
— Opinion

Labor must tell a good story on climate

The Hawke and Keating governments created a reforming narrative of banana republic turned clever country. Anthony Albanese could do the same with the climate revolution.

Craig Emerson

Former Labor minister and economist



Oct 10, 2022 - 3.13pm

Just as the Hawke-Keating governments told a story of leading Australia's first big transformation to an open, competitive economy, the Albanese government has an opportunity to speak of the nation's second big economic transformation to a renewable energy superpower.



Climate Change and Energy Minister Chris Bowen (left) and Prime Minister Anthony Albanese need to be climate storytellers. **Alex Ellinghausen**

Everyone loves a good story. Toddlers love being read a bedtime story. Christians thriving on the parables of the New Testament. Other religions with their own tales and fables. The story of Rosa Parks refusing to give up her bus seat for a white man.

Some politicians like to impress by reading dozens of mind-numbing statistics from prepared speeches. Others use big words when little ones will do.

Then there are the storytellers.

John Howard gave coherent speeches without referring to notes. Andrew Peacock was entertaining. Julia Gillard delivered her devastating “misogyny speech” in the parliament with only a few minutes’ preparation.

Bob Hawke gave well-structured speeches and was a strong advocate using his experience in industrial relations.

But the greatest political storyteller of the modern era was Paul Keating. His warning that, unless Australia changed course it would become a banana republic, [<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p53l2m>] was not a speech but a short, compelling story spoken on a wall phone in a restaurant kitchen.

For years, Hawke, Keating and their cabinet colleagues told the same story of changing Australia from a lucky country whose luck was running out, to a clever country. Their quest was to create an open, competitive economy.

All the policies fitted into their story [<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p59z43>]: tariff reductions; increased investment in education, and research to increase productivity in modern industries; wage moderation in exchange for improvements in the social wage; budgetary restraint; engagement with Asia; compulsory superannuation to reduce the nation’s reliance on foreign finance; and enterprise bargaining to share productivity gains.

The locations Garnaut nominates for these industries are in provincial and rural Australia, breathing new life into old industrial areas.

Under the banner of A Better Future, the Albanese government began telling a story in the lead-up to this year’s election.

In Albanese’s election night victory speech, he spoke of the opportunity for Australia to become a renewable energy superpower.

Albanese, Climate Change Minister Chris Bowen and other Cabinet colleagues often refer to Labor’s climate change policies: rewiring the nation; tightening the

safeguard mechanism; installing community batteries; incentivising the purchase of electric vehicles.

Bringing these together, they can tell Australia's next big story, of tapping into the endowments that can bring the country sustainable prosperity in a decarbonising world.

As Ross Garnaut and colleagues [<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5beht>] persuasively sets out in his new book, *The Superpower Transformation*, we have in abundance the endowments the decarbonising world needs.

Sunshine and wind and their conversion into hydrogen to power the early-stage processing of our massive iron ore and bauxite deposits, An astonishing array of critical minerals used in renewable energy production. And vast expanses of land suitable for revegetation and carbon storage.

To borrow a 1990s Keating phrase, Australia has been hit in the arse by a rainbow. Again.

Australia as a renewable energy superpower producing carbon-free energy and products for the world is a compelling story. It is all the more so for where these decarbonising activities can occur.

As we struggle with urban congestion and high capital city housing costs, the locations Garnaut nominates for these industries are in provincial and rural Australia, breathing new life into old industrial areas such as Newcastle, the Latrobe Valley in Victoria, north and central Queensland, Collie in Western Australia, northern Tasmania, and yes, Whyalla, in South Australia.

Garnaut and colleagues envisage a strong future for high-quality carbon credits generated in rural Australia for sale at home and abroad to countries that find decarbonisation much harder.

Hawke and Keating didn't speak of the transformation of the Australian economy as an end in itself. By implementing policies for an open, competitive economy, they expected and achieved the record productivity growth that generated the budgetary space for their cherished social reforms.

The enormous renewable energy investment task required to achieve Australia's second great economic transformation has the same potential for generating the productivity growth and budgetary space to fund social reforms such as gender

equality, true reconciliation with First Nations people, aged care, better and more hospitals, and public housing.

**RELATED****It is now 'more likely' Australia will be a hydrogen superpower**

<https://www.afr.com/companies/energy/it-is-now-more-likely-australia-will-be-a-hydrogen-superpower-20221010-p5boi1>

**RELATED****Summit an insight into Albanese's operating style**

<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/summit-reflects-albanese-s-operating-style-think-howard-and-the-gst-20220901-p5be17>

Climate change was a big vote-changing issue at the election. The decade-long climate wars are over, not necessarily because the Coalition has changed its view, but because the voting public is not for turning, and neither are markets.

The Albanese government is on the right side of history as champions of Australia's second great economic transformation. It has a story to tell that brings coherence, purpose and community understanding to all its policies.

Craig Emerson is managing director of Emerson Economics. He is a distinguished fellow at the ANU, director of the Australian APEC Study Centre at RMIT and adjunct professor at Victoria University's College of Business.