

Inaugural Virginia Chadwick Memorial Foundation Lecture – Sydney July 21 2011

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This Foundation commemorates the life and work of Virginia Chadwick, one of Australia's most influential female parliamentarians and a strong friend of the environment. Let me say a few words about her at the outset.

She was a teacher before she presumably decided her charges were not unruly enough and so entered the NSW Parliament – better known as the Macquarie Street Bear Pit! John Fahey the former Liberal Premier of this State and Federal Finance Minister remembers that place very well!

Virginia was elected to the NSW Legislative Council representing the Liberal Party in 1978 at the age of 33. Over 21 years at Macquarie Street she blazed a trail for others to follow: she was the first female president of the NSW Legislative Council, first female Opposition Whip, first female Liberal minister and first female NSW Education minister.

As Education Minister she had many achievements. She established the NSW Board of Studies and was an advocate and supporter of selective schools in this state.

In the electorate of Wentworth, which I have the honour of representing in the Federal Parliament, Virginia's influence is still felt. When she was shadow minister in 1988, she promised there would be a new youth centre for the WAYS Youth Services in Bondi if the Coalition won office. And then she delivered it, and that's a very good thing. I believe that Shadow Ministers should always be allowed by their bosses to deliver their election promises. And it continues to provide valuable services to the community.

But today we're thinking more of Virginia's contribution to the environment in the role that she had as chief executive and chairperson of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority, better known as GBRMPA, a position she held from 1999 to 2007.

The beauty and the rich diversity of the Great Barrier Reef are well known. Less well known are its fragility and vulnerability.

Virginia took on the task of protecting, preserving and strengthening the Reef and all her political skills were called in aid as she sought to balance the needs of the environment against the pressure from agriculture, industry, tourism and fishing – to name just a few.

She understood that real leadership is required to persuade people to look beyond the short term challenges created by the conflict between, say, fishing and tourist

development on the one hand and the protection of pristine environmental assets on the other.

Short term the trade offs can look like a zero-sum. A win for the environment is a loss for the fishermen.

But longer term, the ability to preserve environmental assets enables their continuing use on a sustainable basis. Environmental constraints that have been imposed by price externalities, preserve irreplaceable assets, protect biodiversity, and promote the broad goals of human economic development.

Now much of the most valuable work performed by policy makers and public servants therefore is focused on attempting to persuade those incurring (or perceiving) near-term costs from environmental policies to lift their eyes and recognize the longer-term alignment of interests.

Decisions, such as the one David Kemp has spoken about when, as Environment Minister, he was a partner of Virginia's advocacy, was the 2004 expansion of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park's most highly protected zone from less than 5 per cent to more than 33 per cent of its total area can only succeed if contending interests are respectively recognised and where possible reconciled.

And that needed a lot of support, a lot of political skill on the part of Virginia and David, and of course a lot of political support from the Parliamentary representatives in the region, notably the Senator for North Queensland Ian MacDonald and the Member for Herbert at the time, Peter Lindsay, both of whom are here tonight.

And of course they recognised then the importance and the connectedness of these issues with the environment and the health of the community. And it's no accident that here tonight is the New South Wales's Health Minister, Jillian Skinner, who is here tonight drawing time out of her own schedule – heaven knows, Jillian, I can't think of any tougher job in Australia than being New South Wales Health Minister, God bless you – but you've always recognised in your commitment to the environment the connectedness between a healthy environment and a healthy community. And that's why you're here tonight helping us honour Virginia's life work.

Now Virginia it fell to, to work with the various interest groups and stakeholders who are affected by the rezoning. And her success is clear by the expanded protection she achieved by the sections of the reef that were covered and by the subsequent praise this strategy embodied. And as Ian MacDonald was saying to us earlier, it was all achieved on budget, a great achievement.

Now of course the most significant but least tractable threat to long-term preservation of the Great Barrier Reef is not from illegal fishing or polluted runoff from agriculture or bulk carriers that run aground and leak bunker fuel, but from a much broader collision between human economic activity and the natural environment – global

warming, caused in large part by our burning of fossil fuels and the clearing of land and the felling of forests.

The Great Barrier Reef is brutally confronted, it is indeed in the front line of the climate change battle, by two aspects of global warming. Most of the warming which is the consequence of human carbon dioxide emissions increasing the greenhouse effect has been absorbed in the ocean. That's no surprise. As ocean temperatures rise, coral bleaching, which is another way of saying coral dying, events have increased. Indeed since 1979 there have been eight mass bleaching events on the Reef with no known bleaching events prior to that date^[1].

