

Nordic nations see multilateralism as key to combatting climate change

By Audrey Quicke

Nordic countries have long considered multilateralism key to combatting climate change and environmental issues. This month, the Stockholm+50 conference commemorated 50 years since the landmark United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, and for the first time saw United Nations Member States formally recognise the need to phase out all fossil fuels.¹

With a freshly minted Labor Government promising a renewed commitment to both multilateralism and climate action, Australia stands to learn from the Nordic approach to using coordinated international action to drive climate and environmental outcomes.



Image source: Stockholm+50 Opening Plenary²

The Nordic nations' long history of environmentalism and commitment to rules-based multilateralism is well documented by Richie Merzian and Dan Cass in their essay in the book *The Nordic Edge* on 'scandiplomacy' and climate action. According to Merzian and Cass, '[t]he Nordic countries have a deep history in the United Nations in support of environmental protection, not just in signing agreements but also driving the development of the entire regime. As a result, they have credibility when it comes to environmental leadership.'³

The first dedicated international conference on the environment was proposed by the Swedish Government in 1967 and hosted in 1972. The Swedish hosts successfully corralled 114 governments to agree to 26 principles, 109 recommendations, launch a dedicated United Nations Environment Program and create an annual World Environment Day – placing environmental issues at the forefront of

international concerns, and building the scaffolding of the multilateral environmental frameworks we know today.⁴

The Stockholm+50 conference just held in 2022 marked the 50th anniversary of the first international conference on the environment. Its key recommendation for 'promoting phase out of fossil fuels'⁵ is a significant step in combatting climate change, as global fossil fuel production must decline immediately to be consistent with Paris Agreement temperature limits. Globally, current fossil fuel projects would result in over twice emissions compatible with the Paris Agreement 1.5°C scenario.⁶ In Australia alone, there were over 100 fossil fuel projects under development as of November 2021, with a total carbon footprint more than three times Australia's annual emissions.⁷

The recent Australian federal election was heralded as a climate election, with newly elected independent candidates and the Greens likely to push a stronger response to the climate crisis.⁸ The Labor Government are also looking to fix Australia's strained relationship with the Pacific, and both Prime Minister Albanese and Foreign Minister Wong have previously spruiked the importance of international institutions and multilateralism to Australia's foreign policy agenda.⁹ They are looking to re-engage in the region, leaving the infamous days of 'negative

A clear opportunity for Labor's climate action and multilateralism agendas to converge lies in the Conference of the Parties (COP), the annual United Nations climate conference. In December 2021, the Australian Labor Party committed to bid for COP29 in partnership with Pacific Island nations in 2024. This would mean hosting the UN's largest annual event.¹⁰

The benefits are many. Hosting COP29 would bring a much-needed economic boost to Australian hospitality and tourism industries (the COP sustainability criteria stipulate local employment obligations on the host country).¹¹ A COP hosted in partnership with the Pacific could ease regional tensions, building trust and credibility with Pacific island countries. It could also bolster Australia's international reputation –shifting Australia from climate laggard to climate leader.¹²

There are already signs that the Labor Government's commitment to multilateralism will go beyond mere rhetoric. Foreign Minister Penny Wong is set to embark on her third visit to the Pacific since being sworn in just weeks ago,¹³ and in his first international address as PM, at the meeting of the Quad in Tokyo, Anthony Albanese highlighted the importance of strong climate action in the Pacific.¹⁴

If the new Labor Government want to make both climate action and multilateral engagement a greater focus for Australian diplomacy, they would do well to look to the Nordic countries – with their long, proud history of shaping and supporting multilateral institutions, particularly on matters of environmental or climate action. The recent Stockholm+50 conference is one example. An Australia and Pacific Island nation hosted COP29 could be next.

¹ Stockholm+50 (2022) *Presidents' Final Remarks to Plenary: Key recommendations for accelerating action towards a healthy planet for the prosperity of all*, <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/40110/Key%20Messages%20and%20Recommendations%20-%20Formatted.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

² Stockholm+50 (2022) *Opening Plenary*, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/unep/sets/72177720299206452/>

³ Merzian and Cass in: Scott and Campbell (2021) *The Nordic Edge*, Melbourne University Press, 148.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Stockholm+50 (2022) *Presidents' Final Remarks to Plenary: Key recommendations for accelerating action towards a healthy planet for the prosperity of all*.

⁶ Stockholm Environment Institute et al. (2022) *Production Gap Report*, https://productiongap.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/PGR2021_web_rev.pdf

⁷ Ogge et al. (2021) *Undermining Climate Action: The Australian Way*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/undermining-climate-action/>

⁸ The Economist (2022) *Australia's election sets a heartening precedent on climate change*, <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/05/25/australias-election-sets-a-heartening-precedent-on-climate-change>

⁹ See Wong (2021) *Expanding Australia's Power and Influence: Speech to the National Security College – Australian National University – Canberra – 23/11/2021*, <https://www.pennywong.com.au/media-hub/speeches/expanding-australia-s-power-and-influence-speech-to-the-national-security-college-australian-national-university-canberra-23-11-2021/>; Albanese (2022) *An Address by Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese*, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/address-opposition-leader-anthony-albanese>

¹⁰ Merzian et al.(2022) *COP29 in Australia*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/cop29-in-australia/>

¹¹ UNFCCC (2020) *How to COP: A handbook for hosting united nations climate change conferences*, https://unfccc.int/sites/default/files/resource/How-to-COP_2020.pdf

¹² Merzian et al.(2022) *COP29 in Australia*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/cop29-in-australia/>

¹³ Stayner (2022) *Foreign Minister Penny Wong continues Pacific push with upcoming visit to Solomon Islands*, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/foreign-minister-penny-wong-continues-pacific-push-with-upcoming-visit-to-solomon-islands/9lh858j9f>

¹⁴ Albanese (2022) *Opening Remarks of the Quad Leaders' Meeting*, <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/opening-remarks-quad-leaders-meeting>