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Obstructing change: political inertia and the maintenance of climate inaction in Australia

Vanessa Bowden [a], Daniel Nyberg [b] and Christopher Wright [c]

[a]School of Humanities, Creative Industries and Social Sciences, University of Newcastle, Newcastle, Australia; [b]School of Business, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia; [c]Business School, University of Sydney, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

Despite widespread public concern and mounting climate impacts, Australia's climate policy remains stalled. This paper investigates how political, industrial, and environmental actors narrate climate change and each other, contributing to persistent inaction. Drawing on 62 interviews with key stakeholders, we identify three mechanisms – *division*, *paralysis*, and *displacement* – that sustain political inertia. These mechanisms operate through competing problem framings, strategic blame-shifting, and economic narratives that obscure the need for structural change. While existing literature has traced obstructionist tactics, our actor-centred analysis adds depth by showing how discursive interactions across stakeholder groups reproduce inertia, even in the absence of overt denial. Importantly, we argue that inertia is not merely passive but actively maintained by those with institutional power. By foregrounding the role of narrative in shaping climate politics, this study offers insight into the endurance of obstruction and the challenges of building coalitions for transformative climate action in Australia.

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KEYWORDS Obstruction; climate change; inertia; environmental sociology; political sociology

Introduction

The 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change was widely reported as a breakthrough in a world coming to grips with how best to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. A decade later, commitments to future action have proliferated, and research suggests that scepticism about climate change is in decline (Painter *et al.* 2023). Despite these developments, global carbon emissions continue to rise (WMO 2024). Notably, public concern about climate change remains strong and relatively consistent across many

CONTACT Vanessa Bowden vanessa.bowden@newcastle.edu.au
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countries, yet it appears to exert little influence on the pace or ambition of climate policy (Roberts and Brulle 2024). We argue that the persistent gap between widespread public concern and meaningful climate action points to a deeply embedded structural resistance within political and economic systems.

An extensive literature has outlined the resistance of carbon-intensive industries and conservative organisations in combatting climate mitigation efforts. Researchers have noted how climate inaction has been sustained through strategies ranging from scientific denial to the mobilisation of capital, incumbency, and political power reinforcing growth norms, fossil fuel dependence, and capturing policy processes (Oreskes and Conway 2010, Ekberg *et al.* 2022, Brulle *et al.* 2024, Roberts *et al.* 2025). This has occurred despite efforts to address both scientific misrepresentation and to support action. For instance, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has consistently provided evidence of the impacts of climate and certainty that the causes are primarily human-induced (IPCC 2007, 2023). At the same time, awareness campaigns and advocacy from environmentalists have dented the veracity of denial efforts (Spaiser *et al.* 2022, Nyberg *et al.* 2023). Indeed, this has forced those opposed to climate action to mostly move away from denial, which lacks credibility, towards efforts to delay mitigation policy (Wright *et al.* 2021). This progression of debates from denial to delay has been widely traced in the literature, with the umbrella concept of climate obstruction evolving to explain these varied processes (Ekberg *et al.* 2022, Brulle *et al.* 2024).

Australia offers a compelling case study of the intersection between politics, industry, and environmentalism when it comes to climate change. As one of the biggest exporters of coal and gas over the past three decades, Australia has had tumultuous and often polarising debates when it comes to climate change. From being an early laggard, to inadequate emissions reduction targets and continual approvals of fossil fuel projects (Climate Council of Australia 2025), it is fair to say that climate policy in Australia remains stubbornly slow. This is despite the fact that for the past two decades the majority of Australians have agreed that climate change is urgent and that governments need to act (Neelam 2023). Further, it is evident that climate impacts, such as extreme heat, bushfires, floods and coastal inundation are already evident with significant economic and social costs for Australian communities (Australian Climate Service 2025). This begs the question as to why, given such strong public concern and risk to the community and economy, successive Australian governments have failed to provide an adequate response to climate change.

While the processes of denial and delay are well known in Australia, obstruction as a distinct political dynamic has yet to be systematically theorised (for an exception, albeit focussed on education, see Deuchar and

McKenzie 2025). In the following sections, we outline the key findings of the literature on climate obstruction, illustrating that much of the discourse in Australia has indeed reflected those global processes. However, given that this discourse has not been without opposition, we turn to the concept of political inertia to help explain the resilience of climate obstruction. In seeking to understand why successive governments in Australia have failed to act on climate change, our paper investigates the ways in which key representative groups in the climate debate have engaged with the issue. Our data consists of interviews with 62 leaders from the environmental movement, political representatives, and the fossil fuel sector. In analysing the narratives they develop about both climate change and other stakeholders, we seek to understand *how the narratives of political, industrial, and environmental actors help explain the persistent failure of climate action in Australia.*