Furthermore as more carbon dioxide is absorbed into the ocean it increase the acidity of the ocean – the last time the ocean's acidity was this high was 25 million years ago^[2]. This is reducing the capacity of hard shelled sea creatures to form their calciferous shells – whether they are krill in the Antarctic or coral in the tropics.

Much of the work that was done by Virginia and her team, many of whom are here tonight, and which continues at GBRMPA was to reduce agricultural run-off into the Reef, reduce unsustainable fishing on the Reef, and was all designed to increase its resilience to deal with these larger, long term existential threats. Just as a healthy person can better battle a disease, so can a healthier Reef better respond to, and at least in part adapt to, the consequences of climate change.

Now, you will be relieved to know I am not going to spoil the evening with another political speech about the carbon tax or Julia Gillard's broken promise not to introduce it.

Rather, I wanted to say something to you about the importance of science.

But first, let me say straight up that the question of whether or to what extent human activity is causing global warming is not a matter of ideology let alone of belief. The matter is simply one of risk management. It is, moreover, not a question of left versus right indeed it was Margaret Thatcher who more than 20 years ago called for immediate action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Her words, on our response to climate change were as wise and as relevant today as they were in 1990. Mrs Thatcher said then:

“Many of the actions that we need to take would be sensible in any event. It is sensible to increase energy efficiency and to use energy prudently. It is sensible to develop alternative and renewable energy sources. It is sensible to replant the forests which we consume. I note that the latest vogue is to call them ‘no regrets’ policies – certainly we should have none in putting them into effect.”

And let us not forget it was Margaret Thatcher who in 1990 committed Great Britain to reducing emissions by 2005 to a level no greater than 1990 and who as that commitment to combating climate change committed £100 million to sustainable tropical forestry. So so much for those who suggest that people in the Liberal Party or on the centre-right of politics more generally who support effective action on global warming are some how or another from the left.

If Margaret Thatcher took climate change seriously and believed we should take action to reduce global greenhouse emissions, then taking action and supporting and accepting the science can hardly be the mark of insipient Bolshevism.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that many people are grounding their opposition to the Gillard Government's carbon tax on the basis that climate change is not real and that the scientific consensus which supports it is not soundly based.

It is important to remember however that the rejection of the consensus scientific position on global warming, rejection of the CSIRO's position on global warming, is **not** Liberal Party policy.

Quite the contrary. The Liberal Party's policy is to accept the scientific consensus that the globe is warming and that human greenhouse gas emissions are substantially the cause of it. It is also the Liberal Party's policy to take action to cut Australia's greenhouse gas emissions such that by 2020 they will be at a level equal to 95% of their level in 2000. This is the same unconditional target adopted by the Rudd Government and the Gillard Government and pledged at Copenhagen.

That 5 per cent cut is not expected to single-handedly stop global warming but is a measured and prudent contribution to what needs to be a global effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions so as to prevent, it is hoped, temperature rises beyond 2 degrees Celsius in the course of this century.

Having said that, it is undoubtedly correct that there has been a very effective campaign against the science of climate change by those opposed to taking action to cut emissions – many because it is not in their own financial interests – and that this has played into the carbon tax debate.

Normally, in our consideration of scientific issues we rely on expert advice. Agencies like the CSIRO or the Australian Academy of Science are listened to with respect.

Yet on this issue there appears to be a licence to reject our best scientists, both here and abroad, and rely instead on much less reliable views. Some of those less reliable views are from scientists – although most are not.

In an age where the Internet gives everyone the opportunity to be a broadcaster, you can find an opinion to support any proposition. If it doesn't suit your interests to reduce the use of fossil fuels, there are plenty of blogs and articles online to support your self interest.

Some of this material online can be very embarrassing to rely on. A good friend of mine recently contended that the CSIRO were utterly wrong on climate change and he sent me a paper from what he understood was "a leading scientist in a leading journal". As it turned out the paper was in journal published by the Lyndon LaRouche Movement and was written by a man who had recently served time in gaol for securities fraud. The only peer review to which his work had been subjected was, in fact, a criminal jury.

I might note for those unfamiliar with it, that the local wing of the LaRouche movement is the Citizens' Electoral Council (CEC) an extreme, rightwing, racist organisation that I'm proud to say that the Liberal Party emphatically and invariably puts absolutely last in any how-to-vote form that we distribute.

These are the charming people who recently disrupted a scientific conference in Melbourne by threatening Professor Hans Schellnhuber, a leading European climate scientist in the midst of his lecture by waving a noose in front of his face and saying "Welcome to Australia". Just think about that. What a wonderful welcome to Australia from these people.

Now my friend had spent much of his career drawing on expert advice in business, economics and science. He goes to the best consulting firms for his advice, the best law firm, the best accounting firm. And yet on a subject as important as climate change he has been taken in that was anything but the best. And needless to say he was a little bit embarrassed by it.

