

# Executive Summary



## Climate of the Nation 2012

July 2012

Since 2007, The Climate Institute has conducted comprehensive on ground research into Australian attitudes to climate change and related policies. We have published a number of *Climate of the Nation* reports and aim to publish annual mid-year reports to track evolving attitudes and actions.

Attitudes will develop against a backdrop of volatile climate politics, economic uncertainties, carbon pricing realities, low-carbon technological advances, global developments and shifting perceptions of prosperity and quality of life.

In 2012, Australians are uncertain about the science, as yet unconvinced by the carbon laws but are open to be convinced on both.

Majority concern about climate change is moderate, but greater concern regarding associated impacts and minimal support for inaction suggests a deeper level of worry. This disparity may be due to climate change, once considered a scientific and ecological issue, becoming a highly politicised discourse being played out in the media.

The high level of concern for the impacts of climate change on society and the environment, coupled with a large degree of scepticism, suggests that there is a large segment of the population with a latent concern for climate change and its associated implications that are not quite yet convinced of a need for action. This segment is likely to be available to be 'won' by any side of the debate.

Australians are prepared to do their bit so long as government and business shoulder responsibility and perform better. Business performance gets a far stronger net performance disapproval rating than the Federal Government. Only the media's performance is rated worse than business.

Attitudes have, however, been overwhelmingly impacted by the bitterly partisan public policy debates and eroding trust in political parties and institutions.

Twice as many Australians agree that Labor has a more effective emissions reduction plan than support the Coalition's, but both need to convince a third to half of Australians to get majority support. Less than half of Australians think that the Coalition will repeal the carbon laws.

Household cost of living concerns also dominate attitudes in 2012. Here and abroad understandings of climate issues are affected by a complex array of social, psychological and economic filters. Trust in the science is impacted by both opposing voices and the personal experiences of changing seasons and weather extremes. The carbon pricing laws are unpopular, but support grows when the laws are explained. This suggests that a significant proportion of Australians who are uncertain about the laws are open to be convinced.

What is clear is that Australians overwhelmingly support renewable energy, particularly solar power, and greater energy efficiency for industry and households. Coal trails nuclear in the preferred energy mix, which is dominated by renewables: solar, wind and hydro.

Majority support for Australian leadership on climate solutions is there, but this is down from the bipartisan highs of February 2009.

Australians have a growing literacy on energy and carbon issues that is layering on experiences in waste and recycling as well as on water conservation. Greater energy conservation policies and practices appear to have contributed to a drop in overall energy demand in Australia in recent years.

Environmental and economic reforms often come with exaggerated perceptions of their cost, perhaps none more than with these recent reforms. Whether Australians follow past practice here and overseas and grow to accept these reforms will depend on a number of factors. These range from perceptions of personal cost to the effectiveness of reforms in changing business behaviour and pollution reduction.

Narrow interpretations of limited poll questions can lead to analysis pleasing to all parts of the spectrum on this debate.

The collapse of bipartisan support for carbon pricing, cost of living concerns and contradictory scientific opinions have had an impact on climate change concern and support for solutions.

However, the evidence suggests deeper levels of concern and potential for rebound as the reality of carbon price impacts emerge and with early evidence that the carbon price is changing business behaviour. Personal experiences and understanding of seasonal changes and extreme weather events will also be influential.

How these mix with underlying values, views of prosperity and trust in messengers will determine the climate of the nation in coming months and years.

## Key Findings

- + Almost two-thirds (64 per cent) agreed that climate change is occurring. Seventeen per cent said that they did not believe that climate change is occurring; almost a fifth (19 per cent) were unsure.
- + Sixty nine per cent said that climate change is due to a mixture of human causes and natural cycles; a fifth agreed that humans are the main cause.
- + Most Australians (54 per cent) are still concerned about climate change. This has dropped in terms of breadth and intensity over time but there is still only around 10 per cent who see no need for action from the institutions expected to lead (governments and business).
- + Highest climate impacts of concern were: A more polluted planet (80 per cent), a more polluted Australia and destruction of the Great Barrier Reef (79 per cent each), more droughts affecting crop production and food supply (78 per cent), and animal and plant species becoming extinct (75 per cent).
- + Water shortages in Australian cities continues to be a concern, with 71 per cent of respondents identifying it as an issue this year, down from more than 90 per cent in 2008 and 2010.
- + Almost two-thirds (66 per cent) thought there are too many conflicting opinions for the public to be sure about the claims made around climate change.
- + Australians don't think business and the media are doing a good job at addressing climate change. They get net disapproval negative ratings of 21 and 22 respectively, a rate far worse than the Federal Government's at minus 6.
- + Support for the carbon pricing laws of 28 per cent (52 per cent opposition) rises to 47 per cent (29 per cent opposition) when it is correctly explained that all the revenue raised goes to support households, business and clean, renewable energy.
- + Increasing the proportion of energy from renewables and greater energy efficiency from industry were perceived as the most effective emissions reduction policies (with 43 per cent of respondents giving these a 9 or 10 ranking in a scale where 10 meant 'most effective').
- + Eighty one per cent placed solar energy within their top three preferred energy options. Wind was the second most preferred option with 59 per cent. Two-thirds placed coal in their least preferred three options, slightly more than nuclear at 64 per cent.
- + Gender and age were significant indicators with males and those over 55 less concerned about climate change and less supportive of actions.
- + Less than half of respondents (44 per cent) thought the Coalition would repeal the carbon laws.
- + Twice as many respondents agreed that Labor has an effective plan to reduce emissions (28 per cent agreed) compared to the Coalition (14 per cent).
- + More than half (52 per cent) think that Australia should be a leader in finding solutions to climate change with only 23 per cent disagreeing. This is little changed from April 2010 polling when 55 per cent of respondents agreed, down from 69 per cent in February 2009.
- + A minority (37 per cent) agree that Australia shouldn't act until major emitters like China and the United States do. Twenty eight per cent agreed with this proposition in February 2009.

*Climate of the Nation 2012* and associated video content can found at [www.climateinstitute.org.au](http://www.climateinstitute.org.au).