Climate obstruction

Climate obstruction is defined as 'intentional actions and efforts to slow or block policies on climate change that are commensurate with the current scientific consensus of what is necessary to avoid dangerous human-caused interference with the climate system' (Roberts *et al.* 2025, p. 2). The program of climate obstruction has been a global phenomenon, initiated primarily by carbon-intensive industries well before the scientific evidence for climate change was popularised. Dembicki *et al.* (2025) outline three tactics of obstruction: denial, delay and co-optation. Denial refers to attempts to undermine the science, delay primarily the use of economic arguments to prevent the implementation of climate policies, and co-optation the process of inserting industry into policy design to ensure it has limited impact on business. Importantly, these types of obstruction are distinct from distributive, procedural, or local concerns which may also arise as a result of climate policy (Haarstad *et al.* 2025). While obstruction tactics have varied over time and between nation states, each has consistently featured in public and political debates surrounding climate change (Brulle *et al.* 2024).

Globally, obstruction has been spearheaded by the most carbon-intensive industries allying with conservative think-tanks (Roberts *et al.* 2025). At precisely the same time as the formation of the IPCC, car manufacturers and oil companies were central to the creation of the Global Climate Coalition, which set about building disinformation campaigns on science and lobbying US politicians against signing the Kyoto Protocol (Brulle 2023). As awareness of the need for widespread economic reform in response to climate change became apparent, the fossil fuel sector and conservative think-tanks worked to recruit scientists and academics to promote climate scepticism and sew doubt in the minds of the public and policy-makers about

the urgency of climate action (Dunlap and McCright 2015, Moreno *et al.* 2022). These denial efforts were highly effective in the early years of the political debate over climate change.

However, as the evidence for climate change became more difficult to refute, industry organisations shifted to acknowledging the science while also attempting to delay policies aimed at reducing emissions. As Lamb *et al.* (2020) have shown, this strategy of delay took various forms including: attempts to 'deny responsibility' – shifting the blame or arguing that others should act first; 'push for non-transformative solutions' – promote weak or incremental actions; 'emphasize the downsides' – focus on costs, risks, or trade-offs; and 'surrender' to inaction – claim it's too late or too hard to act. These narratives took shape in different forms in different nation states. In economies with a powerful fossil fuel sector, where resistance to action on climate change has been strong, industries pushed for the promise of technologies like carbon capture and storage which would enable their continued use, often leaning on ideas of national identity and fossil fuel dependence as justification for ongoing use (Wright *et al.* 2021, Ekberg *et al.* 2022). While the discourses and typologies of climate obstruction have been extensively documented, they often focus on messaging in isolation, ignoring the specific mechanisms by which obstruction persists despite strong and sustained public concern (Roberts and Brulle 2024). To more fully explore the persistence of climate obstruction, we turn to the concept of inertia as a framework of analysis.

Maintaining obstruction: the role of political inertia

The concept of inertia, originating in the physical sciences, has been used broadly across the social sciences to describe observations whereby individuals and institutions exhibit resistance to change. Fukuyama (2014), for instance, describes inertia as an inherent, indeed biological, trait of human evolution which tends towards authority and order. However, this explanation ignores the active effort required to maintain the political status quo in the face of countervailing forces. This is reflected in the Newtonian concept from which it originated, which 'states that a body travelling in a straight line will continue to do so unless prevented by the effect of an external force . . . rest can come about only through resistance' (Breuer 2008, p. 226). It is useful, then, to recognise inertia as dynamic, involving both active and passive engagements.

Following Becker (1995, p. 301), it is possible to see inertia as a 'connected "package" of practices and relationships' in which agency exists but is contested by those within existing power structures seeking to maintain those structures. It does not discount change, it just makes it more difficult, and costly. Thus, Becker links inertia to the maintenance of hegemony, a process

described by Gramsci (1971) as the creation of a set of common interests – or 'common sense' – around which the possibilities for change are curtailed. Inertia has the potential, then, to explain:

> Why, despite all theoretical efforts to expose the contradictions and insufficiencies of the existing system, and despite a keenly felt need for change in the face of political, financial and economic crises, does the system continue to perpetuate itself? (Zantvoort 2017, p. 708)

Specifically, the concepts of institutional and social inertia have contributed to understanding these processes.

Institutional inertia denotes the characteristic 'stickiness' of institutions, manifest in their persistent resistance to change (Samadi *et al.* 2024). Institutions, as organisations designed to maintain a particular social order, have an inherent inertia. Change is possible, but usually slow. For example, government decisions include 'opportunity cost, political cost and decision cost' (Samadi *et al.* 2024, p. 52) which opens up a number of points of resistance to change. Thus, when institutions experience competing interests or concerns, a common result is a 'stalemate' whereby little action is taken (Munck Af Rosenschöld *et al.* 2014). This can be made worse by incumbency when changes proposed threaten existing power relations, as both path dependency and the accumulation of power constrain both the potential for, and pace of, change (Samadi *et al.* 2024).