But this is not an isolated case. And I have to say this is like ignoring the advice of your doctor to give up smoking and lose 10 kilos on the basis that somebody down the pub told you their uncle Ernie ate three pies a day and smoked a packet of cigarettes and lived to 95. Now that is how stupid it is and we have to get real about supporting and responsibly accepting the science. And if we want to challenge the science, do so on the basis of peer reviewed work of which I have to say, there isn't a lot on the contrary side of the argument.

And this is actually — this war on science and on scientists which is being conducted is much worse than the case of person who ignores his doctor's advice and follows the advice of his friend down the pub, drawing on the life experience of the fortunate Uncle Ernie.

Because the consequences of getting our response to climate change wrong will not likely be felt too severely by us, or at least not most of us, but will be felt painfully and cruelly by the generations ahead of us. And the people in the world who will suffer the most cruelly will be the poorest and the people who have contributed the least to the problem. There is an enormous injustice here. When people try and suggest to you that climate change is not a moral issue, they are wrong. It is an intensely moral issue raising grave moral issues.

Those of us who do not believe the CSIRO is part of an international Green conspiracy to undermine Western civilisation or do not believe that leading scientists like Will Steffen are subversives should not be afraid to speak out, and loudly, on behalf of our scientists and our science. We must not allow ourselves to be deluded on this issue.

If you are a Liberal, as I and many others here in this room are, most of us are perhaps. If you are a Liberal, do not imagine that taking that position puts you at odds with Liberal policy – it does not. It does not. And remember too that if we form a Government in Canberra and then seek to meet that 5 per cent target through purchases of carbon offsets from farmers and payments to polluting industry to cut their emissions, the opponents of the science of climate change will be criticising that

expenditure too as “pointless” and “wasteful” with as much vehemence as they are currently denouncing Julia Gillard’s carbon tax.

As Liberals, we have to stake our environmental case and our position on the right way to deal with climate change on the basis that we are supporting the science. That is our policy and we should not allow ourselves to allow people to imagine that it is not. In my view, we cannot afford to allow the science to become a partisan issue as it is in the United States where it appears that it is apparently no longer politically acceptable for any would-be Republican Presidential candidate to say that he or she believes that global warming is occurring and is caused by human activities. Now the change in the Republican Party is extraordinary. In the Presidential Election in 2008, John McCain, the Republican candidate, ran on a policy in terms of climate change that was only marginally different to that of Barack Obama. I mean, the differences were one of detail. And there has been an extraordinary swing, not against cap-and-trade versus direct action; not against one mitigation policy against another; but there has been a swing against the science and that is profoundly dangerous. Because we run the risk that we diminish the science, that we discredit the science and that of course is the ultimate justification for doing nothing about it.

Now not so long ago I was with a friend, a very long serving and distinguished Environment Minister from our region and we discussed the progress of the climate change issue globally. And he said that he thought that human selfishness and greed was so great that there would be no effective action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and that by the end of the century our planet would be uninhabitable for billions of people. And as he said that, I felt a chill going down my spine. I feared that he was right but my natural optimism reasserted itself and I thought to myself, ‘we are better than that’. We are better than that but you could not fault him in terms of his objectivity or realism.

Now let me just say this to you: The idea that our country, this great country of ours, can sail through a 3, 4 or 5 or more degrees rise in temperature this century with our prosperity and freedom, let alone the Great Barrier Reef, intact is very naïve. So this is a big issue. So in the storm of this debate about carbon tax and direct action and what the right approach to climate change should be, do not fall into the trap of abandoning the science. Do not fall into the trap of thinking that what Lord Monckton says or what some website says is superior to what our leading scientists or leading universities would say.

And I just ask all of you, many of you here, have had important dealings with the medical profession. Would you allow yourself, your own body to be operated on by some medical theory that you picked up on the website or would you seek to get the most highly respected specialist in the field to operate on you. We all know what the answer is. That’s what we do with our own bodies. What we’re talking about now is the future and the health of the planet.

Now I think an effective response to climate change does not depend on one mitigation policy or another being adopted. Different countries will have different views on what is the most cost-effective way to reduce and indeed so will different political parties and different political leaders. But we must not allow opposition to a particular policy to undermine or diminish our commitment to take climate change

seriously and to work effectively both here and globally to ward off the avoidable consequences of global warming.

We also need to be very clear-eyed about what an effective global response to climate change requires. There are many calculations on the scale of emissions reductions required. But it is quite clear that to achieve the necessary cuts by mid century all or almost all of our stationary energy – and when I say our, I mean the world's – will need to be generated from zero or near zero emission sources.

