

The Politics of Carbon: A Case of Throwing Good Money after Bad?

By Dr. John Bruni

In an interesting piece published in *The Western Australian*, February 28th, it was suggested that the Australian Federal Government might commit close to \$600 million of taxpayer's money over three years to shore up a United Nations initiative: the (UN) Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Group on Climate Change Financing.

The aim of this group, according to the UN Secretary-General, is for industrialised countries to pledge financial support and set up an international fund to be administered by the UN,

“of mobilizing \$100 billion per year by 2020 to support mitigation and adaptive activities in developing countries. Such resources represent a sound investment in a safer, cleaner, healthier future for us all”.

While this might appear a noble way of dealing with the highly charged and often partisan issue of man-made Global Warming, there is a question over the sums of money involved in this proposed multilateral affair, especially at a time when industrialised countries are struggling with economic uncertainty.

When push comes to shove, politics comes down to courting or, more cynically, manipulating the will of the people to suit the fashionable agenda of a national elite. Many within the national elite among Western industrialised countries have used fear of an impending environmental apocalypse to drive their populations into supporting 'Green' agendas. And while it is true that the industries that drive our collective economic wealth have for years enjoyed lax environmental regulations, especially in the developing world, whether UN Climate Change Financing will *mitigate* this problem, or create new unintended problems, is yet to be determined. After all, planet Earth has a dynamic system and 'Climate Change' is a fact of geologic record which predates the arrival of humans and their polluting industries. As records show, the Earth has had many dramatic swings in climate – some of which occurred in recent history when our global population was much smaller than today's and humanity's impact on the environment was much less profound. This begs the question: if Climate Change is a natural occurrence on planet Earth, will the UN or the good will of supporting nations be able to bring about stability to the world's complex environment, or is this simply a futile exercise of throwing good money after bad, with no certain outcome?

Having travelled to Egypt and Ethiopia not so long ago, I was struck by the high level of air pollution in their national capitals – Cairo and Addis Ababa. In both countries, old vehicles with extremely bad emission

standards ply the roads and rubbish litters the streets and waterways. As a casual visitor it seemed strange to me that people in these otherwise proud and ancient lands



have to be educated or coerced to adopt habitual cleanliness. These observations demonstrated to me

just how entire nations need to drastically change their behaviour to accommodate even a small part of what the UN and its Western backers need to combat. Can UN dispensed funds to the developing world replace the millions of largely unroadworthy (by Western standards) and highly polluting cars, trucks and buses with fleets of new hybrids, LNG and bio-fuel powered vehicles? It seems that the \$100 billion per annum to be collected for two thirds of the world's population to change, is hardly enough when you consider that the average income in many of these countries prevent affordability to adopt new and cleaner technologies. And what of educating the masses in these countries on the obvious health benefits of cleaning up after themselves, especially in cultural contexts where self-discipline is not strong and the willingness to adapt to externally enforced behaviour is weak.

And we are not even touching on the issues of domestic and foreign industries in developing countries that think nothing of dumping untreated effluent or toxic waste into clean water supplies, or destroy tracts of natural forests for unsustainable cash-cropping; nor the ongoing problems

associated with UN administered funds directed to corrupt national governments in developing countries with poor management skills and record keeping.

Then there are the prevailing issues of playing to the Western Green agenda itself. While broad and well intentioned in scope, its ambitions are largely unrealistic in spite of the many messianic advocates who tend to see the problem of Global Warming through the lens of technology alone. Establish a wind farm and you are heading in the right direction; buy a hybrid or install a solar panel on the roof of your house and you're lessening your carbon footprint. However, it is at the level of very real human frailties that things start to break down. Corporate greed will find, or worse still, will buy its way through legislative hurdles on dumping waste. The 'corporates' might clean up their act in Western countries where media scrutiny can ramp-up public awareness and pressure governments to take action, but in developing countries where a brown paper bag can make loopholes appear in even the toughest law, and where media oversight is weak or non-existent and civil society is crushed under the boot heels of the local autocrat, responsiveness to Green initiatives can be 'underwhelming'.

Agreeing with the concept that Australia's promised investment in UN Climate Change Financing can make a difference, you'd have to be a 'true believer' – a non-questioning acolyte of Prime Minister Gillard's new found Green international mission for Australia. The suggested \$600 million

(approx.) over three years reported as ‘promised’ to the UN Climate Change Financing, is really too little to make an impact on the environmental standards in the developing world. But this sum is significant enough to be invested in local projects including the establishment of new schools, hospitals and the refurbishment of national road and rail networks. The fact that Prime Minister Gillard publicly reversed her pre-2010 election position from ‘no tax on Carbon’ to ‘a tax on Carbon’ has dented her



polling, stained her public image and left her open to attack from a confused and angered general public. That Gillard had apparently pledged this money to the UN without prior consultation with the Australian people demonstrates a level of political arrogance or ignorance that may yet come to haunt her. For her political opponents this is nonetheless no cause for celebration. Yes, Gillard is beholden to Greens leader Bob Brown to maintain her Prime Ministership. She is also beholden to the support of 3 Independents, none of whom are natural confederates of Federal Labor and, sensing ‘blood in the water’, Liberal-National Opposition Leader Tony Abbott may attempt to use the carbon tax debate to destabilise the Independents’ support for Gillard and possibly precipitate an early federal election. But the fact remains that even within Coalition ranks there are those who would ‘cross the floor’ and vote in favour of more stringent controls on national carbon emissions which would

leave the door wide open for significant splits within a future Coalition government.

As the Labor Party has no way of sugar-coating the carbon tax, it remains to be seen whether the public’s concern over skyrocketing electricity prices will subdue their enthusiasm for subsidising international efforts at combating ‘man-made’ Global Warming.

The sad fact is that unless developing world countries come to grips with their own failings in governance and administration and at least try to lift their own national environmental standards and consistently apply them, no amount of international aid will reduce their carbon outputs. Dependence on other countries’ money or technology is not the answer. National pride, self-discipline and ambition are the answer. If we look at Singapore as an example: once a malaria-ridden outpost of the British Empire, it is now a modern, clean and developed city-state that prides itself on its



appearance and its Green credentials. Encouraging other African, Asian and Latin American countries to follow this example, one city at a time, could eventually alter the urban landscape of many countries. In this sense, charity and cleanliness begin at home.

Egypt air pollution image:

<http://www.menainfra.com/media/media-news/news-thumb/100416/pyramidpollution.jpg>

Gillard image:

<http://resources2.news.com.au/images/2010/06/24/1225883/784810-julia-gillard.gif>

Singapore skyline image:

<http://www.topnews.in/files/Singapore-Tourism.jpg>