



DAVID MORRIS MP

Member for Mornington

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Environment

Shadow Parliamentary Secretary for Local Government

Labor's Window Dressing Won't Tackle Climate Change

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Mr MORRIS (Mornington) — What an interesting debate! Some contributions have been more effective and more interesting than others, but a lot of ground is being covered. As the member for Doncaster indicated at the commencement of today's debate, members of this side are committed to action on climate change. We believe the climate is changing, and we support the need for action.

I was interested to hear the Premier claim in his second-reading speech that climate change is, in his view, the greatest challenge of our generation. Clearly, despite the scale ascribed to the challenge by the Premier, climate change has not been the no. 1 priority of this government. In 2006 the government committed to legislation to reduce emissions by 60 per cent on year 2000 levels by 2050.

No legislation has been forthcoming to match that promise. In the 2009 statement of government intentions, which we debated in February 2009 and which sat on the notice paper for the rest of the year until eventually it was discharged, there was a commitment to finalise the Victorian climate change white paper by mid-2009. It may well have been finalised by mid-2009, but it was not made public until July 2010.

Surely if this is the greatest challenge of our generation, if the government is committed to the sorts of time lines government members have talked about for many years past and if the government is committed to so-called binding policy targets, it would not have taken as long as that to get the white paper out. It would not be 12 months late. Magically it is now in the shadow of the election campaign.

If Labor cannot be trusted to act on supposedly the greatest challenge of our generation, can it be trusted to act on anything? Once again, this sitting week — and it has happened before in this sitting week — we are being asked to deal with a bill which has far-reaching consequences, not only for the government but for all Victorians.

It has far-reaching consequences for the state as a whole, not just the people who live in it. It is an issue on which there must be reasonable agreement; it is an issue on which we, as a Parliament, must ensure that the arguments the government are running can be adequately scrutinised. They need to be

scrutinised not only by the Parliament and the community but by independent assessment, as is the process with almost any other serious environmental proposal. Not only do we not have time to have the scrutiny of independent experts but we do not have the time to have the scrutiny of the community. We do not have time even to have proper scrutiny by the Parliament.

Apart from anything else, the community needs to know what price it is being asked to pay, because if climate change is real —

Mr Herbert interjected.

Mr MORRIS — I have already said today — and I will come back to the 10 years — that I believe climate change is real. Even if I were a sceptic I would probably be pragmatic enough to take the Thatcher view that we certainly need to give the planet the benefit of the doubt. Whatever the situation in terms of beliefs, there will be a price to pay. It may be a price we pay by putting a price on carbon.

While some — and clearly there are no Greens members in this chamber — in other places have commented that you can tax the generators and you can tax the polluters and somehow magically that does not cost anyone else except the producers. Anyone who understands basic pricing knows that if you put a charge on a private company, it is going to pass it on to consumers. The price is going to be paid not only by generators; the price is going to be paid by consumers as well.

In the absence of a price on carbon there clearly is an enormous environmental price to pay. It is an enormous price to pay in terms of the reduction of the capacity of the planet to feed the human race. That is clearly a consequence of rising global temperatures. It may be a price we are forced to pay in terms of reduced living standards because of the price on carbon tax. It may be a price we are forced to pay because of a decision taken to minimise our carbon footprint — that is, either a voluntary or forced position. Whatever it is — it could be one of those things, any of those things or other related solutions — there will be a price to pay. There is no free meal ticket; there is a price to pay.

We need to know before we go down this track what the price is going to be. We need to know who is going to have to pay the price. The reality is that in terms of this plan we have no idea what the price is going to be and no real idea where the burden is going to fall. From my perspective it appears that the burden is going to fall fairly and squarely on the most disadvantaged Victorians. It will certainly fall disproportionately on the most disadvantaged Victorians — that is, the people who have the least capacity to pay.

For the last 11 years, and at least in the years since the Kyoto agreement, we have heard lots of talk from government members. We have heard lots of political point-scoring; we have heard lots of waffle, lots of discussion, lots of

concepts and lots of posturing. But if climate change is genuinely the challenge the Premier claims it is, why were we not debating these sorts of measures at the commencement of the 56th Parliament? If the government were fair dinkum about it, the subject would have been on the notice paper right from the start. We may even have started debating it in December 2006.

Even if the government wanted to say, 'We need to wait for the updated report, the fourth assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change' — which was a report that came out in mid-2007 — and waited until then, we could have been discussing that matter in 2008. But we were not. Why? It is because the only challenge recognised by this Premier is the challenge of getting re-elected and clinging to power.

The only genuine commitment this government has is not the survival of the planet or the future health of our environment, but surviving post-2010. That is the extent of the commitment this government has. That is what it is about. Is not about action; it is about perceptions; it is about politics as usual.

There is absolutely no credibility in terms of the government meeting targets. There has been no action. There is no independent assessment of these figures; there is no community agreement on these figures.

Yes, there was a promising initial public reaction, but government policy is not a political point-scoring exercise and it is not a public relations exercise. It is about good long-term policy, and this long-term policy is totally and completely untested. There are also concerns about the impact of the Environment Protection Authority regulations; they are not necessarily insoluble concerns, but certainly there are issues that need to be worked through. There are obviously serious impacts for the future of the Latrobe Valley. The government seems to have tossed the Latrobe Valley overboard with this legislation, and clearly that is another issue that needs to be worked through.

The state faces a significant challenge in terms of climate change, but it is a challenge that we need to meet with measures that we know will work. We have measures in place; we need to know what those costs will be, that we have the capacity to pay and that we are not imposing on those least able to protect themselves. We need a real solution to what is a real problem, not simply window-dressing for the 2010 election.