

‘We’re in the coal business’: Maintaining fossil fuel hegemony in the face of climate change

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Abstract

Despite the worsening climate crisis and market shifts towards decarbonization, Australia remains heavily invested in carbon-intensive activities. As one of the world's largest exporters of coal and gas, Australian political economy has been dominated over the last several decades by fossil fuel expansionism. In this article, we explore how Australian corporate and political elites have defended the continuation of fossil fuel extraction and use in the face of calls for a transition to a low-carbon energy future. Through an analysis of public statements by industry associations, corporate leaders, politicians and trade union officials, we identify how these actors have constructed a hegemonic temporal narrative stressing the historical importance of fossil fuels and that a transition to renewable energy represents a threat to Australia's future. Our analysis contributes to the growing literature within the field of industrial relations attending to the complex industrial dynamics underlying the maintenance of fossil fuel hegemony. We also contribute to recent discussions on hegemony by demonstrating the importance of temporality in linking diverse actors together in defending hegemony. Finally, we highlight the critical importance of corporate power in fundamentally shaping climate and energy politics.

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Introduction

Climate change now poses a significant threat to the future of humanity and much of life on the planet. Despite decades of political debate, meaningful action in terms of a dramatic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions has remained illusory (Spash, 2016). As the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Assessment Report details, the planet is now experiencing warming unseen in 125,000 years and atmospheric carbon levels at their highest level in over 2 million years (IPCC, 2021). As the world experiences a procession of unprecedented heatwaves, droughts, fires and storms, future projected warming of 2, 3 or even 4°C presents an apocalyptic future likely incompatible with continued organized human civilization (New et al., 2011). As UN Secretary-General António Guterres grimly declared, we have now reached a ‘code red for humanity’ (Harvey, 2021)

However, carbon emissions continue to increase and the fossil fuel sector continues to plan for expanded production. This is what is referred to as predatory delay (Steffen, 2016): recognition of the urgency of climate change and that something needs to be done, just not yet. In countries traditionally reliant on coal, oil and gas extraction, political and corporate leaders employ a range of discourses to defend fossil fuel expansion in the face of worsening climate impacts. In using the term ‘discourse’, we refer to the articulatory practices that constitute social relations and formations (Howarth, 2013). It is through discourse that the social meaning of fossil fuels is constructed by linking together contingent elements or demands into a relational system. Australia provides a good example of how the fossil fuel sector and government have for decades articulated the importance of national economic growth based upon fossil energy over and above any environmental concerns (Brett, 2020; Nyberg et al., 2013).

In this article, we employ a neo-Gramscian theory of hegemony to explore how corporate and political elites in Australia have responded to calls for decarbonization. Through an analysis of public statements by key industry associations and politicians, we identify how these actors have constructed a dominant temporal narrative about the historical importance of fossil fuels. Any move away from fossil fuels is articulated as endangering the livelihoods of workers and communities as well as the national economy. Our analysis demonstrates how fossil fuel hegemony in Australian political economy is maintained through the coordination of messaging and policy between peak fossil fuel industry associations, major resource corporations and key political parties. These actors justify the delay in phasing out coal and gas by articulating the centrality of fossil fuels for Australia’s national interest as common sense.

This analysis makes several contributions. First, we build on the emerging industrial relations literature on climate change by demonstrating the central role of corporations

and political elites in shaping this area of policy debate. While industrial relations scholars have identified the role of trade unions and employer associations in the climate policy space (Goods, 2013, 2017; Thomas and Doerflinger, 2020), there has been a noticeable lack of engagement in this literature on the dominant role of corporations and their industry associations in shaping the political discourse of climate change (for a recent exception see Goods, 2021). Second, our neo-Gramscian engagement contributes to recent debates on the possible transition away from fossil energy by explaining the importance of temporal constructions of hegemony (Ferns and Amaeshi, 2021). It is, we argue, the temporal construct that holds the political narrative together amongst diverse and fractured elite actors – a fossil fuel past projected into the future. (Nyberg et al., 2020). Finally, our paper explains how, in the face of dramatic market and technological changes, this temporal narrative protects the industry from broader calls for a transition away from fossil fuels. It is only by better understanding the discursive construction and maintenance of fossil fuel hegemony that a counter-hegemony against fossil fuels can be successful.

