

Why we should be afraid -- very afraid -- of Julia Gillard's fantasies

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- From: [The Australian](#)
- March 19, 2011 12:00AM

WE were given two highly instructive insights during the week into Julia Gillard's thinking on her carbon dioxide tax. It proved an extremely disturbing revelation.

The first came on the ABC's Q&A program on Monday. The second was her speech to the Don Dunstan Foundation in Adelaide..

The combination was particularly valuable. For while she might have "mispoke" on Q&A, the spontaneity better captured what she felt on the emotional level, genuinely or otherwise.

While the prepared speech gave us the considered, for want of a better word, substance on which the greatest change in the entire economic structure of Australia, bar none other in our 223 years of European settlement, was based, we were left with two alternatives.

If she actually believes the nonsense she spouted, spontaneously first and then with consideration aforethought, we have a leader with all the save-the-world enthusiasm and profound ignorance of a junior high school student.

And what would that say about the battalions of advisers on which she presumably relied? Or indeed, as in the joke about Maggie Thatcher, the sheep otherwise known as her cabinet colleagues?

If she doesn't believe the nonsense, we have a leader who is setting out to impose real pain on every Australian and cause serious damage to the national economy, for utterly no positive purpose.

I would suggest it is an inchoate mix of the two. That she actually believes we have to cut our emissions of carbon dioxide to save the planet. She knows it can make absolutely no difference. And she has a sort of vague expectation that we will emerge into some, literally, sunlit prosperous carbon-free future. All this was captured in her comments on China.

On Q&A she asserted that it was simply not true that we were the only ones moving to attack carbon pollution (sic). China was closing down a dirty coal-fired power-generation facility at the rate of every one to two weeks, she asserted. And it was putting up a wind turbine at the rate of one every hour, she added.

The picture she set out to paint was of China replacing dirty coal with clean wind. The truth is, as we've noted through the week, that China is not simply replacing coal with coal but dramatically increasing coal-fired generation.

Yes, it is closing really dirty coal-fired stations: the ones that pump out those little bits of grit that used to blanket our cities and which Gillard & Co are deliberately seeking to inject into the community's consciousness with their references to carbon pollution.

Real pollution has long since been banished from our coal-fired power stations and our cities. Smog no longer kills thousands of Londoners every year. But it is still killing thousands in Chinese cities.

And not just in China. A World Health Organisation report in 2005 noted that more than half the world's population relied on dung, wood, crop waste or coal to meet their most basic energy needs.

Cooking and heating with such solid fuels on open fires or stoves without chimneys led to indoor air pollution, including small soot or dust particles that were able to penetrate deep into the lungs.

Every year, this sort of real carbon pollution was responsible for the death of 1.6 million people, WHO wrote in 2005. If anything it would be worse today.

That is the real carbon pollution. Not the carbon dioxide that is the target (the only target) of her tax; the real pollution that is precisely avoided by our centralised existing clean, yes clean, coal-fired power stations.

The building of similar power stations in the developing world would be the quickest, cheapest and most effective way of reducing and eliminating those deaths.

So does Gillard actually believe her carbon pollution nonsense?

Depressingly, you would have to conclude that at some level she does. Like so many who say or at least think, even if they understand, that this is all and only about reducing emissions of carbon dioxide; that yes, it's good to get rid of the bits of grit as well.

Witness our down under prophet Ross Garnaut, taking time off from dispensing his weekly profundities ex cathedra, to echo on the ABC's Lateline this same confused but deliberately dishonest mish-mash about China closing "environmentally very unfriendly" power stations and replacing them with new coal ones that had "very low emissions".

The facts on China are simple and irrefutable. It has a coal-fired system equal to more than 13 times our entire electricity generation. Between now and 2020, it is going to add between 400GW and 500GW to its existing 670GW of coal-fired power generation.

That's its projections. And that's net. So if they close, say, 200GW of really dirty old stations, they will be building 600GW to 700GW of new ones, all pumping out carbon dioxide, if hopefully not also grit.

Total power generation in Australia is about 50GW.

Yes, China might be aiming for 150GW of wind and 20GW of solar by 2020. But that's installed capacity. When the wind don't . . . and the sun don't . . . Real capacity of the two

combined will be closer to 50GW by 2020, as against an extra 400GW at least of additional coal-fired generation.

Despite those clean coal-fired stations that exist only in the deeper and increasingly darker recesses of Garnaut's mind, by 2020 China will be emitting something like 25 times the entire emissions of Australia today. Rendering utterly ineffective the 5 per cent cut we will purport to achieve at such huge and permanent cost.

The Prime Minister launched into pure fantasy in her speech in Adelaide about all the jobs that would flow in her brave new (sunlit) world. We'll become the world's supplier of electric and hybrid cars. Welders and steel workers will build and maintain large-scale solar plants. On and on she went, climaxing with this re-assuring statement of certainty. "And there will be new jobs too."

In both forums she claimed we had an abundance of solar, wind and geothermal. Interestingly in Adelaide she added natural gas, which emits what I wonder?

If we have these "in abundance", why don't we embark now on an accelerated program of closing our coal-fired stations and just plugging in the community power cord to all that sun and wind?

As I started: does she really believe the nonsense she spouts? Should we be afraid? Or really afraid?