



GREEN CALL:
Professor Tim Flannery wants sweeping government reforms.

Climate backflip 'betrays' our trust

By Rosslyn Beeby
Science and Environment Reporter

One of Australia's top climate scientists, Professor Tim Flannery, has accused Prime Minister Kevin Rudd of betraying public trust on climate change policy.

"I detect a profound mood of political disenchantment in this country," he told a national business leaders conference in Canberra yesterday.

Professor Flannery said Australia's efforts to tackle climate change were being stymied by the "fossilised mindset" of vested business interests using political donations to influence government policy.

"I'm talking about men in their 60s and above, who are in positions of political power ... let's just say that not all of the fossils are in the ground," he said.

During his opening address to the conference, Professor Flannery called for sweeping government reforms to create "a better political system" and a "more perfect democracy" in response to voter disenchantment.

"There's a lot of merit in the idea of publicly funded elections ... We need a clearer voice by the public in decision making, unswayed by the purchase of power."

Professor Flannery accused Mr Rudd of "a singular failure of leadership" and betrayal of his party's 2007 election promises by shelving the Government's proposed emissions trading scheme for two years. It was a "dismal policy decision" that placed Australia among the world's "wooden spooners" in the race to develop greener economies, he said.

The National Business Leaders Forum of Australia's Business Leaders

PM's climate backflip 'betrays public trust'

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The statement calls for the Government to commit to a minimum 25 per cent cut to Australia's greenhouse emissions by 2020, and 90 per cent by 2050. The Government's target is currently a 5 per cent reduction by 2020.

A list of 20 climate policy recommendations to be taken to the Prime Minister by forum members includes the introduction of an interim carbon tax or levy, a congestion tax for major cities, decoupling electricity market profits from customer sales, and mandatory investment by Australia's top 250 companies in

energy efficiency. The forum's chairman, Myer Foundation vice-chairman Martyn Myer, said Australian business was operating in "a policy vacuum" with regard to climate change and future carbon pricing.

"Business now has to operate and make significant investments in the absence of a defined regulatory environment. The situation is intolerable," he said.

In his opening address to the forum, Professor Flannery called for Australia to develop a strategy to "move away entirely" from coal-fired electricity within the next 20 years, and lessen economic dependence on coal exports.

Professor Flannery said after a

recent visit to Europe he had lost faith in carbon capture and storage "as a way forward" in cutting greenhouse emissions. European experts had conveyed "a very negative view" of its potential use to cut emissions from coal-fired power stations, but felt it could play a minor role in coal gasification and enhanced oil recovery.

"This is a game-changer in many ways. It strips the fig leaf away from the illusion that we can maintain a coal-based future using these technologies," he said.

Australian Greens deputy leader Christine Milne said studies in the United States showed carbon capture and storage technologies

were never likely to be viable. "The Greens opposed legislation last year transferring all the long-term liability for anything going wrong with carbon storage to the taxpayers and it is unfortunate that the Liberal and Labor parties were so blinded by coal that they were prepared to pass the risk entirely on to our children," Senator Milne said.

Cooperative Research Centre for Greenhouse Gas Technologies chief technologist Barry Hoper said geosequestration still had a vital role to play in cutting emissions.

"We need a range of technologies to cope with climate change," he said.

Eggs in one basket

It's easy to see the appeal of geosequestration as a quick and easy means of reducing the concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. What could be simpler than "capturing" this troublesome greenhouse gas, compressing it, transporting it to a suitable site, and injecting it into deep geological formations where it would remain trapped for thousands or millions of years?

Our conspicuous consumption of fossil fuels could continue unabated – a reliance lessened to some extent by the adoption of renewable energy sources – and global warming would be consigned to the history books. The drawback with this magic bullet solution is that it may be decades before it becomes practicable on a scale that would reduce levels of global emission, and it may be hideously expensive. However, the belief that geosequestration is a straightforward technological solution to global warming well within our ability and our budget is a popular one, especially in coal-dependent countries such as Australia.

Certainly noted environmental activist and former Australian of the Year Tim Flannery used to think so, but this week questioned whether it would ever be economically feasible. Professor Flannery is on the sustainability advisory board of Siemens, and was told by the company's technicians during a recent trip to Germany that though carbon capture and storage was technically feasible, the fact that it wasn't happening now meant it was unlikely to occur in the future.

Committed proponents of carbon capture and storage may reject this pessimistic analysis, but on the question of development costs and when geosequestration technologies might be deployed on a commercial scale, they have never been particularly forthcoming. In the case of Australia, where coal-fired power stations (the major producers of carbon dioxide) are far removed from suitable storage sites, the economic viability of geosequestration remains highly problematic.

The Federal Government will probably ignore Professor Flannery's fading enthusiasm for "clean coal", the more so since he has accused Prime Minister Kevin Rudd of "a massive betrayal of trust" on climate change. But given the wisdom and necessity of spreading the risk when making public investment decisions, the Government should commit more money to geothermal, solar and nuclear technologies to ensure that Australia's future energy requirements are met in timely and cost-efficient fashion.