Capitalism and fossil fuel hegemony

The evolution and development of the global capitalist economy have been fundamentally based upon the extraction and use of fossil fuels (Foster et al., 2010; Klein, 2014). Beginning in the Industrial Revolution in England in the late 18th century (Malm, 2016), the use of coal, oil and gas as major sources of energy not only enabled the rapid industrialization of the western world but the expansion of capitalism as a global economic system (Mitchell, 2013; Wright and Nyberg, 2015). Fossil fuels provide over 80% of the world's total primary energy supply and underpin the global financial system, not only as the most heavily capitalized sector but also a dominant source of finance and investment for the world's banks, insurance companies and pension funds (RAN, 2020). The global market economy is thus a 'petro-market civilization' fundamentally defined by fossil fuels (DiMuzio, 2012). Indeed, the pervasive impact of fossil fuels across global energy production, resource extraction, manufacturing, transport, agriculture and food production has meant that within political debate, it is difficult to imagine how current societies could be organized differently. Fossil energy thus provides a 'hegemonic' or 'common sense' (Gramsci, 1971) understanding of economic development that has until recent years been envisaged as beyond question.

However, the growing political recognition of climate change as an existential threat to the future of human society fundamentally challenges the dominance of fossil energy. A burgeoning social movement of climate mobilization, worsening physical climate impacts and the dramatic decline in the cost of renewable energy has signalled growing contestation of the traditional energy model (Newell, 2020). In particular, over the last year, the world has witnessed an increasing number of regional and national governments, as well as many of the world's largest and most powerful corporations, including large fossil fuel corporations such as BP and Shell, publicly committing to a future of net zero carbon emissions. At last, the world appears to be pivoting away from the prevailing 'fossil fuels forever' imaginary (Levy and Spicer, 2013).

To understand the continued reliance on fossil fuels and the limited transition towards decarbonization in Australia, we engage with the concept of hegemony. Advanced in Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* (1971), hegemony refers to the ways in which public justification and support for a political order are maintained by active and passive consent. By focusing on how the dominant regime manufactures consent in civil society, Gramsci (1971) explains the institution and reproduction of social order. Rather than violence or coherence, it is by constructing agreement between divergent social groups that hegemony is upheld. Gramsci refers to this as a 'war of position' through which political allegiances are formed and interests reshaped to concur with the dominant social order. As such, hegemony is an ongoing process of forging a common 'conception of the world' within society (Gramsci, 1971: 323).

Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 96 and 105) developed the contingent aspects of the war of position by suggesting that hegemony occurs through a process of articulatory practice involving the development of 'chains of equivalence' that forge common identities or interests amongst what are often disparate social groups. This equivalence is temporally held together by actively opposing or repressing competing demands and interests. The emphasis on difference highlights the political frontier between opposing social forces. The contingent aspect of hegemony suggests that the hegemonic projects are only temporally fixed, with actors and groups connected via different political projects. Their multiple and even contradictory interests are accommodated within hegemonic projects open for transformation (Howarth, 2015).

While earlier conceptions of hegemony focused on the role of the state and civil society (Gramsci, 1971; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985), more recent applications have emphasized corporations and business interests in the construction of dominant political ideologies (Levy and Egan, 2003; Nyberg et al., 2013). For instance, in terms of fossil fuel hegemony, researchers have documented how major fossil fuel companies, their industry associations and various right-wing think tanks and media organizations have over the last 30 years combined resources to develop political campaigns of climate change denial, which constructed uncertainty and derailed regulatory moves for emissions reduction in countries such as the United States and Australia (Levy and Egan, 2003; Nyberg et al., 2013; Oreskes and Conway, 2010). Beyond the explicit denial of climate change, the defence of fossil fuel hegemony has often relied upon the assertion that there is no real alternative (Paterson, 2021); that opposing forces are naïve or unrealistic. In these articulatory practices, fossil energy is constructed as fundamental to economic growth and affluence, despite the obvious scientific discourse that fossil fuels are the dominant producer of greenhouse gas emissions which now endanger organized human civilization (New et al., 2011). There is thus a discursive representation of the continuation of fossil energy (much like capitalism itself) as 'common sense' – inevitable and innate to human flourishing and beyond question.

