constituted the leitmotif of the Morrison government when it denied, ignored or downplayed 'any linkages between the fires and government policy' in 2019-20 (p.142). In chapter 6, Christine Li, Toms Kompas and Pham Van Ha report that the Black Summer fires resulted in direct costs of $10.2 billion and indirect costs of $54.2–99.5 billion, adding up to a total cost of $64.3–109.6 billion. Then, in chapter 7, Sotiris Vardoulakis, Iain Walker and Sophie Atkin

discuss the direct loss of life and injury caused by the fires, along with smoke-related and mental health impacts. They call for careful public health preparedness, including air quality reporting and exposure reduction measures in the case of future fires.

Part 3 of the book is on 'Looking forward'. In chapter 8, Peter Christoff argues that Australia is 'part of a global society increasingly threatened by substantial new human-generated global risks', including environmental, health, economic, military, and geopolitical ones that 'arise from the legacies of Empire, hyper-industrialisation, hyper-consumption and militarisation' (p.211). In his view, Australia's Black Summer constituted a climate emergency created by a larger global crisis. Christoff argues that the Australian state must transform itself into a vigilant climate state which seeks to mitigate, adapt to, and address the loss and damage resulting from climate change. Then in chapter 9, Michael-Shawn Fletcher, Rodney Keenan and Kevin Tolhurst review Indigenous land and fire management before British invasion, the changes in fire management since European invasion, the development of Western bushfire science, and current forest and fire management in Australia. They posit the way forward in terms of effective fire, forest, and land management requires 'committed leadership, trust between governments and Indigenous knowledge holders, bipartisan political support and long-term funding models' (p.251).

In chapter 10, David Schlosberg and Danielle Celermajer delineate three predominant climate imaginaries: (1) the imaginary of wilful ignorance; (2) the imaginary of transcendent technofix; and (3) the imaginary of doomism. The imaginary of wilful ignorance consists of two subtypes: (a) the wilful ignorance of science that was manifested by successive Coalition governments in their refusal to listen to climate scientists and experts, along with denial and delay of 'any plan to create environmentally, economically and ethically viable to transition' (p. 259); and (b) the wilful ignorance of community knowledge or the 'exclusion of the knowledge and normative practices of local communities that are now actually suffering from the reality of climate change' (p.259). The imaginary of the transcendent technofix refers to the 'fantasy of technological intervention, the preservation of existing systems and ways of life through the shift to a more ecologically aware and attuned capitalism, clearly illustrated by the top-down ecomodernist and geoengineering movement' (p.263). Finally, the imaginary of doomism refers to the 'fantasy of apocalypse and ecological and social collapse' (p.264). As a practical counter movement, Scholosberg and Celemajer

discuss the alternative, grounded imaginaries that have emerged in many communities and 'are rethinking and redeveloping systems that deliver basic needs' (p.268), such as Indigenous initiatives, ethical supply chains, and regenerative farming. Unfortunately, they don't mention the eco-socialist, eco-anarchist and de-growth imaginings that sadly operate on the margins of the larger society.

In an Epilogue to the volume Peter Christoff concludes that 'new patterns of fire management must emerge across Australia's varied ecological landscapes. Changing the frequency, timing and intensity of fuel reduction activities, trying to ensure the best possible protection for ecosystems and species as well as human life and property, requires careful observation, and this too will take time to develop' (pp.290-1). Ultimately, the larger question is whether Australia and the world put measures in place that not only adapt to climatic disasters, such as bushfires or wildfires, heat waves, cyclones and floods, but mitigate against them in radical ways.

Oil production and opposition to it in Australia

In terms of fossil fuel production, Australia is particularly noted for its coal and natural gas production, not oil production, although it is the world's 20th largest oil exporter and vied until quite recently for being the world's largest top exporter of liquid natural gas (LNG). Royce Kurmelows (2024) in *Slick* explores what he dubs 'Australia's toxic relationship with big oil'. He begins his engaging story with an account of his own attendance (as a press person) at an annual conference of the Australian Petroleum Production and Exploration Association (APPEA) in Brisbane in May 2022. Its gala dinner was attended by politicians including Coalition resources minister Keith Pitt, future ALP resources minister Madeline King, former foreign ministers Julie Bishop (Coalition) and Stephen Smith (ALP). Kurmelows views this as illustrating 'overlap between government and industry – a state of affairs some might call "state capture"' (p.9).