In relation to climate change, Brulle and Norgaard (2019, p. 19) elaborate a broader theory of 'social inertia', arguing that the disruption represented by climate change is met with 'social processes that maintain and reproduce social stability'. These tensions are evident on three levels: individual, where the potential to destabilise one's sense of self means that people avoid the issue; institutional, in which the new practices required to manage climate change do not yet have legitimacy and; societal, where a mix of ideological opposition to, and a lack of cohesion on how to act on, climate change prevent a response (Brulle and Norgaard 2019). In what follows, we seek to build on this work by elaborating on the specifically political dynamics at play in social inertia.

Central to this process is the control of definition: 'letting people whose business it is defined what that business includes, which versions of it are serious and important, and which don't matter much' (Becker 1995, p. 307). This process is fundamentally political; with the wielding of power comes the ability to dictate the terms of debates, emphasise particular voices to be heard and to dismiss others. We thus employ the concept of *political inertia* to deepen our understanding of how obstruction to climate action persists despite sustained opposition. To explore these dynamics, we focus on the distinctly political dimensions of climate inertia by analysing the perspectives of influential actors in Australian climate policy debates. Our emphasis is on

the political rather than the social or cultural aspects of climate inertia. This leads us to our central research question: *How do the narratives of political, industrial, and environmental actors help explain the persistent failure of climate action in Australia?*

This analysis contributes to the growing literature on climate obstruction and delay by complementing typologies of obstruction (Lamb *et al*. 2020) with a thematic, actor-centred focus on shared narratives between political, industrial, and environmental actors. While existing typologies have been instrumental in identifying the tactics and strategies used to delay climate action, they often focus on messaging in isolation. By contrast, this study examines how different actor groups frame the problem, assign responsibility and negotiate legitimacy in relation to one another. In doing so, we describe the mechanisms of *division*, *paralysis*, and *displacement* as functioning to create systemic inaction – not solely through obstructionist tactics, but through the cumulative effects of these mechanisms themselves. This approach adds depth to the obstruction literature by showing how the discursive dynamics – across and between actor groups – contribute to the persistence of policy gridlock even in the absence of overt denial. Our contribution is thus both theoretical – in terms of elaborating the shared political processes which result in inertia – and practical – by illustrating the ways in which some actors have been able to mobilise resistance to political inertia and push towards greater climate action.

Methodology

The research presented here is from a large, qualitative study into the politics of low carbon transition in Australia. We adopted a qualitative research method to provide insights into the motivations, interpretations of knowledge and actions of participants regarding the politically controversial issue of climate policy, using interviews to explore unrehearsed insights and unexpected observations (Bercht 2021). Representatives of key organisations involved in the debates about climate change policy were selected through a review of four of the major media outlets in Australia over the period of study (2019–2022). Respondents had a detailed knowledge of climate policy in Australia, as well as a central representative role in political debate. Over the course of the study, we interviewed 79 corporate executives, lobbyists, industry association leaders, political representatives (including two former Prime Ministers), as well as representatives from leading environmental non-government organisations. For the purposes of this paper, interviews with participants who did not clearly fit into either the environmentalist, political, or industry categories were removed, with a total of 62 interviews remaining in the data set (see Table 1).

Table 1. Participants by category and role.

Category and Code	Total	Position	Total
Environmental NGO	18	Community Campaigner/Organiser	6
		Director/CEO	6
		Analyst/Researcher	6
		Director/CEO	7
Fossil Fuel Industry representatives	21	Government Relations/Sustainability Managers	7
		Lobbyists and Industry Group Representatives	7
Political representatives	23	Politician (State/local)	2
		Politician (Federal)	8
		Advisors/Department Staff (State/Local)	5
		Advisors/Department Staff (Federal)	8
		TOTAL	**62**

The interviews were semi-structured to cover a range of topics, including participant's level of engagement with policy making, political views, opinions of other stakeholders, opportunities and barriers to change, attitudes on climate science and the risks of both climate impacts and policy. Most interviews lasted around an hour and were fully transcribed and coded in the qualitative software *QSR NVivo* by two of the paper's authors, with ongoing input from the research team. Analysis was focused on how participants 'actively create meaning' in their interview responses (Silverman 2024). Interviews have been de-identified and, for the purposes of brevity, been allocated a number within their group.

The coding process was iterative, with the first level of coding open, with 84 codes illustrating specific statements which were observed across the data (see Table 2). These initial codes were subsequently organised into sub-themes (23) by identifying conceptual affinities and grouping together codes that shared a common narrative framing. While this gave us some insights into the prominence of issues such as, say, climate delay discourse, we also wanted to understand how each of the groups engaged in policy debate. In order to do this, we used thematic narrative analysis to identify areas of both commonality and difference, which were coded into six key themes identifying how each stakeholder group discussed: climate science and their evaluation of the problem; depictions of others involved in the debate and; reflections of their own involvement in climate politics (see Appendix for illustrative quotes).

