

Easy riders and raging bulls

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Let me put forward one way to think of the climate wars. Think of a square divided into quarters.

The horizontal axis describes where people stand in relation to whether global warming is real. It traverses a spectrum of views ranging from strong climate change believers on the far left to the strong climate change denier on the far right.

The vertical axis describes the relative level of economic security of people. This spectrum ranges from those enjoying strong economic security at the top to those who are most economically insecure at the bottom.

People sit at numerous points along these axes.

On the centre-left side of the belief spectrum are those who may not be completely convinced of the scientific evidence of global warming but who think that precaution is the right policy. On the centre-right side are those who do not completely deny the scientific evidence but who reject the ideological zeal of the believers on the far left.

Political affiliations do not completely correspond with the left-right spectrum between belief and denial.

There are individuals who confound this typology because there are political leftists who are deniers and rightists who accept the scientific evidence for man-made global warming: for example, former British Conservative prime minister Margaret Thatcher, the world's first political leader to take climate change seriously and who was instrumental in establishing the Hadley Centre for Climate Prediction and Research.

It is a measure of how the once politically neutral question of whether climate change was scientifically true has mutated into an increasingly polarised ideological war that the hero of conservatives worldwide is on the wrong side. If Thatcher were climbing on to the world stage today I doubt she would be batting for Clive Hamilton and Bob Brown's team. She'd be opening the batting with Nick Minchin, and slogging Kevin Rudd and Penny Wong's Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme for sixes into the stands.

Once-mild sceptics on the centre-right are being pushed further right, recoiling from the righteousness and the moral posturing of the zealots on the left.

The believers on the left seem oblivious to the extent the religious nature of their fervour alienates potential supporters. The price being paid for the West's progressive classes re-finding God in the environment makes many a sceptic yearn for the time people went to church for spiritual succour. Natural revelation has long provenance in Christian theology, but the Greens' religious atheism is repellent to many.

Conversely, the fact too many on the other side are animated by a wilful obscurantism and see all things through the prism of that old chestnut, political correctness, excites their opponents on the left into paroxysms of righteous rage.

What better accelerant for right-wing fury than Hamilton? What better provocation for leftist apoplexy than Minchin?

But let's now get to the point of my schema. Most of Australia's climate change action policy advocates come from the top left-hand box. They believe that climate change is real, is caused by humans, and that urgent and dramatic action must be taken to reduce carbon emissions. They are also economically secure. All of the media and the legions of educated people who believe in global warming fall within this quadrant.

Yes, there are also believers who are economically insecure but they are not the heartland of climate change activism. If they also dread climate change, their relative economic insecurity nevertheless affects the kinds of policy responses they may support or reject.

Pacific Islanders and other such people who are directly confronted by rising sea levels and believe in climate change causation comprise those in the bottom left quadrant who are economically insecure but believe in the need for action on climate change.

The top-right corner is occupied by the economically secure who don't believe in (or even care about) climate change and resist action. Capitalists whose pursuit of self-interest has transmuted from natural calling to German social theorist Max Weber's iron cage of an endlessly unfulfilling accumulation and consumption, and who are at least honest enough not to cloak their economic security under a mantle of moral worthiness like the wealthy Al Gore, occupy this corner. There is much scope for cynicism among this mob, but it is a toss-up as to what's worse: climate policy activists who want others to pay costs of ameliorative action but who will ensure that any cost they themselves bear will not be a great burden, or those archetypal cigar-chompers who don't give a damn. One is blatantly selfish, the other more subtly so.

I am on the upper side of the economic security axis. Though almost all my relatives and the people most dear to me are economically insecure, and though I intimately know and work with people in poverty, I must confess this: I have no idea what it would mean for electricity bills to go up by, say, \$50 a month. I think I could easily afford such a rise. And if I were asked to pay this increase in return for saving the planet, then I would probably readily consent. In fact my altruistic sacrifice number is probably significantly higher than \$50.

Like many educated, middle-class professionals who earn a good salary, I have lost a real understanding of what an increase in the cost of living such as this means for lower-income people. Growing up in an extremely low-income family does not guarantee this empathy.

There is a policy issue here: it is easy for people above the income security line to devise and advocate climate action policies that allocate costs that are affordable by us but that are a big deal for the percentage of society for whom \$50 a month makes or breaks a family budget or for whom any greater scarcity of employment is a life disaster.

There is also a potential political issue here.

When economically insecure people realise that climate action advocates are largely economically secure and can afford the costs that will be incurred by the policy choices they are advocating, they may revolt in the way Tony Abbott hopes they will. Where do you sit in this quadrant?

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