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Climate or Career Change: Critically examining the Australian Government's construction of climate change policy as an economic transition

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Developmental Paper

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Abstract:

Climate change, as a public policy imperative, has been a heavily contested and politicised issue in Australia, and elsewhere. This contestation has resulted in a fragmentation of climate change policy in Australia, in which problem representations, whilst connected to climate change, are centred on economic and social consequences of climate change. Central to this paper is the problem representation that climate change action will displace particular workforces, communities, and regions. The paper critically examines this problem representation through the Jobs and Skills Australia's Clean Energy Capacity Study, which aims to *'identify and analyse occupations, supply and demand factors and geographical consideration to support Australia's transition from 'brown' to 'green' energy'*. Utilising Bacchi (2012) *What is the problem represented* (WPR) approach the paper illustrates key constructions of economic narratives, such as a 'business as usual' and 'ecomodernism' approach. This is done whilst minimising discussions around the environment and climate change.

Introduction:

Iron ore, coal and natural gas are consistently in the top 3 of Australia's export commodities (Australian Government 2021); as fossil fuels, reducing global dependency and use of these commodities is essential to combatting climate change. This diametric composition of environmental versus economic needs has created a particularly unique contestation of climate change policy/action in Australia that has global consequences. Since at least 2007, at a federal level, ideologically constructed narratives of climate change action/inaction have dominated Australia's response to climate change. This has resulted in policy paralysis and political instability, that has engendered the political spectrum to engage in increasingly neutralised and apolitical statements about "responsible" climate action.

This narrative of responsible climate action is characterised by addressing climate change through a manageable and responsible "transition" that protects the economy. This narrative is connected to broader Anthropocene organizing narratives advanced by Wright et al (2018). Dominant in Australia, and elsewhere, is the Anthropocene narrative of "business as usual" (Wright et al, 2018, 460), in which the current capitalist agenda of growth will naturally address the global consequences of climate change, with minor adjustments to the status quo. Similarly, economically focussed Anthropocene narrative of ecomodernism, in which innovation and technological change will address climate change (Wright et al, 2018, 461), enjoys a similar primacy. These Anthropocene narratives have particular consequences for political and policy action on climate change as they appear to address environmental and economic concerns that are central to the contestation of climate change action in Australia.

In this paper, we contend that these Anthropocene narratives are central to the problem representation with the Australia's Clean Energy Capacity Study, we briefly introduce *What is the problem represented* (WPR) approach before moving through its application to the Terms of Reference of Clean Energy Capacity Study. We conclude with a discussion of this problem representation is connected to Wright et al (2018) Anthropocene organizing narratives.

WPR Approach:

Bacchi (2012) *What's the problem represented to be? (WPR Approach)* provides a useful tool for critical analysis of policy, by positioning the interrogation around the representation of certain problems. This displaces more classical analysis that assume policy is an objective instrument of government intervention. There are six-steps within the WPR approach, these six steps are not prescriptive, but rather to guide in the application and critical analysis of problem representation. In this paper we group the six-steps in the following ways: What is the problem (1), interrogate the problem (2, 4, 5), and understand its ontological and ideologically groundings and contestations (3 & 6). This paper's application of WPR is centred on Jobs and Skills Australia's Clean Energy Capacity Study, which seeks to understand the: *workforce needs for Australia's transition to a clean energy economy*" (Australian Government, 2022). We focus on the problem representations that are framed within the (draft) terms of reference of the Capacity Study.

Interrogate the problem: *What's the problem (WPR #1)*

The language of the Capacity Study creates a neutral frame, under which 'critical evidence and insights' are needed to support 'workforce planning, policy development and program design'. These activities are connected to the goal to "build a strong and vibrant Clean Energy sector and contribute to the Government's Powering Australia Plan". This goal advances a nationalistic imperative encapsulated in the "Powering Australia Plan", that is underpinned by a "strong and vibrant Clean Energy section". This problem is represented as a largely "economic transition" in which "critical evidence and insights" (from an economic or workforce perspective) are central to the effectiveness of this transition. This is further advanced by the terms of reference (ToR), which focus on the need to define the Australian clean energy workforce (ToR 1); establish the current state of the clean energy workforce (ToR #2); analyse future demand, supply and barriers (ToR #3, 4, 5). Central to this problem representation is the Anthropocene organizing narrative, 'business as usual', in which there is limited acknowledgement the ecological transformation connected to climate change is intimately connected to a growth trajectory (Wright et al, 2018, 460).