This could be renewables like hydro, biomass, wind, solar or tidal power. It could be geothermal power, it could indeed be nuclear power. But it will not be burning coal unless the emissions from that coal are captured in some form or other.

Australia generates most of its electricity from burning coal – much of it very emissions intensive brown coal in Victoria or South Australia. That is why our carbon dioxide emissions are among the highest in the world on a per capita basis – a reason why the Chinese (whose emissions are about one-fifth of ours) and the Indians (whose are less than one-tenth of ours) find our regular references to their emissions – and why should we do anything until the Chinese or Indians do something – why they find those references incredibly galling. Those of us, and David's a member of this club with me, who have represented Australia at international conferences on this, know how incredibly embarrassing statements like that are when you actually confront the representatives of those countries.

We are also the world's largest coal exporter – we have 19% and 58% of the global trade in thermal and metallurgical coal respectively. In 2009, thermal coal exports were worth \$18 billion, and metallurgical coal exports worth \$40 billion.

Some people would say, I trust that most would not, that as we have a vested interest in coal being burned we should oppose action on climate change and rather like the tobacco companies who sought to discredit the connection between smoking and lung cancer muddy the waters on climate science in order to prolong the export billions from coal mining.

Others might say that we should not be troubled by the long term prospects for coal because we have abundant resources of the alternatives – gas, the least emissions intensive fossil fuel, uranium, geothermal power and, of course, plenty of sunshine.

A more responsible approach would be to encourage the development of those alternatives at the same time as we promote and develop technologies to capture CO₂ emissions from coal burning – whether that is by pumping it into the ground or by turning it into other useful products.

Indeed many would say that no country has a greater vested interest in clean coal than Australia.

And yet I regret to say to you that neither the Labor government led by Julia Gillard – who is a woman fond of a hard hat, I must say – nor the coal industry itself have shown much enthusiasm for investing in Research and Development or trials for

Carbon Capture and Storage. In fact funding has been cut again as part of the recent carbon tax package.

A handful of large firms dominate production of thermal coal and coking coal. BHP, Peabody, Rio Tinto, Anglo-American, Xstrata, Wesfarmers. The operating earnings generated from thermal coal production alone are not easy to estimate, but they may approach \$10 billion in good years. There is plenty at stake at both the level of producers and export earners, not to mention the taxes they pay along the way for there to be a critical mass of parties with the motivation and resources to move on carbon capture and storage.

Now one of the most dispiriting parts of Professor Garnaut's updates was his analysis in volume seven on carbon capture and storage. Essentially he said work had come to a halt in 2008 and no technical progress or commercial pilots of significance were apparent. The estimate of coal capture and storage adding 40-plus per cent to the cost of coal-fired electricity was about the freshest fact on the page.

One need only look at the vast expansion of new investment in coal-fired generation underway in China, India and elsewhere to understand the importance of this issue. Carbon Capture and Storage isn't just about saving Australia coal exports or generation capacity. It is about addressing the reality which the MIT study on the future of coal baldly stated as long ago in 2007: "We believe that coal use will increase under any foreseeable scenario because it is cheap and abundant." Now if it increases and emissions increase and the science is right, the Reef is finished. And that is a very small part of it. So this is a very serious issue and it is remarkable that with all the rhetoric about the need for action from the Gillard Government, the single most important area of research and development, the one that is arguably the most important in terms of the world's future and most certainly most important from the point of view from our own economy, is being neglected.

So the commercial feasibility and large-scale deployment for Carbon Capture and Storage is the only way – in the absence of some great technological shift, and you won't find me discounting that, I'm a great believer in the disruptive power of technology – the world has any chance whatsoever of achieving the cuts needed to get to the 60 per cent or 80 per cent 2050 targets that leaders have committed to.

The thermal coal industry and the Gillard government both know this. So how should Australians interpret their disinterest in this technology? As an acknowledgement that Carbon Capture and Storage doesn't work and is too expensive and hence thermal coal is finished? Or a sign they don't ever expect to be answerable for those 2050 targets? I fear that is probably the answer.

Now it is up to us, as friends of Virginia Chadwick and as Liberals, to be prepared to look beyond the horizon and recognise that we must act responsibly as custodians for the future of this country and this planet. For our children and our grandchildren and the many generations beyond them. We must treat the science with respect and rely on the best science which is the only responsible and prudent thing to do. And above all, we should commit ourselves to ensuring that the Great Barrier Reef, which Virginia did so much to protect, and so many other wonderful but fragile environmental assets are not destroyed. We must ensure all of the good work from

Virginia and all of the other people who worked with her are not utterly undone by all of the consequences of global warming, of ocean acidification and these great existential threats to the planet that we enjoy, that we revel in and that our children and grandchildren will be able to enjoy just as we have done.