Tracing the origins of these industry-state links, the book harkens back to the Chifley ALP government in postwar Australia that wanted to encourage 'energy independence' through the establishment of a domestic oil industry and even 'flirted with the idea of a national, publicly owned oil company' (p.62). The APPEA was begun to campaign for the creation of a privately owned domestic oil industry. It established an international education committee to provide it with links to Australian universities,

following the lead set long ago by Australian mining companies in funding a university chair of economic and mining geology at the University of Adelaide in 1949. Robert Menzies and his prime ministerial successors developed a cosy relationship between Coalition governments and the oil industry (p.93). In contrast, Rex Connor, minister for minerals and energy in the Whitlam government, was feared by the oil industry due to his desire to create a public-owned resources sector, although Kurmelows asserts that he was 'perhaps more pro-oil than oilmen, more pro-gas than gas men, and more pro-coal that coal miners' (p.94).

Like the coal, coal-seam gas and LNG industries, the Australian oil industry has met opposition from various quarters over the years. The formation in 1966 of the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), for example, was partly in response to a series of major oil rig disasters that began in 1950 and continued into the 1960s. More recently, as Kurmelows notes, Fireproof Australia emerged in the wake of the 2019-2020 megafire as a newcomer in the Australian climate movement, pushing for 'a sovereign aerial firefighting fleet, a program to rapidly rehome people who lost their livelihoods in catastrophic environmental disasters, and the smoke-proofing of kindergartens, schools and aged care facilities to protect children and the elderly' (p.253).

Towards the end of his book, Kurmelows describes two conferences in 2023 that neatly illustrate the current state of play. One was held by the APPEA in Brisbane. Speaking at it, the then Coalition leader, Peter Dutton, 'urged the nation's oil and gas producers to attack the Albanese government over its interference in the gas market' (p.282), while Extinction Rebellion and Fireproof Australia mounted a protest outside. The other conference was COP28 in Dubai. Kurmelows, who attended it, notes that, while UN secretary-general Antonio Guterres urged conference delegates to 'end the fossil fuel age', COP28 made 'no mention of oil or gas in the section that was supposed to deal with transition away from fossil fuels' (p.297).

Further lessons from Aotearoa New Zealand

Stopping Oil by Sophie Bond, Amanda Thomas, and Gradon Diprose (2023) is another important contribution to understanding the continuing influence of the oil and gas industries. Aotearoa New Zealand is often considered to be a refuge from the worst of the ravages of anthropogenic

climate change, but its government has continued to permit offshore oil and gas production on the promise of economic growth and energy independence. Contrasting with the anti-coal, anti-coal seam gas, and anti-natural gas stance of Australia's climate movement, Aotearoa New Zealand's climate movement has therefore been more focused on stopping deep sea exploration and drilling. Not exclusively though: the Coal Action Network Aotearoa, established in 2007, and the Maori- and community-led activism that emerged during 2008-2017 framed around the notion of *environmental justice* which Bond, Thomas and Diprose define as the 'ability to engage in active and robust debate about issues surrounding sustainability' (p.2).

As the authors observe, 'there are huge, vested interests in maintaining the economic and social systems that maintain such privilege – namely capitalism and colonialism – that continue to drive climate change' (p.3). Drawing from their engagement with Oil Free and the broader climate justice movement in Aotearoa New Zealand, they identify four recurrent themes in attempts to legitimise oil and gas exploration. These are that it will contribute to economic development; that it has potential as a useful resource; that oil and natural gas are under-utilised and under-developed resources; and that technology, best practice, and risk will protect the environment (p.40). These are the viewpoints needing to be challenged.

In a similar vein, the authors identify five characterisations of climate activists that recur in the content of mainstream newspapers' reports on opposition to oil and gas exploration. These are that activists are uninformed about risks; they interfere with legal activities; they endanger themselves and others when protesting at sea; they are hypocrites, greenies and hippies; and they are a vocal minority while 'silent majority' supports government decisions on this issue (p.41). Supplementing those denigrations and attempting to secure to secure business-as-usual, the oil and gas industry has relied on Thompson and Clark, a private security agency engaged in surveillance activities (p.67) and has received support from the police as an arm of the state. As the authors observe: 'Policing by force may represent a barrier to sustained politicisation for many people, like those activists targeted by pernicious prosecutions' (p.83).

Digging yet deeper, *Stopping Oil* delineates four key dimensions of contemporary capitalism that reinforce this lack of care and responsibility for the environment. First, 'a long history of separating nature from human activities and treating the natural environment as either resource to extract,

improve or add value to and sell, or as a pollution sink'. Second, 'neoliberal practices, policies and forms of governing across society [emphasising] individuals over collectives'. Third, a responsibilisation discourse that makes the 'broader system that creates inequalities and environmental degradation invisible'. Fourth, a discourse of individual responsibility that 'works against recognising who and what is responsible for climate change and mitigating its impacts' (p.86-88).

