

## Condescension and Climate Change: Australia and the Failure of the Pacific Islands Forum

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*It was predictably ugly: in tone, in regret, and, in some ways, disgust. Australia emerged from the Pacific Islands Forum Leaders Meeting isolated, the true spoiler of the party which saw 17 states facing the obstinacy of one. It had taken place on Tuvalu, some two hours flight north of Fiji. The capital Funafuti is located on vanishing land; the island state is facing coastal erosion, the pressing issue of salinity, the very crisis of its existence.*

Pacific Island leaders were already wise to the accounting cosmetics of Canberra's accountants prior to the Forum. It reeked, for instance, of a gesture for permissive pollution to the tune of \$500 million: we give you money to boost "resilience" and sandbag your countries against rising water levels; we will keep polluting and emitting with expanded fossil fuel projects because that is what we are good at.

**Alex Hawke**, Australia's Minister for International Development and the Pacific, [called](#) the cash promise the "most amount of money Australia has ever spent on climate in the Pacific". As Tuvalu **Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga** [explained](#),

"No matter how much money you put on the table, it doesn't give you the excuse not to do the right thing." That right thing was a reduction in emissions, "including not opening your coal mines".

The PIF leaders were also aware about what disruptive role Australia was going to play. Australian politicians of the past and present have done little to endear themselves to a forum they have only recently felt more interest in because of China's increasingly conspicuous presence. In 2015, when **Tony Abbott** held the reins of power, his culturally challenged immigration minister **Peter Dutton**, in conversation with the prime minister, [quipped](#) rather darkly that "time doesn't mean anything when you're about to have water lapping at your door." The remark was a response to a meeting on Syrian refugees which had been running late, or on "Cape York time", as he put it.

Ahead of the leaders' forum, an [annotated draft](#) of the Pacific Islands Forum declaration revealed a sprinkling of qualifications, repudiations and rejections on the part of the Australian delegation. The comments from August 7 sought to restrict any total decarbonisation, bans on the future use of coal power plants, opt out clauses for the 1.5C limit in temperature rise, phasing out fossil fuel subsidies and the very mention of the term climate change.

When it came to proceedings, **Prime Minister Scott Morrison** showed his true garish

colours: Australia was a small contributor to emissions; it was a global problem, and so others had to do more. In short, the weak excuse of any emission producing state. Besides, he kept trumpeting, Australia was a leading investor in the sector of renewables.

Back in Australia, the Australian broadcaster and regular vulgarian Alan Jones was busy attacking the leaders of the gathering, most notably New Zealand prime minister **Jacinda Ardern**, who had suggested that Australia “had to answer the Pacific” on the climate change issue. A sock, [he suggested](#), should have been strategically placed down her throat. He subsequently suggested that this was a “wilful misrepresentation of what I said obviously distract from the point that she was wrong about climate change and wrong about Australia’s contribution to carbon dioxide levels.”

Fiji’s **Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama** was sickeningly [unimpressed](#), having [expressed](#) open admiration for New Zealand’s efforts to combat climate change.

“Easy to tell someone to shove a sock down a throat when you’re sitting in the comfort of a studio. The people of the Pacific, forced to abandon their homes due to climate change, don’t have that luxury. Try saying it to a Tuvaluan child pleading for help.”

**Michael McCormack**, Australia’s Deputy Prime Minister, added the most revealing touch on Australia’s position at the PIF during [a revealing business function](#) in the rural town of Wagga Wagga on Friday. (McCormack, it should be noted, [is on record](#) as disputing evidence of an increase in global temperatures.) With an address heavy with bruising paternalism, he [thought](#) the PIF leaders were bellyaching, needlessly lamenting their fate. He admitted “getting a bit annoyed when we have people in those sorts of countries pointing the finger at Australia and saying we should be shutting down all our resources sector so that, you know, they will continue to survive.” He had little doubt they would continue to do so, due to the “large aid assistance from Australia” and “because their workers come here and pick our fruit, pick our fruit grown with hard Australian enterprise and endeavour and we welcome them and we always will.” The only think lacking in the statement was a Boris Johnson-styled garnish: a reference to cannibalism, or the toothy water melon smiles.

A neat summary of the entire encounter between the Pacific Island leaders and Australia was provided by Tuvalu’s Sopoaga.

“You [Scott Morrison] are concerned about saving your economy in Australia... I am concerned about saving my people in Tuvalu.”

The final communique proved lukewarm and non-committal, a feeble reiteration of existing understandings that climate change was a serious matter. Bainimarama supplied an acid [opinion](#) on the final text. “We came together in a nation that risks disappearing to the seas, but unfortunately, we settled for the status quo of our communique. Watered-down climate language has real consequences – like water-logged homes, schools, communities, and ancestral burial grounds.” Sopoaga was even more dramatic in [assessing](#) the response to the weakened language of the communique. “There were serious arguments and even shouting, crying, leaders were shedding tears.”

Sadly, the main Australian opposition party would not have done much better. Efforts on the part of Senator Penny Wong to claim a drastically different Labor approach must be put to rest. This is a party torn on the subject of King Coal, energy costs and renewables.

The hysterical aspect to PIF is that Australia's denuding contribution will only serve to damage its own interests. In the short-term, Chinese diplomats will be delighted by the self-sabotaging efforts of the Morrison government. Beijing's Special Envoy to the Pacific, Ambassador Wang Xuefeng, was on hand to [tell the forum](#) that "no matter how the international situation evolves, China will always be a good friend, partner and brother of Pacific Island Countries." Expect a surge of interest towards the PRC in the forthcoming months.

A longer term consequence is also impossible to ignore. Fine to joke about having refugee islanders pick the fruit of your country, but to do so requires places to grow fruit. Rising sea levels may will cause the dreaded vanishing of the island states, but it will also submerge a good deal of Australia's precariously placed coastal cities. What a bitter, if not deserved outcome that would be.

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