Moreover, as Mildenberger (2020: 58) has noted, political action to regulate carbon emissions and decarbonize economies faces the dilemma of the 'double representation of carbon polluters', which spans the traditional assumption of the division of class interests. This dilemma has directed the vast majority of research within industrial relations towards union engagement with climate change (Goods, 2017). This research shows unions' varying political positions and how they have to negotiate different interests

and demands (Snell and Fairbrother, 2010). While the interests of both capital and labour are fractured, the defence of fossil energy often extends across political party lines to include politicians and trade unions representing workers and communities aligned with fossil fuel extraction and use (Goods, 2013). Thus, it is evident that the fossil fuel industry has constructed a broad coalition of actors in support of the current social order blocking demands for decarbonization.

The analysis of fossil fuel hegemony has foremost mapped the powerful actors and their articulatory practices in establishing hegemony (Ferns and Amaeshi, 2021; Nyberg et al., 2013). While utilizing a neo-Gramscian discursive approach, this is still foremost a spatial consideration of established interests and actors constructing hegemonic coalitions across society (Nyberg et al., 2018). The hegemonic project is based on synchronizing identities and interests across different actors by constructing and expanding the equivalence of social demands against a different Other (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Temporality is foremost employed to theorize change, that is, the openness to include alternative and new linkages within the hegemony. While ever there are split interests and identities, there is always the possibility for a counter-hegemonic project to include new actors and groups within the chain of equivalence to move the political frontier. New meanings become dominant and what is seen as 'common sense' shifts.

However, the possibility for change and the articulation of different politics are always conditioned by past articulations of 'reality' (Mazzolini, 2020). Indeed, the discursive construction of hegemony involves a temporal narrative in which the current order is interpreted as a dominant past, a natural present and a desired future. For example, the reproduction of Australia's colonial past is intimately interwoven with present discourses around the common good of fossil fuels as well as future projections of the benefits of fossil energy (Baer, 2016). The construction of hegemony thus involves co-implicated, but analytically separable, spatial and temporal dimensions. In constructing and reproducing a 'historic bloc' of different interests, this hegemony can be strengthened through the articulation of a narrative which speaks to the past, the present and the future (Nyberg et al., 2020).

Following on from this co-implication of spatial and temporal dimensions in understanding hegemonic projects, we are interested in the question of *how fossil fuel hegemony is defended and maintained in circumstances of counter-hegemonic challenges, and the articulatory practices that underpin such a defence*. In exploring these questions, we draw on the public statements of industry associations representing the coal and gas industries, senior executives from major fossil fuel corporations, senior politicians at both state and federal levels and union officials. The analysis aims to identify the key articulatory practices and linkages that are made in defending fossil fuel hegemony against the threat of climate action.

Research context and method

The context for this study is the political economy of Australian climate and energy policy, which since the 1990s has become a source of increasingly heated and partisan political debate (Hamilton, 2007; Hudson, 2019). The Australian fossil fuel sector has

been a central participant in this political controversy through public statements, media releases and public relations campaigns aimed at limiting carbon emissions regulation and promoting coal mining, gas extraction and coal-fired power generation (Nyberg et al., 2013). These instances of public campaigning build on other covert forms of political activity such as industry association lobbying, political donations and revolving door appointments between industry, the bureaucracy and politicians (Pearse et al., 2013; Wilkinson, 2020). In this paper, we focus on the public statements of industry associations and aligned politicians that defend the continuation of fossil fuel extraction and reject calls for a transition towards renewable energy.

To analyse the public discourses underpinning the defence of fossil fuel hegemony, we conducted a qualitative analysis of media coverage of the coal and gas industry and its responses to climate change policy during the period 2008–2020. This time period provides a long-term view of the various policy directions on climate change in Australia, following the election of the Labor government at the end of 2007, with the promise to prioritize climate change, until the recent announcement from the conservative government advocating for a gas-led recovery from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collected included media articles from the country's major print media outlets (*The Australian*, *Australian Financial Review*, *Sydney Morning Herald/The Age*, *Courier Mail*) and online media (*ABC News*, *Crikey*, *The Guardian*, *RenewEconomy*) which quoted public statements by resource sector industry associations, fossil fuel executives and federal and state politicians. This collection consisted of over 300 media articles, which were then supplemented with additional media releases and statements from prominent coal and gas companies as well as the major industry associations including the Minerals Council of Australia, NSW Minerals Council, Australian Coal Association (ACA), Business Council of Australia and the Australian Petroleum Production & Exploration Association (APPEA).