As Bond, Thomas, and Diprose emphasise, the climate justice movement in Aotearoa New Zealand is quite disparate, consisting of those such Extinction Rebellion who are engaged in non-violent direct actions; and those who lobby politicians to promote climate-friendly policies and legislation. While some climate justice activists are critical of the larger ENGOs, such as Greenpeace, for becoming coopted, the authors contend that 'large ENGOs like 350 Aotearoa (350.org's Aotearoa branch) and Greenpeace Aotearoa play a crucial role in coordinating some climate movement actions, and often in resourcing or supporting actions like the ANZ blockades' (p.98). It appears that the climate movement in Aotearoa New Zealand has been more successful in curtailing fossil fuel extraction than the Australian climate movement has been in this regard under both Coalition and ALP governments. When Jacinta Adern was Prime Minister, the government banned oil and gas exploration in the Exclusive Economic Zone, except for onshore production in Taranaki on the west coast. Despite this, it reportedly remains the third highest *per capita* emitter among Annex I countries, behind the United States and Australia (p.104).

Carbon tax (again)

Meanwhile, in Australia, economist Ross Garnaut (2024) has tried to keep the focus on taxing carbon as the central element in climate change mitigation. His latest book is called *Let's Tax Carbon*. Introducing it, he states that it is 'the last in a quintet of books since Australia turned away from nearly a quarter-century of exceptional prosperity eleven years ago. All five books discuss the links between zero-carbon transition and Australian economic performance. The links between the transition and living standards have come to be understood better over time as we have made our way through these eleven years' (pp. 2-3). His latest contribution to that allegedly 'better understanding' mainly reinforces extant ideas: 11 of the chapters in the new book substantially reproduce public lectures,

speeches and journal articles that he has previously presented or published. It is mainly in his concluding chapter ('Looking forward: building the Superpower and restoring prosperity') that we see some fresh material where he 'tells the story of Australia's partial reset as happening during the first two years of the Albanese Labor government' (p.7).

Garnaut asserts that the 'Albanese government approach has been generally cautious and incremental, leaving much of the heavy lifting to future parliaments' (p.285), whether they be Labor or Coalition governments 'supported by some combination of others in the House of Representatives [that] will have undivided responsibility for completion of Australia's reset for prosperity and building the Superpower' (p. 287). As in his earlier books on policy to address climate change, Garnaut continues to advocate the embrace by governments of some form of carbon pricing, asserting that it is essential to 'getting the balance between state intervention and market exchange' (p.315). Like other Australian techno-optimists, such as Saul Griffith (2022) and Alan Finkel (2023), he operates on the premise that both Australia and the global economy require not only a lot of energy but growing amounts of energy, in essence operating under the parameters of what has commonly been termed *green capitalism*.

Regional energy transitions in Australia

The latter feature is also evident in a new book on regional energy transitions in Australia, co-edited by Gareth Edwards, John Wiseman and Amanda Cahill (2025). The introductory chapter says that the first clear-cut indication of an energy transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy in regional Australia harks back to 2016 when the French multinational Engie announced its intention to close the Hazelwood coal-fired power station in Victoria's Latrobe Valley. The regional energy transitions then emerged from 'discussions and collaborations between labour, community groups, environmental groups, industry and local state governments' (p.2). In the 2022 federal election climate change was a leading election issue, particularly for the ALP. By contrast, the federal election of May 2025 saw climate change relegated to the sidelines with 'cost of living' as the primary issue emphasised by both the ALP and Coalition. Edwards and Wiseman maintain that the potential for job creation has been central to the case for an energy transition, becoming a stance adopted by groups as diverse as Beyond Zero Emissions and the Business Council of Australia.

Case studies of the energy transition in five regional centres take up most of this quite concise book. In the first, Lisa Lumsden and Linda Connor maintain that the Repower Port Augusta Alliance, which involved 'local government, business, unions, health and environment organisations' (p.26) set the pace in the early 2010s for the rest of South Australia, making it the only state to have successfully made the transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy. They say, however, that, in developing renewable energy facilities in Port Augusta, much of the construction work was done by labourers from outside the community, such that the energy transition 'has made a minimal long-term contribution to the material well-being of Port Augusta' (p.43), particularly its First Nations people.

The second case study turns to the situation in Victoria's Latrobe Valley. Dan Musil and Elianor Garrard describe the attempted energy transition there which has entailed actors including the federal government, the state government, local governments, community organisations, labour unions, an array of environmental NGOs (including Environment Victoria, Environmental Justice Australia, Friends of Earth, the Australian Youth Climate Coalition, and 350.org), and the University of Melbourne and RMIT. The authors observe that, while industry initially proved to be a hindrance to the energy transition, Engie eventually commissioned a large battery at the Hazelwood power station site. Pointing to modest successes, the authors state: 'The Valley now hosts several successful installation businesses and small-scale renewable manufacturers. There is $54 billion worth of large-scale renewable projects currently in development or planning in the wider Gippsland region' (p.53). But caution is also evident in the authors' warning that the coal-powered plant closures expected soon will require the Latrobe Valley's future as a renewable energy hub to have 'on-going, well-resourced planning and coordination' (p.62).

