

With apologies to Frank Sinatra, Scott Morrison might not have done it yet, but he has set a course which is different from most of the developed world and other major emitters.

The purpose of the Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), which entered into force in 1994, and now boasts 197 member States, is the stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level which would prevent dangerous anthropogenic climate change.

This commitment would require substantial reductions in greenhouse gas emissions. Parties agreed to protect the climate system through “common but differentiated responsibilities and capabilities”, with developed country parties taking the lead.

Developed country parties in Kyoto 1997 agreed to legally binding commitments which were designed to reduce emissions overall. Australia’s commitment was a reduction from expected growth to plus 8% off a baseline of 1990 emissions, accounted for between 2008 and 2012. This was about a 30% reduction off business-as-usual projections and was regarded as an equivalence of effort to that of other parties. Australia met its commitment.

A second accounting period was subsequently agreed for the 2013 to 2020 period, the Doha Amendment. Australia committed to a target of minus 5% off a base year of 1990. Australia exceeded its commitment.

In 2010, parties had agreed that future global warming should be limited to below 2 degrees Celsius, in order to meet the objectives of the Convention. But it was becoming increasingly apparent that agreed efforts were not going to achieve that objective. One of the significant issues was the rapid growth of the emissions of large developing states, particularly China. Emissions from developing countries are expected to exceed emissions from the developed world during the first half of this century.

A formula to address this issue was agreed in Paris 2015 and the Paris Agreement came into force the following year. The Paris meeting locked in the commitment to keep temperature rises below 2 degrees from pre-industrial levels, with the goal of achieving a net zero carbon balance in the second half of the 21st Century. States were also urged to pursue efforts to limit temperature increases to below 1.5 degrees, recognising that the 2-degree commitment might prove inadequate.

Developed states agreed to commit nationally determined contributions towards the greenhouse emissions reduction goal. Australia committed to a reduction of between 26% and 28% by 2030, off a base year of 2005. New contributions were to be set every five years. Developing countries, whilst not expected to achieve immediate reductions, were expected to reduce their rate of emission growth.

The Paris Agreement also invited states to formulate and submit long term low greenhouse strategies by 2020. The planned year 2020 Conference of the Parties (COP) did not proceed because of the COVID19 pandemic and has now been rescheduled for this November 2021.

So, Australia has a formal commitment under the Paris Agreement. The Morrison government claims that it will meet that commitment. It is also expected by 2025 to commit to a new enhanced target out to 2035. It also has said that it will present a long-term strategy at this year’s COP. In terms of the Paris Agreement this is a strategy, not a commitment, but would provide context for Australia’s medium-term commitments.

Unfortunately, the outcomes from the cumulative NDCs seem unlikely to achieve the minimum goal of the Paris Agreement, let alone the more ambitious goal. Decoupling economic growth from carbon growth is proving challenging and economic development in the developing world has been

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strong. Member states have therefore been contemplating what more should be done, and the view of many is that it is necessary to commit to more ambitious targets.

The trend has been for states to commit to net zero carbon emission targets by 2050. All G7 States have, for example, made that commitment. Some are committing to achieving net zero carbon before that date. Additionally, some are raising their medium-term Paris targets. Not surprisingly, this is putting pressure on Australia. Australia's share of global emissions is only about 1.4% but it can be said that accounting for fuel exports would lift our share of the global carbon footprint to about 5%. Also, on a carbon per-capita basis, we have one of the most carbon intense economies in the world.

Last week US President Joe Biden hosted a Leaders Summit. He committed the US to reducing emissions by 50-52% by 2030. He spoke in terms of leading a clean energy revolution. Brazil pledged to achieve carbon neutrality by 2050. Japan pledged to curb emissions by 46% by 2030 compared with 2013 levels. This is in addition to its previously announced net zero commitment by 2050. Canada pledged to reduce emissions 40-45% compared to 2005 levels. South Korea said that it will unveil a stronger emissions reduction pledge. It had previously committed to the net zero target by 2050. The EU is committing to cutting greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels. The UK had previously committed to cutting emissions by 78% compared to 1990 levels by 2035. China offered nothing new of substance, but had earlier committed to achieving net zero by 2060.

Prime Minister Morrison clearly wanted to address the perception that Australia had not been carrying its share of the carbon reduction weight. He reminded participants that Australia had reduced emissions by 19% by 2019 off a 2005 base, "more than most other similar economies". He said we have a goal to reach to reach net zero and to "get there as soon as we possibly can". But he would not commit to new targets. He said rather that he expected such a goal to be achieved through new low carbon technologies and that his government was sponsoring such innovation.

Australia has always been reluctant to agree to carbon reduction targets without knowing and endorsing the policies and measures necessary to achieve its commitment. That has served Australia well, in that Australia is one of few countries to have met all of its previous commitments. And in broad terms it has been at least an equivalence of the effort of others. Clearly Scott Morrison does not have a set of policies and measures that he would be prepared to endorse at this time which would achieve a target of net zero by 2050. In such circumstances, he will not make a commitment. That honesty is commendable, but unlikely to appease those who feel they are committing to aggressive and specific reductions, and the economic cost, in the years ahead.

So, Scott Morrison is doing it his way. When he says that the outcome is what counts, that is ultimately true, but this global effort requires all of us to have confidence in each other's efforts. There is little doubt that the Morrison government is seeing whether it can add meat to the bones of its emission reduction program before November. That would be a good thing, not because of threats of border tariffs or the like, but because it adds confidence to the global effort in a challenge of a type that the world has never previously encountered.



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