Finally, we sought to understand how each theme assisted in answering our research question of how these actors' narratives helped to explain the persistent failure of climate action. Through this process, we identified three distinct but interrelated mechanisms – *division*, *paralysis* and *displacement* – which we elaborate below.

Table 2. Mechanisms of political inertia and thematic coding.

Mechanism	Themes	Subtheme/Coding
Division	Fragmented Problem Framing: Competing narratives from industry, politicians, and environmentalists prevent a shared understanding of the issue	Climate narrative: • economic threat • environmental crisis • energy reliability issue • moral responsibility • exaggerated/alarmist Selective evidence: • Cherry-picking data • Emphasis on uncertainty • Downplaying impacts • Global comparison ("Australia is small") Problem boundary disputes: • Mitigation vs adaptation focus • National vs global responsibility • Short-term vs long-term • Cost vs opportunity Discursive minimisation: • "Not urgent" • Incrementalism • Issue fatigue
	Polarisation & Activist Backlash: Activists are framed as extreme, undermining public support and reinforcing division.	Delegitimisation: • Activists labelled "radical" / "extreme" • Wrong v. right tactics • Personal attacks on activists • Activists are anti-jobs /anti-growth • Protest is spectacle over substance Culture war framing: • Urban vs regional divide • Elite vs "ordinary Australians" • Environmentalism as identity politics Backlash dynamics: • Public resentment • Protest fatigue

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (Continued).

Mechanism	Themes	Subtheme/Coding
Paralysis	Diffused Responsibility: Responsibility is passed between actors (industry, government, public), with no clear leadership.	Blame shifting: • Industry blames consumers • Others failed to act in the past • Public framed as responsible via lifestyle choices Scale shifting • "It's a global problem" deflection • Federal vs state vs local buck-passing Individualisation of responsibility: • Emphasis on recycling/ personal behaviour • Carbon footprint discourse • Moralisation of consumption Leadership vacuum: • Absence of clear policy authority • "Waiting for others to act"
	Political Dysfunction & Strategic Avoidance: Politicians avoid action due to short-termism, blame-shifting, and industry capture	Short-term electoral logic: • Fear of voter backlash • Focus on marginal seats • Policy reversals Industry influence: • Fossil fuel lobbying • Revolving door politics • Subsidies and tax concessions • Energy sector pressure Symbolic politics: • Targets without enforcement • Rebranding existing policies Procedural delay: • Commissioning further reviews • Legislative stalling • Deferral to technology breakthroughs

(*Continued*)

Table 2. (Continued).

Mechanism	Themes	Subtheme/Coding
Displacement	Economic Framing Dominates: Reliance on markets and technology (business as usual).	Market optimism: • Carbon markets as central solution • "Let the market decide" • Private investment emphasis • Deregulation narratives Techno-solutionism: • Hydrogen as future saviour • Carbon capture and storage reliance • Innovation/future breakthrough will solve it framing Cost emphasis: • Economic cost of transition • Job loss framing • Competitiveness concerns • Energy price anxiety Growth compatibility: • "Net zero without sacrifice" • Green growth discourse • Business as usual with offsets • Framing transition as purely economic opportunity
	Policy Overwhelm & Retreat: Climate action is dismissed and discussion is sidelined	Issue fatigue: • Climate as politically toxic • Voter exhaustion Competing crises displacement: • Cost-of-living • National security • Pandemic recovery Downscaling ambition: • Weakening targets • Delayed timelines • Reduction in regulatory scope Silencing & avoidance: • Avoidance • Exclusion from party platforms • Lack of legislative ambition

CONTEXT: Australia

Australia is an ideal setting in which to explore the resilience of climate obstruction. As a colonial settler economy, Australia has been shaped since its formation by the extraction and use of fossil fuels. From the 1980s, a series of resource booms led to the dramatic growth in the mining sector. This reliance on coal, and to a lesser extent gas and oil, as sources of energy and export earnings have resulted in a deeply entwined corporate-state nexus of multinational resource companies, industry associations and political parties (Baer 2016). Reflecting on this, over the last 30 years, Australian politics has been marked by an increasingly heated policy debate over climate change.

