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Tēnā koutou, Tēnā koutou, Tēnā koutou katoa.

A brief history of climate change

What a summer! It's been hot, even here in Wellington. All over the country, green fields have turned a golden brown, rivers have dried up or slowed to a trickle, and, unfortunately for our farmers and for our native plants and animals, the threat of drought now hangs heavy over the land.

Will 2015 be another record year for the climate?

Last year was the warmest year on record around the world. Nine of the ten warmest years on record have occurred since 2000. This is the 38th consecutive year that the annual average temperature has been above the long term average.

The trend is pretty clear — our climate is heating up — and we are facing, in the words of Climate Change Minister Tim Groser, “the great challenge of our age”.

He's right. Climate change is the greatest challenge of our age. Runaway global warming hangs over us like the threat of a nuclear winter did during the height of the Cold War. Just as they did during the height of the Cold War, parents are looking into the eyes of their children and asking, “What kind of a world are we leaving behind for you?”

But I'm not going to focus this speech on the dire consequences of doing nothing on climate change. I'm sure all of us have heard the science; we've read about the wicked storms and wildfires and droughts, the risks to agriculture and forestry, the threats posed to our homes and wildlife. We've probably even seen some of the changes firsthand in our own backyard.

We've known about climate change for a long time. Margaret Thatcher was making speeches about it in the 1980s. Simon Upton, as part of a National Government, came close to passing a carbon tax in the 1990s. And the Kyoto Protocol came into force in the 2000s, promising concerted and co-ordinated global action on the climate.

We've had a few more false starts since then and seen how a polluting industry can organise powerfully to secure its own short-term interests, at the expense of our children.

As a result, carbon emissions have continued to grow unabated around the world, but particularly here in New Zealand. As a people, we have one of the highest carbon footprints in the developed world and the Ministry for the Environment has stated in its annual report that our country's net emissions will continue to go even higher — up a further 50 percent out to 2020.

People often think I've made a mistake when I say this. They say 'you mean to say New Zealand's emissions are going down by 50 percent?' Sadly not. I'm afraid the truth is that New Zealand's net emissions have increased by 20 percent since John Key became Prime Minister and the Ministry for the Environment says our climate pollution will increase by a further 50 percent in the next decade under current policy settings.

Because of course the current policy settings subsidise increasing emissions.

If climate change is war, the New Zealand Government is fighting on the wrong side. They are on the side fighting for a global climate catastrophe.

Two decades after Simon Upton's courageous, but ultimately failed, attempt to get action on climate change, it's time we changed sides and joined those trying to cut greenhouse emissions instead of continuing to dramatically increase our emissions.

Climate champions

One doesn't have to look very far in New Zealand to find conscientious objectors to the Government's war to accelerate climate change.

We are a can-do country. We generally look forwards, not backwards. And we're not a people who fear what the future holds.

When faced with a challenge, New Zealanders protest, we invent, and we forge ahead with our practical solutions.

I'm thinking of people like New Zealander Ian Wright, co-founder of Tesla Motors, makers of electric cars, and now developing electric drivetrains for trucks in California.

I'm thinking of people like Dayle Takitimu, an indigenous rights and environmental lawyer who has led her iwi, Te Whanau a Apanui, in their struggle against deep sea drilling off the East Coast, working alongside the recently departed Dr Apirana Mahuika.

And I'm thinking of people like Mike Bennetts, who is taking liquid fuel company Z Energy from being in the middle of the problem to the start of the solution by investing millions of dollars into the development of sustainable biofuels here in New Zealand.

And there are many more.

Some of our best and brightest are realising that our prosperity relies on a thriving environment and that the threat of climate change brings opportunities to be smarter about how we do business, smarter about how we can create and conserve energy, and smarter about how we can organise to create the social change needed to mobilise in the face of the climate threat.

Smart green economics and thinking.

And then there are those in government who are stepping up to the climate threat.

Dunedin City Council has taken the first steps to divest from fossil fuels, realising dirty energy has no place in our prosperous future.

On an even smaller level, the Community Board in Eastbourne, Wellington, is pushing their local council to fund a cycleway around the bays, one which will double as a protective seawall to help repel increasingly severe climate change driven storm surges which threaten to close the only road in and out of their community.

Victoria University has divested from fossil fuels.

Overseas, an increasing number of corporations are waking up to both the threat of unbridled climate change as well as to the opportunities in a low-carbon economy.