The combined document data was imported and coded using the qualitative data analysis software *QSR NVivo*. This process of analysis focussed on the ways in which industry associations, corporate executives, politicians and some trade union leaders enlisted a range of discourses in defence of fossil fuels. This initial coding showed a broad spatial coalition of actors articulating responses to counter-hegemonic demands for decarbonization and stronger climate action. The following step in the analysis involved axial coding across the actors in terms of how they constructed temporal aspects of maintaining or even expanding fossil fuel extraction and consumption. That is, if not now, how and when did they see decarbonization occurring? Through this axial coding, we identified three key discourses that provided a temporal narrative of justification: 'collective well-being', 'the threat of decarbonisation' and 'a fossil fuelled future'. In the sections that follow we outline these three temporal discourses and how they have been expressed by corporate and political elites.

Fossil fuels and collective well-being

One of the key discourses the fossil fuel industry has promoted in its public statements has been to stress its historical role in the development of Australia as a nation and in

the creation of economic prosperity. Indeed, the dominant history of Australia has been presented as fundamentally shaped by fossil energy and coal in particular. From the late 18th century explorer Matthew Flinders' maps identifying coal seams along the Illawarra coastline (McDonald, 1975), to the 20th-century development of steel and electricity production in Newcastle and the NSW Central Coast, coal has been promoted as a core feature of Australian industrialization and economic development (Hughes, 1964). Australia is now one of the world's largest exporters of coal and gas (Mazengarb, 2019), and the fossil fuel industry has been vocal in emphasizing its role at the centre of Australian economic development and national identity. For instance, as the CEO of coal giant Peabody Energy declared at the launch of a study promoting the continued expansion of the Australian coal industry: 'Coal has transformed society over hundreds of years by fuelling industrial revolutions and digital economies. It's the pride of Australia's past, and the pride of its future' (University of Queensland, 2009). These types of articulations linked the industry to the development of Australia's collective well-being and the foundation of the modern state. A broad equivalence was constructed to include elements of nationalism and Australians' interest in economic progress.

Here, the industry has sought to bring together a range of discourses on how coal (and more recently gas) extraction underpins the collective welfare of Australia. This has included arguments about the role of coal-fired power in providing cheap and reliable electricity, the economic contribution of export earnings and mining royalties, as well as employment and job creation. For instance, many of the industry's public statements have for years stressed the way in which fossil fuel extraction is one of the nation's highest export earners and contributes to the collective good through mining royalties and tax revenue which contribute to the provision of essential government services. A clear expression of this argument is seen in the MCA's 2019 announcement of a commissioned report in which they stressed how: 'A new record of massive company tax and royalty payments by the Australian minerals sector has funded roads, teachers, nurses, police and other essential services and infrastructure for our communities and families' (Constable, 2019).

Despite being highly capital intensive, coal mining has also been presented as a major source of employment, emphasizing its role in regional development and as a key part of many communities. The fossil fuel industry's articulation of its importance to jobs and communities has been particularly evident in the last decade during the protracted and partisan political battle over the proposed Adani Carmichael coal mine. Viewed by opponents as the first of a series of proposed new 'mega' open-cut thermal coal mines in Queensland's Galilee Basin, the Adani mine has been the focus of sustained political and environmental opposition. However, in justifying the mine, Adani Australia's CEO, Lucas Dow, reiterated the claim that the Adani Carmichael Project 'will create thousands of jobs and contribute to the royalty stream that builds hospitals and infrastructure and finances police officers, doctors and nurses in Queensland' (Queensland Parliament, 2019: 17). This messaging was taken up by the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) in the lead-up to the 2019 Federal Election, with the union demanding that Labor Party candidates pledge their support for the industry, tying the capacities of the state to continued coal mining production (McCauley, 2019).

This focus on local communities, job creation and regional development has been reinforced through the industry's community programmes. Examples have included advertising campaigns showcasing local conservation and sustainability programmes, profiles of mine workers and their family lives, sponsorship of local sporting teams and schools and hospitals, Indigenous employment programmes and 'education' programmes promoting the benefits of fossil fuel energy (Gocher, 2019). As critics have noted, these practices act as a form of 'inoculation PR' aimed at defusing more negative perceptions of the industry and winning over the hearts and minds of local communities and the general public to the worthiness of fossil fuel extraction (McKnight and Hobbs, 2017: 122).