For instance, political rejection of climate action was highlighted during the 1990s and 2000s under the leadership of conservative Prime Minister John Howard, with the country spending nearly a decade resisting ratification of the first international agreement to reduce emissions, the Kyoto Protocol (Rosewarne 2003). Indeed, it was not until the election of Labor Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, in 2007 that Australia ratified the Kyoto Agreement. However, policy reform has remained elusive. In subsequent years, policies for carbon emissions pricing and mitigation faced heated opposition, resulting in the demise of political leaders and the return of conservative governments during the period 2013–2022 which promoted the expansion of fossil fuel extraction and resisted carbon regulation (Crowley 2021). Despite a change of government in 2022 with the election of Labor Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and a swathe of independents who support climate action, the new government continued to support the expansion of the fossil fuel sector, with 116 new coal, oil and gas projects planned (Dennis 2023). While most of this coal and gas is planned for export, the fossil fuels from these projects when burned will contribute over three times Australia's annual domestic carbon emissions. In 2022, Australia was the second largest global exporter of coal and LNG (Energy Institute 2023); and while domestic emissions targets have become more ambitious, they are heavily dependent on questionable offsets (Armistead *et al.* 2023).

Findings

Through our thematic analysis of the interview data, three distinct but interrelated mechanisms of climate inertia became evident: what we have termed *division*, *paralysis* and *displacement*. We argue that while participants at times had different roles in the processes, when understood together, the mechanisms illustrate the active and passive maintenance of political inertia on climate change in Australia.

Division

Division refers to the ways in which competing climate narratives fracture collective understanding. Conflicting framings from industry, politicians, and environmental groups create a fragmented problem definition, while portrayals of activists as extreme intensify polarisation and reinforce social and political divisions. Not only is climate change understood differently but the ideas about how to respond were varied, with environmental activists in particular a target of critique. The fragmentation in how each stakeholder group conceptualised the problem contributed to divisions in the climate debate from the outset. While environmentalists argued that the problem was both existential and urgent, '*the reef is dying, the kelp forests are dying and there are forest fires and people are losing so much' [Environmental NGO #6, Community Organiser, 2019]* sceptical framings of the problem were more prominent among industry and political representatives, commonly involving interpretations which minimised the potential impacts of climate disruption and the contribution Australia could make in decarbonising: *'The discussion we should be having is how can we make the technology better? How can we burn it more efficiently? How can we reduce the emissions in what is almost 90% of the New South Wales grid, massively growing in the fastest growing economies of the world, we'll probably pop up in India next!' [Fossil Fuel Industry #5, Lobbyist, 2019]*. In this way, participants from industry and politics framed the problem as, at the very least, manageable, while the concerns of environmentalists are seen to be at an 'extreme' end of concern.

A further means of creating division over problem definition has been to suggest that environmentalists are at best naïve or, at worst, dangerous. Comments about why protesting was problematic were prominent in interviews with both industry and political representatives:

> You're lying in the middle of the road, how dangerous is that? I'm just trying to get to work! . . . We have had some pretty frightening stuff with well-meaning activists camped in train corridors and in a couple of cases, calling in where they were and getting it wrong. [Fossil Fuel Industry #10, Industry Group, 2019]

In addition, environmentalists are depicted as hypocritical:

> I think it's easy for them to attack something that most people don't have any experience with. It's going to be really hard to change things like how they use their cars, how people use their food. Look at the outcry when they stopped providing plastic bags in supermarkets. [Fossil Fuel Industry #2, Director, 2019]

For this industry representative, environmentalists are presented as not only failing to understand that their tactics are polarising community support but

they lack understanding and concern for 'everyday' people and those who work in mining communities: '*They just heard, "you've got a job I don't care. I don't care about you or your job". Then that furphy* [slang for false claim] *of, "oh don't worry we'll close down the industry and you'll have these high paying renewable jobs". They don't exist. These people are not fools.' [Fossil Fuel Industry #11, Lobbyist, 2019].*

For their own part, environmentalists also had competing ideas about how they should engage with the issues around climate change:

> There was a grassroots movement that was pretty absolute in its adherence to the physics of climate change … Then there was a cluster of mainstream environment groups [who] appeared with the government in a press conference. That stung for a lot of the more high-ambition or grassroots groups who had been putting a lot of energy into the activism about it and then felt all of that had been spent by the big groups, so to speak, without a feedback mechanism of negotiation. [Environmental NGO #6, Community Organiser, 2019]

While the environmentalists attempted to grapple with their differences, politicians chose winners and losers according to their acquiescence.

Regardless, industry and political leaders regularly depicted environmentalists as ill-equipped to respond to climate change. At best, they lacked an understanding of people's everyday priorities, and their actions were presented as counterproductive. At worst, they were viewed as corrupting young people in an attempt to 'bring about revolution', an option which was seen as naive and irrational. Thus, division in climate politics is sustained through two interrelated themes: the proliferation of competing narratives among industry, political, and environmental actors, which impedes consensus on the nature of the problem; and the strategic framing of activists as extreme, which undermines their legitimacy and weakens environmental arguments for climate action.

