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The Angry Summer: The Politics of Climate Change in Australia

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In February 2011 the Labour Federal Government of Australia, led by the Prime Minister Julia Gillard, established the Climate Commission to be an independent body that provided Australians with reliable and authoritative information about climate change. Following the general election in 2013, the new Coalition Federal Government, headed by Prime Minister Tony Abbott, took only two days to abolish it!

The response was dramatic: Within a few days the sacked Chief Commissioner, Professor Tim Flannery, backed by a huge public response, both in terms of vocal support and funding, established a new, independent, non-profit organization called the Climate Council of Australia.

Previously, the Climate Commission under the leadership of Professor Flannery and supported by the other commissioners including Professor Will Steffen, Roger Beale, Gerry Hueston, Professor Lesley Hughes, and Professor Veena Sahajwalla visited schools, councils and businesses, and held more than 30 community forums across Australia, visiting both city and rural venues, doing the hard yards, meeting with both friendly and hostile audiences. The Commission also published a series of high-profile reports, articles and videos on climate change science, health impacts, international action and renewable energy.

The Critical Decade, the Commission's first report, summarised the current state of climate science, the predicted impacts on Australia, its economy and its people, and emphasised the need for urgent action. This was followed by many more regional reports such as *'Renewable Energy in South Australia'* and *'Queensland Climate Impacts and Opportunities'*.

Unfortunately the new Coalition Government came to power asserting that while global warming was probably real, its anthropogenic origins were not proven. Climate 'skeptics' and 'denialists' successfully lobbied to abandon the carbon tax scheme as well as the Climate Authority that advises on emissions targets and the Clean Energy Finance Corporation that oversees alternatives to fossil fuels. Implementation of these decisions will depend on the

make-up of the new Senate this July. This is the political scenario into which the new Climate Council emerged.

Backed by a massive surge of public interest and an astonishing outpouring of donations, in fact becoming the most successful crowd-funded project in Australia, the Climate Council has already issued some very important short reports. Perhaps the most high profile one was 'The Angry Summer' (www.climatecouncil.org.au/angry-summer) which presented five key findings:

- 1) *Heatwaves and hot days, drought and rainfall deficiency, and bushfires dominated the 2013/2014 summer.*
- 2) *Climate change is already increasing the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events in Australia.*
- 3) *Many of our largest population centres stand out as being at increased risk from extreme weather events, including heatwaves, drought and bushfires.*
- 4) *The impacts of extreme weather events on people, property, communities and the environment are serious and costly.*
- 5) *Limiting the increase in extreme weather activity requires urgent and deep reductions in the emissions of greenhouse gases. The decisions we make this decade will largely determine the severity of climate change and its influence on extreme events for our grandchildren. This is the critical decade.*

The Climate Council (www.climatecouncil.org.au) is now a very active and –critically - independent part of the public response to the dangers of global warming and has been going just over 6 months, employs 8 staff, has released 9 publications, including *Be Prepared: Climate Change and the Australian Bushfire Threat* (www.climatecouncil.org.au/be-prepared). The main messages have generated intense media coverage, reaching millions of Australians. The Council's online presence includes 70,000 Facebook friends (www.facebook.com/climatecouncil) and 10,600 followers on Twitter. The website (shown above) contains a large amount of useful information, including the free online course: www.climatecouncil.org.au/free-online-course-everything-you-ve-ever-wanted-to-know-about-climate-change.

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