Thus, much of the fossil fuel industry's public statements have sought to stress its overall benefit to local communities and the broader nation through its economic contribution, building equivalence between diverse interests within a common good. As epitomized in a 2015 television advertisement by the MCA, coal was presented as a resource that benefited everyone:

'This can provide endless possibilities. It can create light and jobs. Delivering \$6 billion in wages for Australians. It produces steel and powers our homes as well as our economy, injecting \$40 billion each year ... It's coal. Isn't it amazing what this little black rock can do!' (Minerals Council of Australia, 2015).

Importantly, these claims to the industry's contribution to the collective welfare of the nation have been accepted and amplified by Australia's political leaders. Examples have included then Prime Minister Tony Abbott's 2014 claim that 'coal is good for humanity' (Chan, 2014), to the 2017 spectacle of then Federal Treasurer Scott Morrison waving a lump of coal at opposition politicians on the floor of Parliament declaring 'This is coal...don't be afraid!' (Murphy, 2017). More recently, as Prime Minister, Morrison has repeatedly proclaimed the benefits of the fossil fuel industry, stressing its long-term contributions to the nation:

'The backbone of so many communities in regional Australia, the source of jobs, economic livelihoods, and dignity - dignity - for thousands of hard-working Queenslanders. The sources of taxes, royalties, so vital to the government services that we all rely on, and as Queenslanders rely on right across this great state. Funding for teachers, nurses, police, infrastructure, all this and more depends on a strong, competitive, mining industry' (Morrison, 2019: 2).

This view of coal mining underpinning national and regional well-being has been reinforced by politicians from both sides of politics who have articulated the same discourse. For example, the former Liberal Premier of Queensland, Campbell Newman, made this link by stating: 'We are in the coal business. If you want decent hospitals, schools and police on the beat we all need to understand that' (AAP, 2012). Queensland government support for the coal industry was reinforced in 2017, when Labor Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk undertook a trade trip to India with regional Queensland mayors to promote the Adani Group's proposed Galilee coal mine, declaring 'My visit here shows that Queensland supports the Adani project for its potential to create many jobs

for regional Queensland' (Adani, 2017). Thus, both politicians and the fossil fuel sector have constructed a temporal narrative connecting fossil fuels to existing public interests and the future viability of the economy and public services such as health, education and police.

In sum, by emphasizing the fossil fuel industry's importance to the country and local communities, the industry's articulations anchor common interests in a historical trajectory that extends into the future. Fossil fuels are presented as the 'backbone' of Australia, which is materially depicted in the construction of schools and hospitals reliant on the funds from the industry. Through the reassertion of this message, the possibility that Australian citizens could enjoy the prosperity represented by such crucial infrastructure without the industry is denied. The industry is literally seen as, over time, building the nation. Thus, this temporal trajectory of fossil fuels' lustrous past, and importance in the present, is also seen to be 'our future'.

The threat of the decarbonization

However, growing environmental opposition to coal expansion and broader calls for decarbonization has threatened the industry discourse of collective well-being. Indeed, the maintenance of hegemony is dependent on an oppositional force to create clear boundaries around inclusion and exclusion and mark out perceived threats (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). In constructing a political frontier, the Australian fossil fuel industry has sought to frame growing demands for decarbonization as just such an oppositional force. Proposals for energy transition by progressive politicians and environmentalists have been presented as not only threatening the current viability of the resources sector but also the economic prosperity of regions and the nation. By constructing an Other as a threat to collective well-being, the industry-state nexus has sought to further solidify the centrality of fossil fuels in contemporary Australian political debate.

