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A more sustainable Australia: are we ignoring the future?

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Where are Australia’s politicians leading us? Paleontour/Flickr

**A more sustainable Australia.** As we hit the half-way mark of the 2013 election campaign, we asked academics to look at some of the long-term issues affecting Australia - the issues that will shape our future. We begin with Geoffrey Robinson, who looks at our history of neglecting the future.

Every election campaign in Australia has a focus on marginal seats – a topic of endless frustration to electoral observers. But at least marginal electorates can be seen as microcosms of the nation. There is more ground for concern about the narrow manner in which the current campaign has defined the future interests of Australians.

It would be easy to blame voters for this, to agree with economist John Maynard Keynes that humans are prone to discount the future, but this pattern largely reflects failures of political leadership.

The Coalition seems to be focused on restoring a golden age that ended with the defeat of the Howard government. The threats to the future are seen as resulting from Labor’s record of “debt and deficit”.

Labor campaigners boast of their concern for the future, but the party’s modest policy record calls this commitment into doubt. Even the Greens, apart from their championing of the Labor government’s modest carbon price, have largely focused on the present concerns of left-inclined voters.

This omission on the part of political parties reflects popular understandings of sustainability, which are closely linked to fears of resource depletion. The 1970s texts that launched the modern environmentalist movement, such as authored by Paul Ehrlich and the Club of Rome, were deeply shaped by fears of resource exhaustion. It is now clear that many of these fears were illusory. Fossil fuel reserves are not on the verge of exhaustion, but our overuse of them drives climate change.

The focus of elite panic is no longer resource depletion but concerns about the alleged budgetary implications of an ageing population decades into the future. This panic serves to undercut environmental sustainability, as the “environment” is cast as a luxury that is no longer affordable.

Discussions about sustainability in Australian politics are thus often sidetracked into the politically convenient field of arguments about population levels. The Coalition has promised to add “sustainability” to the title of the Productivity Commission, but this curious promise is largely a leftover from the 2010 campaign. That year Labor ineptly sought to divert voter concern about asylum seekers into a notably incoherent debate about population levels.
In 2002 the Department of Immigration commissioned a major report from CSIRO on the sustainability of Australian resource usage. This final report entitled Future Dilemmas suggested that Australians were a nation of “future eaters”, to use a phrase popularised by Australian academic Tim Flannery.

It contended that the degradation of the natural environment was not taken into account by policy makers and suggested that advocates of rapid population growth explain how Australia could accommodate the equivalent of 90 new cities the size of Canberra over the next 100 years. The report met an anxious response from the Department, was reviewed by unsympathetic economists and condemned to the archives.

The controversy around Future Dilemmas largely put an end to thinking about sustainability at the level of the Commonwealth government. This is unfortunate. Australia has a rich history of attempts to establish institutions and processes that address sustainability.

In 1985, Barry Jones as Science Minister established the Commission for the Future. The Commission was a pioneer voice on the need for a response to the greenhouse effect, but it endured constantly diminishing budgets and was finally wound up in 1998. After Jones’ departure from the ministry he chaired a parliamentary committee on long-term strategies but it did not survive the change of government in 1996.

Jones - despite his vision and enthusiasm - was never an effective political player, but in the early 1990s debates about the sustainability of resource use briefly occupied a central position in Australian politics. In 1987 and 1990 the Labor government of Bob Hawke campaigned for reelection on the basis of its “green” credentials.

However many of its environmental initiatives were deeply unpopular with natural resource industries and with significant sections of the Labor Party. In 1989 the Hawke government established the Resources Assessment Commission with judicial chair in an effort to depoliticise these disputes over questions such as the fate of old-growth forests and mining in Kakadu.

The commission’s short life was unhappy. The resource lobby was unhappy with the commission’s conclusion that public opinion on the question of Kakadu mining should guide policy. In 1993 the Keating government abolished the commission.

In the early 1990s the Labor government sponsored consultations between representatives of government, industry and environmental organisations on “ecologically sustainable development”. The government hoped that these discussions could depoliticise natural resource conflicts.

The discussions were difficult; the issue of old-growth forests was particularly divisive and led many environmentalists to withdraw from the process. The outcome of this process was disappointing.

In 1992 the Australian and state governments agreed to a National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development. This strategy remains in effect but it has limited impact, beyond the...
provision of yet another “tick a box” criteria for annual reporting.

The Labor government elected in 2007 showed little interest in establishing an institutional focus on sustainability. The sole exception was the Climate Commission, set up in 2011; the Coalition has pledged to abolish it.

Former Labor minister Lindsay Tanner has argued that much of contemporary Australian politics now revolves around stunts and gimmickry. There was a time when advocates of sustainability were able to win the battle of images: forest preservation activists were masters of the media stunt. This victory proved short-lived.

Politicians have caught up, they have learnt how to champion tree planting for the 6PM news and wind back controls on land clearing at the same time.

Pioneer political scientist Alan Davies once argued that Australians had a talent for bureaucracy. This talent expressed itself in novel institutions such as statutory corporations to operate public services and the industrial arbitration system. These institutions often expressed popular aspirations for efficiency and equity more effectively than politicians.

The future of sustainability policy in Australia will depend on developing new institutions.

*Thanks to the Sustainable Australia Report 2013 for inspiring this series.*