Paralysis

The mechanism of paralysis arises as responsibility is continually deflected between actors, while political short-termism and strategic avoidance – shaped partly by industry influence – block decisive climate action. Here, industry and political representatives present similar narratives: that Australia is a small contributor to the problem in comparison to others and that individual consumption is just as important when it comes to taking action, diffusing the responsibility of those in power. In one colourful discussion, a former Federal Minister commented that:

> I suppose the most significant thing we could do is to encourage people no longer to have children, because with a smaller population we wouldn't have the same impact . . . One way in which you reduce the population of the world significantly was to have world wars. We just kill them off. [Interviewer: I don't know if that was a deliberate policy objective?] I don't think they really thought about it as a population policy [laughs], but part of what we are seeing is a response to an increased world population that expects to live at a certain standard of living. [Political Representative #3, Federal Politician, 2019]

For this participant, then, it is the individual's expectations of standards of living that is the central problem.

Common concerns from both industry and political participants then become a tendency to argue that Australia *'shouldn't lead but it shouldn't follow' [Political Representative #3, Federal Politician, 2019]*. This indifference extended to arguments that *'if we weren't supplying coal to some markets they would get it from others' [Political Representative #3, Federal Politician, 2019]* and that *'even if we did get to net zero by 2035, it would make very little difference to climate change until the big emitters are really brought to task' [Political Representative #13, Federal Govt. Advisor, 2021]*. In contrast to environmentalists – who clearly identified industry and government as the primary means through which action should occur – those in positions of power argued that responsibility was diffuse.

When it came to discussing government policies, nearly all participants agreed that political dysfunction and strategic avoidance had been prominent, with politicians avoiding action due to short-termism, blame-shifting, and industry capture. Here, political representatives themselves pointed to the various limitations within the system and, less surprisingly, the role of specific leaders, in preventing action. The different layers of government were seen to be a means of shifting responsibility:

> it's a bit like - call it the hokey pokey. So as the Federal Government have been active, the states have backed off and then as the feds have fallen away the states have stepped in to fill the void [Political Representative #10, State Govt. Department Director, 2021]

In addition, the legacy of previous actions of government were much maligned:

> The most wild accusations [were made] about the damage that would be done if we had a price on carbon. It was all bullshit. It has now been admitted by his [former Prime Minister Scott Morrison] ex-chief of staff that this was just a game, scoring points. . . . It was nonsense of Morrison to say the things he said in the campaign . . . their motivation is to score points on the other side. I mean Morrison said the other day, 'my whole motivation every parliamentary session is to wedge the other side'. [Political Representative #4, Federal Politician, 2019]

Another political representative, who was a former advisor to the Prime Minister, commented that the debates on the Minerals Resources Rent Tax (whereby the government sought to increase taxes on mining companies) *'showed industry that oh, well, no we don't have to consider [a price on carbon] inevitable at all. We're actually powerful enough to destroy Prime Ministers so we certainly won't cop a carbon price' [Political Representative #6, Federal Advisor, 2020]*. Another described the process at the time:

> you remember that you know it was the greatest moral challenge of our time and all of that kind of stuff, but then suddenly it became about how do we accommodate the industry who were freaking out about the potential cost impact of a price on carbon. Obviously, coal miners and others were freaking out; BHPs and Rios and so on. [Political Representative #7, Federal Advisor, 2020]

Industry representatives were less forthright in their discussion of the same issue, arguing that *'carbon taxes are just not on . . . politically it just seems untenable. It seems to have killed a couple of prime ministers and all that along the way.' [Fossil Fuel Industry #11, Lobbyist, 2019]*.

Environmentalists expressed frustration at the lack of accountability in tracing the links between industry and government: *'you can never really uncover the behind closed doors stuff. We don't really have great transparency in our democracy, so we don't really know how often they [industry representatives] meet politicians and what they talk about' [Environmental NGO #1, Director, 2019]*. Environmentalists held strongly to the view that both sides of politics were captured by industry and were unwilling to address the role of Australian coal exports in fuelling climate change:

> Even with the ALP [Australian Labor Party] and the CFMEU [Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union], if you look at those two beasts as a linked beast, they talk transition, but then you're stunned to realise that they're only talking about transition about our own local energy - they're not talking about the 90 per cent of coal from this valley that goes to exports. [Environmental NGO #3, Community Organiser, 2019]

Indeed, one environmentalist argued that '*The Labor Party is structurally incapable of dealing with the coal mining industry.' [Environmental NGO #6, Community Organiser, 2019]*.

Paralysis in climate politics, then, is perpetuated by the diffusion of responsibility and strategic inaction. By centring the individual choices and emphasizing Australia's relatively small contribution to global emissions, responsibility for climate action was diffused across the broader population, thereby obscuring the need for systemic leadership and structural change. At the same time, political actors often evaded meaningful action through mechanisms of blame-shifting – redirecting accountability to other sectors or levels of governance – and were constrained by industry influence, as

entrenched relationships between policymakers and fossil fuel interests limited the scope of potential reform. Together, these dynamics contributed to a state of paralysis, in which climate action was further constrained despite the urgency of the crisis.