The fossil fuel sector's characterization of decarbonization as a threat to collective well-being was well demonstrated early on in the 2009–2011 political debate over the then federal Labor Government's attempts to introduce first a market-based emissions trading scheme, and later, legislation for a fixed price carbon emissions reduction system (Wilkinson, 2020). Pushing back against such proposals, the ACA, coal-fired power companies and mining corporations such as Rio Tinto, Xstrata, Peabody, Anglo-American and BHP funded a highly successful public relations campaign targeting mining communities under the tagline 'Let's cut emissions, not jobs.' Citing an industry-funded consultant's report, the head of the ACA emphasized the future threat to communities and employment with a move away from coal expansion:

'These are real jobs, supporting real families in regional Australia. The carbon tax will put thousands of jobs at risk and push billions of investment dollars in new mining developments offshore to our competitors.' (Maher, 2011)

In the years that followed, continued calls for decarbonization and a move away from coal and gas extraction and use have prompted the industry to continue to stress the

economic threats this poses. For example, in responding to calls by Greens politicians to restrict the opening of new coal mines, the head of the NSW Minerals Council argued this would ‘send the state into a deep economic recession. It would cost tens of thousands of direct jobs across the state, devastate regional NSW and it would heavily impact on at least 8000 additional businesses that supply our operating mines’ (Loussikian, 2017). These proclamations of the economic catastrophe became a regular feature in newspaper opinion pieces and interviews in the financial press as the industry sought to push back against the growing environmental critique. Moving away from the legacy of coal and gas was presented as threatening the collective well-being of economic growth, employment and regional development that the industry claimed it had created.

Beyond the broader economic impact of a move away from fossil energy, the industry has also sought to stress the impracticability of alternative renewable energy technologies. Despite the rapidly falling cost of renewable energy (now more than price competitive against traditional coal-fired electricity), industry associations and the leaders of major fossil fuel corporations continued to promote the idea of the inadequacies and dangers of moving towards renewable energy. As the former CEO of mining giant Rio Tinto proclaimed in 2015, ‘Coal is going to be needed for 50 years or more...for those of you who think that solar is going to do the job or wind power is going to do the job or hydro is going to the job - you really need to wake up’ (Chessell, 2015). In proclaiming the inadequacies of renewable energy technologies, an oft-repeated theme from the fossil fuel sector and its political allies was the apparent intermittency of renewable electricity and the naiveté of its proponents. As one coal industry advocate asserted: ‘not even the most earnest activist can change the laws of physics and force solar power to work at night or in cloudy weather, wind power to work in calm conditions’ (Hepworth, 2015). These statements served to reinforce a discourse of decarbonization as technically unviable and a threat to Australia’s energy security.

In defending the hegemony, the fossil fuel industry also engaged civic discourses. For instance, campaigns by environmental NGOs to prevent the opening of new coal mines and the promotion of fossil fuel divestment were presented as undermining law and order and democracy, with the CEO of the Minerals Council arguing that:

‘war against coal and fossil fuels risks walking a more radical path with its warriors feeling no longer bound by the normal rules of a civilised, democratic society...I question the motives of people and “movements” whose objectives are not aligned with the broader interests of the society we live in.’ (Stevens, 2013)

Environmental critics of the fossil fuel industry were thus presented as a dangerous Other; zealots under the sway of a mistaken ideology. As the CEO of Whitehaven Coal argued in an address to industry representatives, a ‘green ideology’ was threatening the industry and the nation evident in recent successful court cases challenging the expansion of coal mining and gas extraction: ‘It is green ideology that has locked up our plentiful domestic gas reserves. It is green ideology that demonised coal and forced up prices. It is green ideology that had led to the notion we must choose between coal and renewables.’ (Stevens, 2017). Indeed, in response to growing divisions between the coal

industry and gas companies, the CEO of oil and gas giant Shell Australia sought to reunite the sector by emphasizing environmentalists as the real enemy:

‘Our opponents are well-orchestrated, well-funded and well-drilled on tactics aiming to destroy an industry that has been an overwhelming force for good. Armed with megaphones or iPhones, an increasing number of professional activists and huge armies of ideologically driven volunteers are waging a virtual war with religious zealotry.’ (Williams, 2019)

This discourse was strongly supported by state and federal politicians keen to ensure the continuation and growth of the coal and gas sectors. In response to the growing success of protests against coal mining involving disruption and non-violent civil disobedience, the Queensland government introduced new summary offences laws prohibiting protests which threatened the operational functioning of mine sites or impeded public convenience (Stevenson, 2019). Police response to environmental protests also became increasingly violent, with politicians and a number of media personalities arguing for acts of physical violence against climate protesters and calls for increased penalties and criminal charges (Joshi, 2019). This growing authoritarian response to the environmental critique of coal mining and fossil fuels more generally highlighted the defence of the existing hegemonic order and the articulation of an identified Other establishing the political frontier. Decarbonization and a move away from fossil fuels were presented by the industry and its political allies as not only a threat to economic and collective well-being, but a challenge to the Australian collective identity promoted by ‘extremists’ and foreign ideologies.

