

The greatest moral conundrum of our time ... until the next one



Last year, we were told, the most important issue for the country – for the planet – was greenhouse gas emissions. This meant the Senate had to pass the government's carbon pollution reduction scheme.

It was so urgent it had to be legislated before the end of the year, and before the summit in Copenhagen.

We were led to believe if the Senate refused to pass the legislation there would be a double dissolution of Parliament. The Liberal leader, Malcolm Turnbull, warned this would lead to a humiliating election defeat for the Coalition. Kevin Rudd declared climate change "the great moral and economic challenge of our time".

Now the legislation has become less important than getting 30 per cent of the GST from the states so the government can rearrange financing in the hospital system. Can a momentous moral challenge fizzle out like this? Or are you beginning to suspect all the crisis was politically driven?

I was thinking about this on Saturday night during Earth Hour – when people are urged to turn off their lights to show they support reducing greenhouse gases and saving the planet. Four years ago newspapers ran front-page pictures of Sydney in darkness as people everywhere switched off their lights and contem-

plated the impending doom that fossil fuel electricity would bring upon us. Earth Hour did not attract such prominent coverage this year. Most front pages ran with pictures of the formula one grand prix in Melbourne – a gas-guzzling, high-octane car race that is shown on millions of plasma screens guzzling electricity all around the world. It is hard to think of anything less devoted to renewable energy and carbon reduction.

The Victorian and NSW governments are so concerned about gas emissions they are competing against each other with taxpayers' money to get future rights to host the event.

What amazes me is the way this greenhouse campaign can be switched on and switched off as quickly as the lights during Earth Hour. And for the moment the government has decided to switch it off so we can all get back to talking about health funding.

Our monthly Anglican newspaper broadly reflects the prevailing progressive left opinion. In the December issue, in the lead-up to the government's self imposed timetable for securing the emissions trading legislation, it ran four extensive articles on the need for action over climate change. It published no contrary views.

In fact, the Copenhagen summit was given more column inches than Christmas, which is quite an achievement for a religious newspaper. But the issue has hardly registered in the newspaper since. Even though nothing has happened, the urgency has gone out of the campaign.

The activists from NGOs who flew to Copenhagen to get urgent action on carbon emissions have gone back

to their previous causes. This doesn't mean they are insincere – on the contrary. It's just that their enthusiasm can be heightened or lessened with adroit management from the political professionals running the government's election year agenda.

I watched this issue elevated in the lead-up to the 2007 election, when it was used to illustrate how the Howard government was old, tired and out of touch. It was brought to fever pitch late last year to wedge the Coalition.

Without any immediate political target, it lies dormant. But I expect it will be back for the election – probably in an attack on the Coalition's policy on direct abatement measures. Which is why the public is entitled to get a little cynical. You never hear Rudd arguing for an emission trading scheme as if he really believes it is "the great moral and economic issue challenge of our time". He raises it, he drops it, it comes and it goes – like all the other issues of the regular media cycle.

Those scientists who made exaggerated claims about the Himalayan glaciers undermined trust in the science behind global warming. And those politicians who made exaggerated claims about their policy proposals have undermined trust on the political issue. It would have been better to be honest enough to admit the uncertainties, and acknowledge the downside of their policy. As it is, Earth Hour has become an apt metaphor for their tactical approach – a time to spread darkness, rather than illumination.

Peter Costello is a former federal Liberal treasurer.