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**Communicating Climate Change
Opening Remarks to the A Climate for Change Parliamentary Briefing**

**Monday 21st March 2011
Parliament House, Canberra**

The task of communicating climate change is incredibly challenging- it makes the achievement of world peace seem reasonably straight forward.

The first problem is that scientists are notoriously reluctant to talk about issues in a black and white way. There are always areas where there is legitimate room for doubt, and there is always room for improvement in our scientific understanding of issues, including climate issues. When scientists first started noticing global warming they produced a pretty wide scope of future temperature rise. Obviously the difference between a 1 degree rise in temperature over 100 years and a 6 degree rise in temperature over 100 years is very dramatic, and the public could be forgiven for thinking that with such a big variation in possible outcomes that it might be legitimate to sit back and wait until we knew more about what was going on. The trouble is that the more we learn about this phenomenon the more serious it has become. New pieces of information always seems to be at the outer edge of the range scientists have been giving us, so instead of being towards something that might happen towards the end of the century, climate change is increasingly clearly something which is happening right now.

The second problem is that the media thrives on controversy, and likes to hear an argument, so that the handful of people who dispute climate change science around the globe are given air time quite disproportionate to their credibility. Al Gore makes this point very strongly in 'An Inconvenient Truth'.

Even those media outlets which are less tabloid and see news and current affairs as something more than entertainment, still have a notion of equal time for opposing views, or 'right of reply', which means that you can have 100 scientists or even 1000 scientists, from the CSIRO, Bureau of Meteorology, and the Universities, talking about the impact of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases on our climate, finding themselves getting the same, or even less, air time than half a dozen climate sceptics.

The third problem is that while there are many people in Australia and around the world who are engaged with the issue, and who do want to tackle it, there are many others who are not engaged much at all, and whose knowledge of basic science is limited. I have had quite successful, well educated business men in my electorate ask me whether I think climate change is real, and in the discussion that follows it turns out that they do not really know about the greenhouse effect- the role of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in keeping the earth warm by stopping rays from the sun bouncing back out into space, that they don't know the difference between the greenhouse effect and the hole in the ozone layer, that they don't know what impacts increasing carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gas levels are likely to have on the climate.

In a world saturated with 24/7 TV, computer games, facebook, twitter, and limited attention spans, getting people to concentrate for long enough to understand the basic science is a real challenge.

And the fourth problem, and probably the biggest one, is the role of self-interest on the part of some large companies in generating mis-information. Upton Sinclair famously said "It is hard to get a man to understand something if his salary depends on his not understanding it". Al Gore has pointed out the parallels with the tobacco industry which used to bankroll mis-information campaigns to generate doubt in the public mind that there was a link between smoking and lung cancer. We have organisations in Australia like the Institute of Public Affairs which are given space in our daily newspapers to peddle climate skepticism without being required to disclose their sources of funding.

So, given what we're up against, it is hardly surprising that communicating climate change, both here in Australia and around the world, is a major challenge. That is why briefings like today's are so important. We need to engage ordinary citizens so that they understand the nature of the issues, so that they understand the link between the increase in carbon in the atmosphere from 280 to 380 parts per million, the link between that and extreme weather events such as the Black Saturday Bushfires, Lockyer Valley Floods, and Cyclone Yasi, so that they understand things like ocean acidification and the melting of the glaciers which provide essential freshwater supplies for much of Asia.

And it's not just about communication of the problem, it also needs to be about communication of the possible solution. We all need to know more about the alternatives- solar, wind, geothermal, biomass, carbon capture and storage- we need to know about their impacts- their benefits and their costs. Getting people to understand and think about alternative paths is also vital.

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