

Carbon tax and other dirty language

By Nicki Roller

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[Pro business](#) climate change sceptics and pro tax [environmentalists](#) have hijacked the climate change debate and changed our understanding of ordinary language. We keep hearing the same debates with predictable partisan points of view.

Climate change has been appropriated by so many people with different agendas but is it possible that we could have a constructive discussion over the most pressing issue affecting all of our futures?

Might climate change and its tax, be an opportunity for regaining public trust?

Language has become so laden with meaning that we can no longer trust simple words to be neutral. Words are bandied about like weapons of mass destruction - junk science, tax, radical lefties, tree huggers, clean coal, dirty coal, crisis, cataclysm all perpetuating fear, anxiety and distrust. Language is deliberately being used to obscure real issues and possible solutions.

Because of our busy and complex lives, many of us have issue fatigue and often give big issues the least amount of attention or critical analysis. We have become Homer Simpsonised in our thinking.

"Tax" - mmm, all tax is bad - therefore I am against a carbon tax.'

Add to that our suspicion that we live in a world of shady deals, lobbyists and corporations exerting undue influence on governments, it is not surprising we suspect everyone has an agenda and that no experts have any neutral information.

As our trust in authority declines we are turning to 'ordinary' people for the truth. Industry lobby groups such as the [Australian Industry and Trade Alliance](#) are taking advantage of this and using 'ordinary' people to warn us against the carbon tax via television [ads](#).

People from a broad range of demographics including a hairdresser, a trade person and a mother advise and frighten us of "the world's biggest tax with no environmental benefit", repeating, "why threaten our jobs?"

As we saw with the \$22 million anti-mining tax campaign, whoever can afford the best advertising agency and largest media buy, will win the debate. The anti-mining adverts in 2010 were widely believed to have contributed to the [removal of Kevin Rudd](#).

Political marketing has always existed but now television advertisements have become the primary landscape for political debate. By necessity, thirty-second ads are prone to be sound bites reliant on emotive language to persuade through repetition of simplistic ideas.

There is no place for complex debate in this media spectrum. As a barrage of information, in this media format, it creates voters who don't deny but are worse; they are indifferent to the science.

Science has become an even dirtier word than tax, giving rise to anxiety about science and what it can tell us. That science could have competing and different points of view, shocks people who presume the field is comprised only of immutable facts.

We expect science to provide uncontested theories but this expectation of science is unreasonable and actually, unscientific. Scientific evidence is factual: it is only how the evidence is interpreted that opens up the contentious can of worms.

The field of science has come to have different meanings as it relates to politics and the economy. The economic argument for not taking any action on carbon is that in the short term it will harm the economy and jobs.

Somehow economics has supplanted science as the 'truth' and become the dominant framework through which the science is analysed. But economics does not have a good track record of predicting outcomes: remember the global financial crisis. There will be short-term economic implications for climate mitigation but that is no reason not to act for long term environmental benefits.

Could we not take a 'learn as we go' approach rather than a 'wait and see' one? As the [distinguished climate advisor, Ross Garnaut](#) warned, climate science uncertainty says things may turn out better or worse than expected but it is naïve to think things will be better.

Many people believe that scientists are evenly divided between sceptics and believers, but this too is false, however misinformation tends to embed itself in cultural myths, longer than facts.

The [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC) is the leading international scientific body assessing climate change and won the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for their work. Consensus between thousands of their scientists asserts that climate change is real and demands immediate mitigation.

Some 2504 IPCC scientists from around the world, peer review and conduct research on a voluntary basis. The majority of scientific bodies endorse its method of consensus yet, climate change deniers, usually not scientists, write the views of the IPCC off entirely. Is it possible that thousands of unpaid scientists around the world are colluding in a massive conspiracy?

[Tim Flannery](#) notes that Australia is one of only a few countries that are still debating the science of climate change as a tactic to delaying action. While certain aspects of climate change such as the rate and severity of that change will always be uncertain until it happens, it is no excuse to not to act on what we do know. We have moral obligations to future generations to invoke the scientific principle known as the [precautionary principle](#), best summarised as better safe than sorry.

While the deniers and believers [battle it out in 30 second TV commercials](#), many of us will remain in denial because as Al Gore said, "The truth about the climate crisis is an inconvenient one".

Climate change mitigation will require change by all of us and it is often human nature to resist any change. We can however, continue to resist change because soon there will be a new generation and as quantum physicist Max Planck observed, "A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it."

In our lifetime we have seen and will continue to see irreversible climate changes, and the future generations, our grandchildren will have to live with the severity of those changes. They will demand to know why we spent years arguing over semantics and fiddled while Rome burned.

Perhaps there is time before our generation dies out to re-conceptualise the climate change debate and stop using dirty language?

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