Displacement

The third mechanism, displacement, describes how economic logics and technological optimism shift attention away from substantive climate action, sustaining business-as-usual approaches. Alongside this, policy complexity and fatigue contributed to the retreat, with climate issues downplayed or removed from the agenda. In a debate riddled with division over even the most basic understanding of the issue of climate science, economic framing dominated and subsumed the discussion. As one political representative argued: '*this is a significant economy. It's built on coal – so what can I say?' [Political Representative #1, Federal Advisor, 2019]*. A former state premier illustrated the impact of this:

> I think one lesson is avoiding using transition when it comes to the coal communities. They don't like it. They'd rather have good secure well-paid jobs for the next 10 years than to be forced into something half time, part-time now. So, they don't like talk of transition. We've got to find a different language to use to talk about economic diversification, for example, in those coal communities. [Political Representative #8, Federal Politician, 2019]

Avoiding discussion of climate change was also a theme from environmentalists, who reframed climate change to be more about issues they thought communities would care more about. To that end, some emphasised concerns about land, generalised 'pollution', or water – or, solutions, such as support for renewable energy – rather than focusing on climate change or coal. As the CEO of one prominent climate campaigning organisation noted:

> What we were trying to do is stop a major expansion and it got talked about as though we were trying to shut down the industry. That wasn't the aim of it at all. But for the first four years of doing that we didn't really talk about coal. We were talking about protecting the reef. We were talking about protecting groundwater. Talking about protecting farmland. Talking about lots of other things. [Environmental NGO #2, CEO, CEO, 2020]

As another explained, this was an easier way of manoeuvring the conversation into a direction of more immediate community concern:

> We're not a climate change organisation; we don't have climate change as our core purpose. Obviously, there is a climate change element and angle on gas and coal mining but when we're making Facebook posts about climate change, which we don't normally do, there'll be a huge number of our supporters saying, 'what are you talking about? This is not - this is a conspiracy. This is not

> real; this` is a myth.' . . . we haven't been trying to shift people towards concern about climate change. We've been trying to shift them towards concern about the need for structural adjustment in the Hunter mining industry. [Environmental NGO #6, Community Organiser, 2019]

While the positive engagement in choosing to focus on other environmental demands was used to bring people into campaigns, it was also about avoiding any conflict which might arise from discussing climate change, as another environmentalist explained: '*Sometimes they say "I'm not sure about climate change" or "we should just go underground and continue coal mining". In fact, down in the southern water catchments, I had a very good ally down there who was great on the subsidence damage and just no interest in climate change whatsoever' [Environmental NGO #3, Community Organiser, 2019]*. Although the exclusion of climate change from certain conversations may have served as a strategic tool to broaden engagement, it also led to the avoidance of concrete demands related to climate action.

This displacement of climate change as a central concern diluted its political urgency, allowing industry representatives to argue that technological development and efficiency measures would be adequate responses. Indeed, business as usual practices were depicted as already leading to improvements, according to the chief executive of one company:

> Big heavy industries like ours have always worked to minimize our greenhouse gas emissions before we knew they were greenhouse gas emissions or that was the right thing to do . . . . relentless optimization of the business to reduce emissions is actually just part of that DNA in terms of continuous improvement . . . I've been working in heavy industry for over 30 years, and every project I've ever done has had, in retrospect, agreed, a positive greenhouse impact, [Fossil Fuel Industry #4, Sustainability Manager, 2022]

Another argued that technology is 'the only way' to deal with the issue: '*One thing I do think that we should be investing in is new technologies because the only way I can see out of that is a technology solution.' [Fossil Fuel Industry #9, Government Relations, 2019].*

In a similar vein, a prominent shift in the debate which occurred over the time of the study was the growth of methane gas as an export industry, which was specifically framed as a substitute for renewable energy:

> You can't have 100 per cent renewables unless you've got vast amounts of storage, so that at night time or when the wind's not blowing you still have enough power in reserve to keep the system going. . . . So gas is a power-firming service that has a relatively lower carbon footprint than oil, coal; is probably more sustainable than nuclear [Fossil Fuel Industry #8, Manager, 2019]

Thus, industry presented itself as already implementing solutions to climate change which could be addressed through its usual practices. As one CEO argued:

> The politics is now starting to become less relevant because the cost curve, the technology itself is, and industry's desire to do the right thing . . . has leap-frogged the sense of the role of government in all of this. They missed the bus. Their time's passed. [Fossil Fuel Industry #1, CEO, 2019]

This narrative positioned industry as not only a responsible actor but the primary driver of a climate response, effectively marginalizing the role of government and reframing climate action as a matter of technological and market progress rather than political will. Displacement thus operates as a mechanism through which climate change is sidelined in political and policy discourse. When climate action is framed primarily in economic terms – focused on costs, jobs, and market competitiveness – the ecological urgency of the crisis is diminished. This is compounded by the lack of structural planning, where reliance on market forces and technological innovation substitutes for coordinated industry and transition planning. Together, these dynamics shift attention away from the systemic nature of the problem, displacing climate change as a central concern in decision-making.

