

Australia's Chief Scientist Dr Alan Finkel

Trip Notes from Brussels and the International Network for Government Science Advice conference

29 September 2016



Brussels! A city synonymous with international politics, and all the hope and frustrations attached. It seems only right that I am here for a gathering of scientific advisers – my colleagues in the difficult business of giving governments frank and fearless advice about how science can help to build a better future.

I was asked to share an Australian perspective on a topic no spokesperson for science can avoid: climate change.

There's a running joke in my office that I could post an article on the future of potato farming on Mars, and references to "that warmist Alan Finkel" would still turn up in the comments feed.

As ambassadors for science, we need to have something constructive to say on the climate – not least because if we can't address it effectively it will increasingly dominate our conversations.

I firmly believe that across the country, Australians are capable of engaging with scientists on this topic.

If I held any other view then I would have to accept I've lost before I've begun. I refuse to set the bar for my performance so low.

I am confident we can present the science in a way that shows the reality and scale of the problem. We can help people to see the world as it looks from the scientist's perspective. With science, the future *will* be different, and it *can* be better – as any tour of an Australian research facility will persuade you.

My job is not to impose my particular version of what that better Australia will be. It is to help ensure that the conversation is accessible to everyone. And to be genuinely accessible, it has to be interesting.

I have reflected deeply on that responsibility in recent weeks, prompted by the publication of the Climate Change Authority's (CCA) latest report and all that followed in its wake.

I am a Member of the independent CCA Board, and I endorsed the findings and recommendations set forward.

I do not speak on the CCA's behalf, but I will say that my conversations with my colleagues in recent days have confirmed for me the value of the report's recommendations.

In a perfect world, we might have been asked how to transform the country to 24/7 near-zero emissions energy – as soon as possible.

But that's beside the point. When you are asked for advice, you look at the question and you commit to the process if you believe that you can answer that question in a helpful way.

In this case, the terms of reference for the CCA report were clear:

- 1) A toolkit of actions that Australia could undertake to achieve its commitments arising from the 2015 Paris conference, in the first instance, a 26 to 28% emissions cut by 2030; and
- 2) Consideration of how the tools can be sharpened every five years, as signatories to the Paris targets review and tighten their commitments to meet the global goals of net zero emissions by the end of the century.

The report that the CCA delivered answers to that brief. And I believe it does so in a manner that is not just deeply considered and evidence-based, but clever.

When people actually *read* the report – rather than responding to the hasty judgments of others in clickbait headlines – they were genuinely impressed.

The key recommendations are:

- 1) To introduce an emissions intensity scheme. This is a closed system specifically for the electricity sector (about a third of Australia's emissions), with no cost or revenue to government and no short or near term impact on

electricity prices. It will drive down emissions from the electricity sector in a predictable fashion. Frankly, it is a clever new tool in the kit.

- 2) To expand the existing “safeguard” mechanism (a means by which growth in emissions across multiple sectors are limited) to include emitters at the 25,000 tonnes per annum level instead of only those at the 100,000 tonnes per annum level. This scheme would then lower the baseline linearly to achieve the 2030 target and the deeper emissions reductions that will be needed in the future.
- 3) To introduce vehicle fuel efficiency regulations on the simple principle that vehicles that drive further per litre also emit less carbon dioxide and the owners spend less on fuel. Everybody wins.

But there’s the rub - reading a long report takes time. Reflecting on it takes effort. It’s not surprising that the initial response was to cover the imagined politics of the CCA, not the substance of its report. It is deeply regrettable that the spotlight was gone before the more considered commentators had their chance to respond.

For those who are interested, the [summary report](#) is a useful entry point.

I welcome the CCA’s efforts to bring the focus back to where it should be: what can we do today that is affordable, reliable, and delivers on the commitments we made in Paris.