



The Climate Institute

Climate of the Nation 2016
Australian attitudes on climate change

Foreword

Climate of the Nation is Australia's longest running survey benchmarking community attitudes on climate change.

Two weeks of, at times, simplistic sloganeering about an electricity "crisis" in South Australia became an ominous backdrop for conducting this year's research. Some were quick to blame the resultant price spike on the state's surging renewable energy and the closure of its coal-fired power stations.

Yet, our research shows this "crisis" didn't affect the continued growth in enthusiasm for renewable energy. It may, however, have played a role in the increasing levels of support for a better managed transition from coal-fired power to clean energy.

Indeed, while public support for renewable energy – including wind, but particularly solar – over coal and gas, has grown, so also has Australians' frustration with our politicians for not supporting it more.

There is widespread disappointment with the performance of all levels of government, as well as business. This is clearly articulated in the views Australians hold in relation to their performance in taking climate action.

What is interesting, particularly after a turbulent 10 years in national policy, is the strongly held view that government at the federal level should hold the lead responsibility for climate action. This view is held pretty consistently across the political spectrum of voting preference. Only a handful of people say governments – federal, state or local – should not take action.

Perhaps repairing this increasingly chronic distrust of politicians can start with climate action. In Australia, at least, climate and energy policy has been a major feature on the political stage for many years. Credible and, ideally bipartisan, climate action could also help with this broader distrust and alienation.

Our research, and that of others, has identified mid-2012 as marking the low point in support for climate action. Expectations have been rebounding since that point – when the scare campaigns met the reality of the carbon laws in action. Their repeal didn't halt this trend.

Today, public expectations are clearly that Australia should be an international leader in climate solutions.

A number of elements buttress this rebound. A growing realisation that the impacts of climate change are actually hitting us now has been accompanied by growing trust in the science. The myth that Australia was somehow acting alone has now been demolished, most notably via the public and strong Chinese and US climate partnership, as well as the success of the Paris climate negotiations.

Perhaps most powerfully, clean energy alternatives are now a very real part of our lives. This goes beyond the global investment reality where we have seen investments in renewable energy double investments in fossil fuels. Plunging costs for solar and wind technologies are being matched by the emergence of other more tangible technologies that people can directly interact with in their everyday lives – electric cars, and household batteries. People can see the clean energy future and they want to be part of it.

Of course, realising this future isn't simple. Careful, fair and inclusive strategies need to accompany policies that will unlock markets which encourage modernisation and decarbonisation of electricity, transport, buildings and other sectors of the economy. Years of policy and political turbulence has sapped a sense of urgency, as well as the confidence people place in politicians. Yet the potential is clear.

Inconsistency, half measures or backtracking will undermine efforts to seize this community potential.

Australia will be reviewing its climate policies in 2017 and has also committed, internationally, to consider post-2030 emissions reductions targets at this time. It will do so, not only as other nations step up their activities in line with their commitments under the Paris climate agreement, but also as the global investor community becomes increasingly attentive to climate change risks and opportunities.

This will be our first national policy conversation for at least five years. It is an opportunity to connect a flailing political system with a growing and increasingly tenacious, if wary, resurgence in the community's desire for action – which is now the strongest it has been since 2008. It is highly likely support for renewable energy and climate action will also continue to grow. The big question we are left with is, how will our politicians respond?

**John Connor, CEO
The Climate Institute**