The massive Norwegian pension fund, worth over a trillion New Zealand dollars, yep a thousand billion, has recently divested from 32 coal mining companies as

well as tar sands producers. The Fund argues that these companies face a grim future as action on climate change limits their future production.

Stanford University in the United States has divested from coal.

And my personal favourite, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, established by the heirs to the famous oil magnates, is getting out of fossil fuels.

Having understood that change is inevitable, and that first movers have the advantage, companies like Walmart, Mars, and Proctor & Gamble are helping create a revolution in the power sector by switching to 100 percent renewable energy. Forty-three percent of Fortune 500 companies now have clean energy targets and some corporations have even set an internal price on carbon to drive innovation *despite* the lack of government leadership.

Unilever's CEO Paul Polman, a global leader in sustainability, recently said, "Our share price is up 25 percent over the past four months alone, showing the world that you can address tough issues without touching the economic viability of your business model."

However, no one person or business, not even one the size of Unilever, can win this climate war alone. Business relies on clear signals from government about the long-term price path of carbon before it can reasonably be expected to commit the large amounts of capital needed to shift to low-carbon future.

It's now time for *this* House to play catch up and work with those who are helping transition the New Zealand economy to a low-carbon future.

Questioning the quality of our leadership

We need a partnership approach linking individuals, communities, NGOs, businesses, and governments across the globe.

Dealing with the threat of climate change is not only going to define us as a people, it's going to define the very nature of leadership.

This House's record on climate change has been weak.

The last two New Zealand Prime Ministers of our times — Helen Clark and John Key — will be remembered as expert political managers — but neither really got on top of the big one — runaway climate change.

To be fair, towards the end of the Clark Government they did manage to get an emissions trading scheme implemented against significant resistance, but the Key Government immediately weakened the scheme. But when you look at New Zealand's actual emissions they have consistently increased over the course of the 21st century.

When you understand that New Zealand's emissions are set to grow by 50 percent in the next ten years, you realise there's a huge historical cost to the managerial style of politics that has dominated New Zealand politics for the last decade.

How will we manage the sea, when it's lapping at our doorstep?

The enemy of climate change will not be defeated by poll-driven political management.

Abraham Lincoln, Kate Sheppard, and Michael Joseph Savage achieved remarkable victories for slaves, women, and the poor in moments of great political courage and conviction.

Our great leaders, the ones we still remember, stepped outside of the current of history and showed how we could live better; how seemingly impossible hurdles could be overcome with effort and ingenuity. They defined the spirit of the age and expanded the definition of what it means to be human. Their inspired leadership was a gift of love, no less.

When it comes to the war against climate change, we can no longer live in denial by saying 'we're so small that we don't matter'. That is not the ANZAC spirit. That is not the spirit of the Maori Battalion. If you will excuse the sporting metaphor, imagine if the All Blacks believed that when they ran out onto the pitch to face a country ten times bigger than our own?

The climate crisis is a universal call to arms and we in this House need to play our part.

We will work with you (or fight you every step of the way)

In John Key's post-election interview with John Campbell on TV3, he said, "I will lead a government that leads for all New Zealanders...I don't want to pass everything 61 to 60. It's a really bad place to end up as a government. Just passing everything with the barest of majorities, I don't think that is the right way to govern."

I was heartened by his statesmanship, his sense of inclusion, and his offer of good will.

And surely climate change – the greatest challenge of our times – is one issue above all of them that we need to find a way to work across the House. Our children’s livelihoods are too important to play partisan politics over.

National plus Greens plus Labour plus NZ First plus the Maori Party voting to pass legislation that halts our growing carbon emissions and makes polluters pay would send the strongest political signal that we mean business on the climate.

To whom, besides ACT, could the climate science deniers lobby turn to look after their interests?

It sounds deceptively simple, to collectively choose an energy-efficient, low-carbon path for our economy rather than the Government’s current choice of energy-intensive, high-carbon pollution economy – one which, at some unknown point, ends catastrophically.

Once we get the price on carbon right, and the supporting incentives in place, we have the dynamic market economy, the scientists, the business people, and the social innovators that can do the rest.

This century will be the century of sustainability. The countries and the businesses that lead that shift to sustainability will dominate.

How much harder could we push in crucial climate negotiations overseas if we could show the world that we have our own house in order, that we’re beginning the necessary transition, and that the sky hasn’t fallen on our heads after all?