Discussion

In exploring the varied positioning of key representative groups in public climate discourse and their framing of both the problems and solutions for climate change, we have outlined three mechanisms which contribute to the inertia on climate policy in Australia; *division*, *paralysis* and *displacement*. These emerge from and are sustained by the intersecting narratives of political, industrial, and environmental actors. Importantly, these three mechanisms do not operate in isolation. Rather, they form a mutually reinforcing web of inertia: division – driven by competing narratives and the strategic delegitimisation of environmentalists undermine solidarity; paralysis – sustained by blame-shifting, industry capture and the diffusion of responsibility – prevents systemic action; and displacement – through economic framing and technological optimism – marginalises climate urgency, further entrenching division and reinforcing business-as-usual.

Given the prominence of climate obstruction, *division* is expected; indeed, it is a legacy of the debate since the realisation that meaningfully responding to climate change requires dramatic decarbonisation and the end of fossil energy. As a proxy for action on climate, environmentalists are deliberately represented as out of touch, hypocritical and at times outright dangerous by

both industry and politicians (Colvin 2020). Division, then, serves to weaken the collective power required for an adequate response to the issue.

The diffusion of responsibility in the *paralysis* of the political process serves to further delay action. This shifting of responsibility, coupled with the capture of the major political parties, results in a form of paralysis, where even well-intentioned political actors argue they are constrained by the need to appease powerful incumbents. While paralysis is reflective of institutional inertia (Gardiner 2009), we emphasize the active process of denying responsibility; politicians and industry in particular assert their own helplessness. Paralysis thus works in concert with division; there is no agreement on what can be done nor is there agreement on who should do it.

A familiar solution to this impasse is *displacement* of the issue of climate change. Politicians implement incremental policies, continue to approve fossil fuel projects, and industry emphasises the promises of efficiency and technological innovation. For their part, environmentalists engage a strategic silence; attempting to garner community support for positive changes for the economy or environment more generally, but being careful not to mention 'climate change' to the wrong people. This paralysis is not passive – it reflects a tactical engagement with a hostile discursive environment, one that paradoxically reinforces inertia by limiting the scope of contestation. As Antadze (2018) has noted, the cumulative outcome is a politics of apathy, as the priority of climate change is removed from the frame.

Across these dynamics, we see how climate inertia is not the absence of action, but the result of sustained discursive engagement – where actors actively shape the boundaries of debate, reinforce divisions, and maintain the illusion of progress while resisting structural transformation. Together, they help explain why Australia's climate response remains stalled, despite growing public concern and mounting evidence of climate impacts.

Conclusion

Our analysis adds depth to existing typologies of climate obstruction by tracing how discursive practices sustain political inertia. We show how obstructionist tactics have evolved into persistent gridlock, maintained through narratives that obscure problem definition, diffuse responsibility, and reinforce business-as-usual. Our approach highlights how discursive interactions – within and across actor groups – perpetuate policy stagnation, even in the absence of overt denial.

While inertia dominates, our findings also reveal openings – through emerging alliances and reframing efforts – that challenge the status quo and offer pathways toward more transformative climate action. Importantly, unlike the cultural trauma experienced by individual citizens

(Brulle and Norgaard 2019), the actors in our study hold institutional power and agency. Their narratives do not merely reflect inertia – they actively produce and sustain it. Thus, there is an element here of agency, suggesting at least a theoretical possibility for change. There are for instance, newer participants in the business sector – in finance and technology – which are seeking to disrupt such inertia (McLean 2020). Moreover, as we have observed, environmentalists are forming new alliances in order to delay new fossil fuel development and build community action for energy transitions. In this, there may be hope that as they continue to work in building 'unusual coalitions' that, over time, trust between environmentalists and the community might allow for more difficult conversations (Colvin *et al.* 2025).

While the International Energy Agency has pointed out that 'every data point showing the speed of change in energy can be countered by another showing the stubbornness of the status quo' (International Energy Agency 2021), our hope is that by understanding the connections between obstructionist rhetoric and the political inertia, there is potential to find the space for discourse which encourages action. Further research in identifying the stories, relationships and messages that cut through the apathy we now observe is urgently needed. The challenge is to find them in time to implement the radical cuts in carbon emissions needed to avoid dangerous climate change.

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ORCID

Vanessa Bowden http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6642-2826

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