The energy transition in the regional town of Collie (population 8,812) in the southwest region of Western Australia is the focus of the following chapter by Naomi Joy Godden and her team of thirteen collaborators. In 2017, the Western Australia government decided to retire the three state-owned Muja and Collie coal-fired power stations by 2030: two units of Muja were retired right away in 2017. Godden et al. report that: 'In 2020, a Just Transition Working Group (JTWG) and the WA Government developed *Collie's Just Transition Plan* to fund and implement a just transition for affected workers and the wider community away from its economic dependence on coal' (pp.69-70). To date, however, the transition plan has failed to include local Wilman Traditional Owners, leading the

authors to emphasise that 'Country and First Nations peoples in transition could help address the myriad social justice and human rights issues that First Nations peoples experience due to ongoing impacts of colonisation, social exclusion and discrimination, and facilitate a programme of reparations' (p.87).

In the next chapter, Warrick Jordan, Kimberley Crofts, and Liam Phelan examine the energy transition in the Hunter Valley of NSW, a long-time coal mining region. Responding to the intention announced in 2015 by energy company AGL to close its Liddell coal-fired power station, the Hunter Energy Transition began a 'company-state-university coordination effort' (p.100). The authors note that: 'The election of the federal Labor Government in 2022, including a former coal minister to the seat of the Hunter, marked the return of federal efforts to balance emissions reductions and the value of mining and industry to regional Australia, through a national emissions reduction scheme, regional industry policy and the creation of a national Net Zero Authority. This was followed in March 2023 with the new state Labor government committing to establishing a regional Hunter Authority to manage transition' (p.103). As the authors concede, however, the Hunter Valley's energy transition is a work in progress, with no clear end in sight. As elsewhere, the Hunter is struggling with how to implement an energy transition, one that addresses 'questions of responsibility, justice and action that go with it' (p.113).

In the book's final case study, Amanda Cahill examines the vexed issue of transforming Gladstone in Central Queensland from a carbon capital to a so-called renewable energy superpower. As a matter of historical note, readers might consult the late Norwegian anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen's (2018) detailed examination of Gladstone as a 'boom town', including aluminium production, the expansion of the port of Gladstone to accommodate the export of LNG, the impact of the East End limestone mine and shale oil production on agriculture, and community responses to ecological damage in the Gladstone region. Central Queensland has served as key focus of climate activism 'since the Indian conglomerate Adani announced plans to develop a massive new coal mine in the undeveloped Galilee Basin in 2010' (p.121). As an effort to assuage protesters, in 2020, the state funded an NGO, The New Economy (TNE), to convene energy transition workshops in four regions, including Gladstone. Not surprisingly, as Cahill reports, most of the attendees at the Gladstone workshop 'were drawn from heavy industry, energy companies, or different levels of government' (p.123). In the wake of the 2021 Central

Queensland Energy Futures Summit, the 'Gladstone Regional Council began an 18-month-long participatory planning process in partnership with TNE to develop a ten-year Gladstone Region Economic Transition Roadmap' (p.126). Since the 2022 federal election, Gladstone has taken centre stage in discussions about how Australia could achieve the net zero target by transitioning renewable energy and supposedly green industries.

In pulling together these five regional case studies, Edwards, Wiseman and Cahill lament that, as the energy transitions have begun to take shape, 'justice has slipped out of focus' (p.142); and, despite the Albanese government's investments in renewable energy projects, it has failed to 'curtail Australia's massive coal and gas exports' (p.144). Indeed, the government has approved numerous new fossil fuel projects. Only time will tell whether it will develop the fortitude necessary to revive its commitments to an energy transition and stronger climate action.

Edwards, Wiseman, Cahill and the other contributors to their anthology frame their analysis of energy transitions largely within the discourses of ecological modernisation and green capitalism, although these terms do not appear in their book. Unfortunately, even green capitalism fails to adequately address the depletion of natural resources and environmental degradation, including anthropogenic climate change; nor deal adequately with social justice issues, such as who has access to energy and other resources and who does not. Just as capitalism operated on other sources of energy prior to the fossil fuel revolution, green capitalism, heavily reliant on a programme of ecological modernisation, will require enormous resources to develop and maintain, thus leading to new resource curses, particularly in the Global South. As Stuart Rosewarne (2022:412) warns, the construction of massive solar and wind farms may result in 'restricting traditional custodians' access to solar and wind farms' and constitute a form of 'colonisation that is being abetted by federal and state governments in their determination to find a solution to the climate crisis that does not compromise the pace of capital accumulation'.

