

Faith leaders' open letter to Prime Minister Albanese

Background information - October 2022

The following briefly explains the various points we have included in the letter, based on our research and input from the wider climate movement.

Australia profits from exports that are causing the climate crisis

A staggering [45% of all new proposed coal projects in the world are in Australia](#). The coal industry plans to expand and operate for decades to come.

Australia is one of the world's biggest coal exporters and 95% of Australia's coal must [remain in the ground](#) to even have a 50% chance of keeping to a 1.5C of warming.

Australia's exports of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) have risen dramatically in the last five years and, with our small population, Australia is now the [third largest exporter of fossil fuels](#) globally, behind Saudi Arabia and Russia.

Coal and LNG exports bring in substantial royalties and are protected by powerful vested interests which mount disinformation campaigns when their profits are threatened, eg, around job losses.

Vulnerable people are already paying the price

ARRCC is greatly concerned for people in low-income countries who are already paying the price in lost lives and livelihoods. Bangladesh is experiencing internal migration from coastal areas inundated by sea level rise; the super-storm Typhoon Haiyan killed over 6,300 people in the Philippines in 2013; desertification is a major threat to survival for people in East Africa; drought in Syria was a factor in the origins of that country's civil war.

We are also concerned for generations coming after us who will have to live with the consequences of this generation's failures.

The grave injustice is that such low-income countries do not bear the historical responsibility for the climate emergency we are collectively facing.

The challenge of winding back coal and gas exports

Much more unpalatable to Labor than incentivising the transition to renewables is the challenge of winding back our coal and gas exports. Labor fears being punished at the ballot box if they go down this route.

Yet they must, if our nation is to authentically help avert a climate catastrophe. In the International Energy Agency's roadmap to limiting warming to 1.5°C, there is [no room for new coal and gas mining](#). It said, 'There is no need for investment in new fossil fuel supply in our net zero pathway. Beyond projects already committed as of 2021, there are no new oil and gas fields approved for development in our pathway, and no new coal mines or mine extensions are required.'¹

Fossil Fuel subsidies

Our understanding is that the Labor Government wants coal and gas to come to an end but is determined not to be the one to blame for closing these industries down. They want the market to do the job instead, and there is good reason to think the market will do so at least when it comes to coal.

However, the real risk is that the same cannot easily be said of gas and that even with the coal industry the market may not bring about its demise soon enough to prevent really serious consequences.

One answer to this seems to be to push the Government to at least remove all forms of public subsidies for these two industries, which have been rising and reached \$11.6 bn in the financial year 2020-2021. Taking away subsidies would transition Australia away from fossil fuels and still leave a lot of room for the government to avoid blame.

ARRCC's justice lens means we back [calls by the Aboriginal youth climate organisation, SEED](#), to stop hand-outs to fossil fuel industries, and the money should be going to social housing, aged care, disaster preparedness, the health system and so on.

Impacts of mining on First Nations peoples' rights & duty to protect Country

Because of the way the federal Native Title is framed, many First Nations groups have found themselves powerless to stop coal and gas mines from opening up or having expansions approved on their Country. They are left with their spiritual connections to Country violated and profoundly frustrated that they cannot act of their felt duty to protect Country.

Mining companies apply to destroy Aboriginal cultural sites and most of the time are given consent to destroy. In NSW, only 1 out of 704 applications for permits to construct on land that was culturally significant to Traditional Owners had been refused between 2012 and 2017.

Restarting contributions to the UN Green Climate Fund

Climate finance - to assist low-income countries to adapt to and mitigate climate impacts - is a neglected responsibility of wealthy countries and a major sticking point at UN climate negotiations. It refers to the USD\$100 billion *annually* committed by wealthy nations under the Paris Accord to the UN Green Climate Fund (GCF).

In the first two years of the GCF, Australia contributed USD\$165 million approved for the Pacific (apart from bilateral funding). Wealthy nations are generally not meeting their commitments but, from 2018 onwards, ours has been the only wealthy nation not contributing to the GCF at all.

Based on our wealth and emissions, [Oxfam and ActionAid have calculated](#) that Australia's fair share of climate finance should be 2.5% of the global total. Australia can achieve this fair share by progressively increasing its commitments to reach \$12 billion annually by 2030. The previous Morrison Government preferred to give bilateral aid to Pacific and South-East Asian States, taken out of the Overseas Aid budget.

Low-income countries have also become increasingly assertive in their calls for a robust funding mechanism to compensate low-income countries for loss and damage suffered because of climate-related disasters.

Before the election, Labor's policy platform did not propose specific amounts as contributions to the GCF. They did say that they 'will honour our national obligations under the Paris Agreement.'

A just transition for extractive industry workers

Labor is already very mindful of this, but it remains an important justice question for people of faith. Particular communities should not have to carry the economic burden alone caused by our nation's decision to wind back coal and gas mining. Fortunately, Labor recognises that there are many more jobs in renewables and low carbon industries and plans to use regulations and public money to build these up, especially in the regions. (Source: [ALP website](#))

The Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty

The GreenFaith International Network has made the proposed Fossil Fuel Non-Proliferation Treaty central to this year's actions in the lead-up to COP27. The main idea of this is to focus on limiting and moving away from actual production of coal, oil and gas rather than 'emissions' in the abstract. An easy overview of the Treaty can be found at <https://fossilfueltreaty.org/>

The three key elements of the proposed Treaty are:

NON-PROLIFERATION

Preventing the proliferation of coal, oil and gas by ending all new exploration and production

FAIR PHASE-OUT

Phase-out of existing production of fossil fuels in line with the 1.5C global climate goal

JUST TRANSITION

Fast-tracking real solutions and a just transition for every worker, community and country

In addition, the focus of the climate movement in Australia could well shift for a while, away from emissions reductions targets and onto coal and gas production and exports instead.

The current level of warming is not safe

Month by month we witness the tragic impacts of warming even of 1.1°C. They include the current heatwave and fires in Europe and the recent floods in NSW, which came so soon after previous flooding. They include the unprecedented drought in Australia that ended in 2019, the 2019-2020 catastrophic bushfires and the repeated bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef.

It would be unwise to say that 1.1°C is a 'safe' level of warming. How much more disastrous will be 2°C, or even the more optimistic 1.5°C?

The authoritative Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report of August 2021 essentially cautioned that our [decisions this decade](#) will make the difference between a liveable future for today's young people and a future that is incompatible with a well-functioning society.

First Nations Foreign Policy

Pacific Islander leaders have been encouraged by Minister Penny Wong's [announcement](#) before the May election that the ALP would deliver 'a First Nations foreign policy that weaves the voices and practices of the world's oldest continuing culture into the way we talk to the world, and the work of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)'.

The [ALP describes its First Nations Foreign Policy](#) as placing 'the experience of First Nations at the heart of our diplomacy by implementing a First Nations Foreign Policy that incorporates First Nations identities, perspectives and practices into Australia's overseas engagement. We will establish an Office of First Nations Engagement headed by an Ambassador for First Nations Peoples within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to lead systematic engagement with First Nations communities and leaders and embed First Nations perspectives in Australia's international diplomacy.'

Similarly, in her [visit of Pacific Island nations](#) soon after the election, Minister Wong indicated a new respect for the vibrant, sovereign First Nations of the Pacific.

The letter expresses encouragement for the new Government to whole-heartedly follow through on its commitment.