But if this Government continues with the business-as-usual pollution economy approach to the climate, we will fight it all the way. Our children’s future demands that we do.

The Green Party will work with the Key Government if this Government changes course and introduces policies to actually cut emissions. But we will fight them with everything we’ve got if it continues down its current path.

Let this climate fight unite us in this House against a common enemy, rather than divide us between the lines of short-term expediency versus the long-term prosperity of our children and grandchildren.

The Greens remember which side we were on in the battle over apartheid in 1981 and we know which side of the climate fight we are on in 2015.

Simultaneously tackling inequality

Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations said at Davos, that we are the last generation that can take steps to avoid the worst impact of climate change and the first generation that can end poverty.

Alongside climate change, tackling inequality is the Green Party's other main priority.

Like climate change, inequality denies our children the opportunity to prosper they deserve. Inequality denies our children their health, their education, and the simple hope for a fairer future.

Growth and inequality

We've been waiting thirty years under the spell that economic growth will deliver us out of poverty and inequality. How many times have we heard from this Government and governments past that we need to grow the economy first to enable us to address inequality and child poverty?

Per capita GDP has grown by 40 percent since the late 1980s, while rates of child poverty have more than doubled. New Zealand went from a child poverty rate of 11 percent in the late 1980s to 24 percent today.

There are 35,000 more children in severe poverty in New Zealand today than there were before this National Government came to power.

That makes a total of 205,000 New Zealand children living in severe poverty. One in four Kiwi kids live in poverty.

These are children going without the basics like fresh fruit and veges, raincoats, and medicine. These are kids three times more likely to be admitted to hospital, five times more likely to die of cot death, and 27 times more likely to have rheumatic fever. They're likely to stay sick for much of their adult lives and die young.

Our rates of child poverty are unconscionable.

The costly interventions and wasted potential have a dramatic impact on our economic wellbeing as well.

In what is likely to be a seminal finding, the OECD found late last year that inequality hurts economic growth significantly.

The OECD showed that New Zealand — one of a handful of developed countries where inequality has grown fastest since the mid-1980s — has experienced the biggest loss of economic growth as a result of inequality. The OECD estimates New Zealand lost ten percentage points of growth over the last twenty years due to our record levels of poverty and inequality. No country, besides Mexico, had a worse record than us.

The OECD found that: “The gap between rich and poor is at its highest level in 30 years;” that, “inequality has a negative, statistically significant impact on medium-term growth;” and, that “policies that help limit or reverse inequality may not only make societies less unfair, but also wealthier.”

Put positively, policies that limit or reverse inequality in our society will not only make lives here fairer, but wealthier too.

Doing the right thing about inequality will reward us economically.

Why is this so?

The OECD (amongst others) has confirmed that income inequality undermines educational opportunities for disadvantaged people, especially children, lowering their chance to up-skill and break out of the poverty cycle. This trend holds *no matter what the quality or quantity of the education offered*.

Regardless of one’s views on Charter schools, they cannot turn around the long tail of educational underachievement in New Zealand as long as we live in a divided and deeply unequal nation.

And we’re not just talking about one or even five percent of people missing out on the basics. The OECD holds that this cycle of poverty and educational underachievement has an impact on the bottom 40 percent of families.

Our *Feed the Kids Bill* is having its First Reading in the first weeks of this Parliament. It's a small, possibly imperfect response to the fact that hungry kids can't learn at school. Let's govern in the interests of all New Zealanders and vote to send this Bill to Select Committee to turn it into the kind of legislation that will leave a significant legacy for our children.

Revisiting leadership

In 2015 we can end child poverty and take steps to avoid the worst impact of climate change.

Are we going to see in this political term a resumption of business as usual — a style of political non-leadership that manages its way through the next three years, doing whatever it takes to just stay in power?

Or can we escape the trap of the perfectly human instinct to protect our short-term interests and provide real leadership?

We've done it in the past.

1981, with the anti-Springbok tour protests, was the defining year in which many New Zealanders provided leadership on racial equality and opposed apartheid.

1987, with the passing of the Nuclear Free New Zealand Act, was the culmination of years of leadership by many New Zealanders on going nuclear free.

2015 is the year for leadership on climate change and inequality.

The Greens are ready to provide that leadership and we look forward to working with many other New Zealanders who also are providing leadership on these critical issues. We sincerely hope the New Zealand Government is amongst them.