Climate politics in Oceania

Climate Politics in Oceania, edited by Susan Harris Rimmer, Caitlin Byrne, and Wesley Morgan (2024), consists of essays focusing on the renewal of Australia-Pacific relations in the era of climate change. It brings together analyses from academics and practitioners to 'delve further into

issues, challenges and opportunities that now face Australia and wider Oceania region' (p.3). Its introduction recalls Prime Minister Albanese's July 2022 declaration to Pacific Island leaders in Suva, Fiji, that the Pacific region is facing a climate emergency, making it the 'first time Australia has officially associated itself with climate emergency warnings, and more importantly, the first time to have done so in alignment with Pacific island leaders' (p.1). Indeed, by working with the Pacific-island states, Australia could strengthen its credentials as a regional power and thus enhance its soft power. Moreover, in terms of the COP process, whereas Australia has tended to be a 'climate laggard', the Pacific-island states have been climate pacesetters in promoting ambitious goals.

Among the essays included in the book is Simon Bradshaw's 'Possible futures: understanding the science and its implications for Australia and the Pacific'. This argues that, given more destructive cyclones, rising seas, ocean acidification, and compounding threats such as food and water insecurities emanating from climate change in the Pacific region, Australia needs to undertake more climate action than it has to date, including strengthening its 2030 emissions reduction target and coming to grips with its status as 'one of largest producers and exporters of coal and gas' (p.37). More than that, it must contribute more to international climate finance, support 'efforts to address loss and damage from climate change', and deepen its 'partnerships at all levels, from working with traditional allies including the United States to develop secure and adequate supply chains needed for rapid transformation of energy systems, to supporting the region's most vulnerable communities to adapt to climate impacts in ways that build upon their local knowledge and strengths' (p.38).

Another essay is by Wesley Morgan, George Carter and Fulori Manoa on 'Pacific perspectives: regional cooperation in a warming world? A willingness to cooperate may be inferred from the longstanding annual meetings of the Pacific Islands Forum at which leaders from Australia, New Zealand and 14 Pacific-island states come together to consider climate diplomacy along with a multiplicity of other issues. However, as the authors say, while the Pacific-island countries have 'led global efforts to tackle climate change' (p.73), particularly acting through the Alliance of Small Island States (AOISS), including brokering the Paris Agreement in 2015 limiting warming to 1.5 degrees, Australia once again sought to 'exercise veto power of Pacific climate diplomacy' prior to COP19; and Australia reacted with panic when the Solomon Islands brokered a security agreement with China in 2022 (p.83).

China's role is a central consideration the essay by Tess Newton Cain, Romitesh Kant, Melodie Ruwet and Caitlin Byrne, titled 'Climate conversations and disconnected discourses: an examination of how Chinese engagement on climate change aligns with Pacific priorities' The authors observe that China 'has stepped up its engagement in the Pacific in Pacific in a bid to build influence in region over the past ten to fifteen years' (p.93). Despite being the world's largest emissions emitter, China has also increased its involvement in climate policy by, for example, creating the South-South Cooperation Climate Fund in 2014 to which it pledged US$3 billion. Attempting to 'explore and assess the extent to which China's diplomatic effort and development investment in Pacific island nations support Pacific interests, with a specific focus on the collective Pacific ambition for global action on climate change' (p.93), the researchers conducted Zoom interviews with 14 relevant people. The findings indicated 'minimal engagement between China and Pacific island countries in relation to mitigation issues' (p.106), such as in getting China to reduce its emissions. Some interviewees though it problematic that China, purportedly a 'developing country', competes with small island developing states for the same pot of climate finance (p.107). Nevertheless, in 2021, China established three centres, namely Pacific Island Countries Emergency Supply Reserve, the Poverty Alleviation and Cooperative Development, and the Pacific Island Countries Climate Change Cooperation Centre, to assist Pacific-island states.

Melissa Conley Tylor's essay on 'A climate agenda for Australia's Pacific development, diplomacy and defence engagement' draws on her role in having 'led a program consulting more than 140 experts in Australia and the Pacific region on how Australia can shape a shared future with Pacific across its defence, diplomacy and development cooperation' (p.139). The resulting options paper explored how Australia can be an 'effective climate ally in the Pacific' (p.139), proposing seven pathways to this goal:

- placing the 'effects, impacts and root causes of climate change as Australia's central foreign policy concern in the Pacific' (pp.139-140)
- strengthening energy and climate policies, such as transitioning away from fossil fuels for domestic energy consumption and realising that 'exports of fossil fuels have a limited lifespan and that new sources of export revenue need to be found before demand for fossil fuels in international markets fail' (p.143)

- acting ‘as an ally with the Pacific in international climate diplomacy’ (p.143)
- creating ‘dialogue and building on existing links’ (p.145), including Pacific peoples, Australia’s climate science organisations and Pacific equivalents, and an annual discussion between Australia and its Pacific neighbours in tracking to the UN COP 1.5-degree target
- examining disaster preparedness and response for both Australia and its Pacific neighbours
- assisting its Pacific neighbours to access climate finance
- facilitating immigration from Pacific islanders displaced by the ravages of climate change, particularly those impact by rising sea levels that inundate their communities and undermine their settlement patterns and sense of social cohesion.