These representations (and silences) are consistent with other applications of WPR to climate change policy. Junquera (2022) application of WPR, indicates that climate change policy in Spain is framed around three narratives: economic growth, the energy system and employment (p. 2). As Junquera (2022) highlights, the primacy of economic narratives within public policy has considerable implications for other important considerations central to climate change: health, housing etc.

Interrogate the problem: *What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the 'problem'? (WPR #2); What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently? (WPR #4); What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'? (WPR #5)*

As noted, the Anthropocene organizing narrative, 'business as usual' is central to the assumptions that underpin this problem representation. As the problem is represented as an "economic transition" there is a central assumption that the key stakeholder is the clean-energy and high emitting workforces and sectors. By centring these workforces and sectors, the Capacity Study

privileges voices from these sectors and workforces and vests their (economic) interests in the success of this policy. As stipulated in ToR #2, establishing the current state of the clean energy workforce creates explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria intended to centre the policy action on what is necessary to support this workforce. This is further supported by ToR #3 which demand is understood based on *“transition plans”* and the *“impact on demand for employment in high-emitting sectors undergoing transition”*. These assumptions overlook the inextricable role ecological change will have on all sectors and workforces. Further to this the problem representation overlooks the ecological and social consequences that climate change has on all human and non-human life, in Australia and elsewhere.

Interestingly, ToR #6 states *“explore opportunities for, and barriers to, full participation in the clean energy sector for priority cohorts, including women, First Nations Australians, people with a disability and culturally and linguistically diverse Australians”*. Consistent with broader equity and diversity measures this assumes that these cohorts are interested and willingly participants in such economically rational narratives. Further it overlooks how certain groups, particular First Nations Australians will be impacted by the ecological changes brought about by climate change in particular ways, such as loss of cultural sites and connections to “country” (cultural connections to all living things).

Understand its ideologically groundings and contestations: *How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about? (WPR #3) How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated, and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted, and replaced? (WPR #6).*

This representation is connected to Wright et al. (2018) Anthropocene narrative of “business as usual” which reflects the dominant business narrative, under which a capitalist logic of growth and market correction remain pervasive. As noted in the introduction, a national contestation of Climate Change Policy in Australia was well formed by 2007, with political instability climaxing at the failure of the passing of key legislation in 2009 – resulting in a successive changing of ministers, including Prime Ministers, within the Australian Labor Party (ABC, 2020). However, central to this legislation was a proposed Emissions Trading Scheme, which despite its proponents’ claims remains centred on an economic response to climate change. Political instability in Climate Change policy in Australia has pervaded successive Australian Governments, Prime Ministers, and political parties. Whilst not central to this paper is consequential to this analysis as the political instability demonstrates the fraught nature of climate change policy in Australia. As Nyberg, Spicer & Wright (2013), point out Australia’s case is good example due large coal and gas exporting activities, high levels of Green House Gas (GHG) emissions per capita, and a divisive public policy setting (p. 438). These factors reinforce the representations contained in Jobs and Skills Australia’s Clean Energy Capacity Study (Australian Government 2022), and the broader Powering Australia plan) to show a concerted problem representation, reinforced by the Anthropocene organising narratives.

Conclusion:

Climate change remains a global imperative, yet localised inaction is pervasive and limits the capacity of global actors to act in unison. In Australia, the heavily contested and politicised policy arena of climate change as resulted in the emergence of narrow and economically orientated problem representations. Utilising Bacchi (2009) *What is the problem represented* (WPR) approach the paper examines the Jobs and Skills Australia’s Clean Energy Capacity Study. In doing so, we illustrate the concerted and consistent representation of climate change as an economic issue. This problem representation privileges particular workforces and sectors, overlooking the broader impact of climate change on all human and non-human life. Further, gendered and racialised dimensions of

this problem representation are silenced. We expand the discussion by connecting this problem representation to the broader Anthropocene organising narratives, advanced by Wright et al (2018), providing an important theoretical frame to more widely contest the problem representations advanced by the Jobs and Skills Australia's Clean Energy Capacity Study.

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