To date, Australian governments have been reluctant to grapple with the prospect of climate refugees, preferring to view the migration issue in terms of ‘labour mobility and pathways to permanent migration’ (p.151). Over the long run, however, Australia and other developed countries will have to deal with the broader issue of climate refugees from Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Mexico and Central America. Within the context of the capitalist world system, individual nation states, as well as the UN, operate as border-making institutions that legitimise the exclusion of millions of people from land and resources essential to their livelihood and enforce those exclusions through legally sanction violence when needed. Meanwhile, very wealthy people operate in an essentially borderless world that allows them to manage their overseas trades network, spend their money on luxury consumer items and services, and jet around the world as tourists visiting sites not yet despoiled by climatic/environmental change.

Susan Harris, author of the volume’s concluding essay, titled ‘Climate justice and international human rights law: diplomatic implications for Oceania’, digs deeper into conceptions of climate justice. Her preferred one ‘links human rights and development to achieve a human-centered approach, safeguarding the rights of the most vulnerable and sharing the burdens and benefits of climate change and its resolution equitably and fairly’ (p.227). This is the conception offered by the Mary Robinson Foundation, one of several that have domesticated the call of climate

justice activists for 'system change, not climate change'. However, while Mary Robinson's book *Climate Justice* (2018) acknowledges the need to reduce social inequality, it fails to confront the drivers of growing concentration of wealth in most countries in the world. One wonders how she can reconcile a desire for environmental sustainability with her membership in the B-team, a group of leaders formed at a World Economic Forum assemblage in Davos that included Richard Branson, an endorser of her book, and the creator of the Virgin Galactica project that promises space tourism for the very wealthy.

Global social transformation for climate change

Broader strategic political questions are more to the fore in the latest book by former University of Melbourne academic Nicholas Low, *Social Transformation for Climate Change* (2024), reflecting forty years of his thinking and writing about planning, state, democracy, social justice, and the environment. While Low expresses admiration for Marx and Engels' research and passion for social justice, he opts not to look to them for intellectual and political guidance, instead citing Karl Polanyi, Thomas Piketty, Tony Judt and others, including the American political pluralist Robert Dahl, as his intellectual mentors. The result is an engaging *tour de force on* connecting climate transformation with social transformation.

Low's opening chapter argues that humanity requires a massive social transformation 'to manage the costs of climate change fairly and to guarantee democracy and social justice' (p.3). He appears to view ecological modernisation as an important component of the necessary social transformation, arguing that the technology to make a transition to a 'low or zero carbon-emitting global economy has existed for years' (p.6). But his stronger focus is on the social transformation needed to address climate change, requiring actions by governments, nation-states, and international regimes.

Then comes four chapters probing the lessons from the experience of many countries, ranging from Great Britain to Russia, the Nordic states and elsewhere in Europe where various forms of socialism and social democracy have been attempted. Low argues that, unlike in the Soviet Union, a form of socialism was achieved without revolution in various European countries, including the Nordic countries, Netherlands, Britain, France, Germany, Spain and Portugal. Since the bulk of the means of

production remained privately owned in these places, their 'socialism' might be better characterised as instances of social democracy or welfare capitalism. Turning from the state to civil society, chapter 6 then analyses the role that social movements have played, whether providing opposition within repressive regimes or expressing popular concerns 'from below'. The latter includes consideration of the events of May 1968 in France, the anti-poll tax movement in Britain, the influence of Black Lives Matter, the #MeToo movement and the climate movement, described as a 'global movement to pressure governments and industries to take action on the causes and impact of climate change' (p.92).

Having offered these broad political assessments about the state, social movements and societal change, the second half of Low's book focuses more explicitly on the climate crisis. In chapter 7, he refers to its origins in 'the industrial use of fossil fuels to produce energy' (p.99) and notes that the CO_2 level was less than 280 ppm in 1900, rose to about 300 ppm by 1960, to around 300 ppm by 1960, to 330 ppm by 1970, and to 340 ppm in 1980, shortly after the first UN climate conference convened in 1979. Emissions and global temperatures have continued to rise, along with more frequent climatic catastrophic events, despite UN climate actions, including the Kyoto Protocol which took effect in 2005, the *Copenhagen Accord* of 2009, the *Paris Agreement* of 2015 and 29 UN climate conferences. These are matters of fact. What Low doesn't point out is that the UN climate framework is, by and large, bankrupt because it is based upon preserving capitalist parameters of economic growth without recognising the limitations of ecological modernisation in mitigating emissions. A highly developed green capitalist economy would require a great deal of land for solar plants and wind farms and extraction of resources to build and maintain it. Low correctly argues that 'addressing social justice in the age of climate change requires transformational change' (p.110) but the question is *what kind of transformational change*.

Chapter 8 ('Democracy and the international order') mentions a litany of struggles attempting to promote democracy and warns of the rise of 'fake democracies' headed by authoritarian-populist leaders, including Orban in Hungary, Endrogen in Turkiye, Modi in India, and 'perhaps Benjamin Netanyahu in Israel' (p. 117). Low asserts that 'authoritarian-populist governance is a possible precursor of fascism (p. 118), referring to Putin's Russia as a fascist state, although he concedes that its starting of the war in Ukraine was 'driven by the humiliation of Russia by the West under influence of neoliberal regression' (p. 129). In closing the chapter, Low

asserts that the 'social transformation needed to address climate crisis requires further advances in democracy reaching from local and national levels to institutions of global governance' (p. 133).

Chapter 9 ('Inequality and poverty') brings in Piketty's research on income, wealth and climate inequalities. Low concurs that the 'climate crisis is fuelled by the polluting activities of small fraction of world's population' (p. 148), with the 'global top 10% wealth-holders responsible for more than emissions than whole of bottom 50%' (p.148). This makes the path for social transformation to address the climate crisis 'far from clear with no simple working model of socialism to turn to' (p.161); and suggests the need for a 'multi-faceted alternative' to be built 'from many threads of democratic socialism in 20th century and modified for present'.

So, what is to be done? Low's next chapter ('Remaking democracy for a world of climate change') says that a broad-spectrum movement that includes workers, grass-roots actors, elite professionals, intellectuals, political leaders, and social movements is essential to get off the path to climate destruction. On what types of change would it be focussed? Low draws on Piketty's views about 'sharing power over decision-making in firms' (p.169); progressive wealth tax and carbon taxes on emissions; and calls for participatory socialism that allows for 'greater circulation of power and ownership' (Piketty 2021:10) along with social federalism, feminism, and multiculturalism. Recognising the breadth of this political economic program, Low draws on Piketty's proposal for a new model of globalisation based on 'transnational democracy to make decisions regarding global public goods: protecting the environment, promoting research (including into inequality and poverty), and investigating the possibility of imposing common taxes on income and property, on large firms, and on carbon emissions in the interest of global fiscal justice' (pp.183-4).

Recognising that the prospects for transformative change with these characteristics are not auspicious, Low's chapter 11 looks for contributory 'actions, actors and activists'. Observing that Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary General, is a 'champion of social transformation' (p.191), Low argues that humanity also needs a 'champion of social democracy to emerge from ranks of national politics' (p.191). Yet the rise of right-wing populists and neo-fascists, such as Trump in the United States and Putin in Russia, shows the danger of vesting too much authority in champions who espouse nativist ideologies.

Low's final chapter ('What we can learn from the past') argues that: 'While transformations may be devised in detail by intellectuals and implemented from the top by political elites, they are powered and driven by mass movements in civil society' (p.204). This is a strong call for building the momentum from below while strengthening and extending social democratic policies to address the growing climate crisis. Unfortunately, a shortcoming of the book is that, in eschewing Marxian approaches, Low overlooks the extensive literature on eco-socialism or ecological Marxism that has emerged over the past 40 years, much of which seeks to grapple with climate change and contribute to a socio-ecological revolution (Brownhill *et al.* 2022; Engel-Di Mauro 2024).

Concluding reflections

The esteemed Climate Council (2024) gave its imprimatur to the bid by Australia, along with its South Pacific Island neighbours, to host the COP31 conference in 2026, although Turkiye is also still vying to be the host. The last two of the annual COP conferences have been in countries heavily invested in fossil fuel production, while global temperatures and greenhouse gas emissions have continued to rise. Ironically, while seeking international agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the COPs themselves cause massive amounts of emissions, especially because so many people travel to them by air from around the globe. For instance, the UN COP25 in Paris in 2015 had an estimated 22,000 official attendees, including official negotiators, delegates and aides from 195 countries. Adding the NGO representatives, corporate representatives, climate activists, high school students and many journalists who attended gives a total of about 50,000 people present. Assuming an average 9,000 mile round-trip per attendee, and with most people coming by planes, including corporate jets, some 27 million gallons of jet fuels were consumed, causing about 575 million pounds of CO_2 emissions (Stockton 2015).

Despite the best of intentions of the thousands of delegates at the annual COP conferences, as Wainwright and Mann (2018:31) observe, the more fundamental flaw is that the conferences 'treat capitalism as the solution to climate change'. This tendency also pervades much of the literature, particularly articles, books and reports that look for 'solutions' without adequate examination of the systemic political economic origins of climate change. Kiely (2007:129) argues that that conventional climate regimes

'are too easily guilty of ignoring the uneven development of international capitalism, and therefore the unequal context in which rights, values, ethics and international institutions operate'. The planned transition to a sustainable economy that shifts from fossil fuels toward renewable energy sources will require a high degree of political will at both national and global levels, as well as addressing differential access to material resources around the world.

Humanity is at a crossroads – or, perhaps more aptly put, at several crossings. In one direction there is business-as-usual. A second route that appeals to many politically left-of-centre people requires a switch to some variant of green capitalism. The third option is an eco-socialist route that, while not yet attracting strong attention, should become more sought after as the need for it becomes more apparent to the masses of humanity around the world. In the case of Australia, it will take a real utopian vision to transform the nation from a sunburnt country that's in danger of becoming even more sunburnt to being the 'lucky country' that some, but by no means all, Australians regard it as (Baer 2018, 2022). At the global level, the real challenge – whether one identifies as a social democrat, a democratic socialist, an eco-socialist, an eco-anarchist, an eco-feminist, an Indigenous de-colonialist, or whatever – is how we can get from A to B, that is from a still well-entrenched capitalist world system to an alternative world system based on social justice and equality, deep democracy, environmental sustainability and a safe climate (Baer and Singer 2025).

Hans A. Baer is Principal Honorary Fellow in the Anthropology and Development Studies Program at the University of Melbourne.

hbaer@unimelb.edu.au

References

Baer, H.A. (2018) *Democratic Eco-Socialism as a Real Utopia: Transitioning to an Alternative World System*, Berghahn, New York.

Baer, H.A. (2022) *Climate Change and Capitalism in Australia: An Eco-Socialist Vision for the Future*, Routledge, London.

Baer, H.A. and Singer, M. (2025) *Building the Critical Anthropology of Climate Change: Towards a Socio-Ecological Revolution*, Routledge, London.

Brownhill, L., Engel Di-Mauro, S., Giacomini, T., Isla, A., Lowey, M., and Turner, T.E. (eds) (2022) *The Routledge Handbook on Ecosocialism*, Routledge, New York.

Bond, S., Thomas, A., and Diprose, G. (2023). *Stopping Oil: Climate Justice and Hope*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

Christoff, P. (ed.) (2023) *The Fires Next Time: Understanding Australia's Black Summer*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

Climate Council (2024) *Winning bid: The Pacific Partnership That Can Power Our Security and Prosperity*, available: *https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/resources/the-pacific-partnership-that-can-power-security-prosperity/.*

Edwards, G.A.S., Wiseman, J. and Cahill, A. (2025) *Regional Energy Transitions in Australia: From Impossible to Possible,* Routledge, London.

Engel-Di Mauro, S. (2024) *Ecosocialism: An Introduction*, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, Switzerland.

Eriksen, T.H. (2018) *Boomtown: Runaway Globalisation on the Queensland* Coast, Pluto Press, London.

Finkel, A. (2023) *Powering Up: Unleashing the Clean Energy Supply Chain*, Black Inc, Melbourne.

Garnaut, R. **(**2024) *Let's Tax Carbon: And Other Ideas for a Better Australia*, La Trobe University Press, Melbourne.

Griffith, S. (2022) *The Big Switch: Australia's Electric Future*, Black, Inc, Melbourne.

Kiely, R. (2007) *The New Political Economy of Development: Globalization, Imperialism, and Hegemony*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

Kurmelows, R. (2024) *Slick: Australia's Toxic Relationship with Big* Oil, University of Queensland Press, Brisbane.

Low, N. (2024) *Social Transformation for Climate Change: A New Framework for Democracy*, London: Routledge.

Piketty, T. (2021) *Time for Socialism: Dispatches from a World on Fire, 2016-2021*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Rimmer, S.H., Byrne, C., and Morgan, W. (eds) (2024) *Climate Politics in Oceania: Renewing Australia-Pacific Relations in a Warming World*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne.

Robinson, M. (2018) *Climate Justice: Hope, Resilience, and the Fight for a Sustainability Future*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London.

Rosewarne, S. (2022) *Contested Energy Futures: Capturing the Renewable Energy Surge in Australia*, Palgrave Macmillan, Singapore.

Stockton, N.S. (2015) 'The Paris talks will emit 300,000 tons of CO2 by our math. Hope it's worth it', *The New Republic*, November.

Wainwright, J. and Mann, G. (2018) *Climate Leviathan: A Political Theory of Our Planetary Future*, Verso, London.