A fossil-fuelled future

Aligned with the historical social and economic benefits of fossil fuels as well as the current threat of decarbonization to such collective well-being, the third articulation in the empirical material was to project a vision of continued fossil fuel expansion. In defending the hegemony, this articulation rejected pessimistic market, technological and environmental projections for the future of fossil fuels and instead promoted a rosy future for the coal, oil and gas industries. This ‘brightsiding’ of the future was led by key industry associations such as the MCA and the APPEA as well as Liberal and Labor politicians in an attempt to shore up investment decisions in the face of rapidly changing global energy markets.

A key dynamic here has been the rapidly declining cost curve of renewable energy sources such as solar and wind and technological innovations in battery storage that have not only dramatically exceeded market forecasts but also made fossil energy far less price competitive (Jacobson, 2020). Changes in energy production have also been driven by new thinking in global financial markets and the threat climate change poses to the insurance industry from worsening extreme weather and the potential for stranded carbon assets. Combined with a growing awareness of the urgency of the climate crisis and the need for rapid decarbonization, these technological and market changes have resulted in a steady decline in demand for thermal coal in different markets. For

example, governments such as the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan and South Korea are reconsidering their reliance on coal-fired electricity in favour of new wind, solar and green hydrogen investment (BP, 2020).

Further, a growing range of companies has announced goals to reduce their carbon emissions through signing up to initiatives such as Science-Based Targets or the RE100, which commits to the adoption of 100% renewable electricity by 2050 (Walenta, 2020). These have included the world's leading technology companies such as Facebook, Google, Amazon and Apple, which have made aggressive announcements to seek a net zero carbon emissions target by mid-century (Ambrose, 2020). These changes have led some technology analysts to estimate that as much as half of the world's electricity production will come from renewable energy sources by 2050, potentially crowding out coal, oil and gas as primary energy sources (BloombergNEF, 2019).

In response, the Australian coal and gas industries and aligned politicians have sought to continue to promote a 'fossil fuels forever' imaginary (Levy and Spicer, 2013). This has involved asserting the central role of coal and gas in any economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic as well as stressing technological innovations in their industries. Again, the fossil energy-state nexus has been vividly illustrated in the Federal government's establishment of a National COVID-19 Commission Advisory Board chaired by a leading mining executive and including representatives from other corporate resource giants such as Dow Chemicals and Saudi Aramco (Murphy, 2020). Unsurprisingly, the Advisory Board recommended the expansion of gas infrastructure and the opening up of new gas fields, which the Federal Government eagerly accepted as part of a 'gas-led recovery' from the pandemic (Morton, 2020). In response, the CEO of the industry association APPEA re-emphasized the collective benefits that would accrue from such policy support:

'As the economy continues to recover from COVID-19, the industry stands ready to provide energy security for homes and manufacturing businesses, generate jobs through exploration and new operations, provide taxation revenue to build schools, roads and hospitals and strengthen our economy' (APPEA, 2020).

The expansion of gas extraction and export over the last decade, which include some of the world's largest gas processing facilities (such as the massive Gorgon project in north-western Australia), also feeds into a broader industry rhetoric of how fossil fuels can paradoxically provide a response to the climate crisis. Despite dramatically increasing Australia's domestic carbon emissions, industry leaders have promoted gas exports on the basis that 'Australia's gas industry, domestically and through our exports of liquefied natural gas (LNG), contributes substantially to the economic development of the nation and reduces global greenhouse gas emissions' (APPEA, 2015: 4). This 'transition fuel' argument has been echoed by government ministers keen to talk up the gas industry's growth, with politicians replicating industry talking points that Australia's gas exports reduce global emissions if they replace coal-fired electricity (Macdonald, 2019). However, such arguments neglect the significant fugitive emissions within the

gas supply chain as well as the more potent warming impact of methane as a greenhouse gas (Schwietzke et al., 2014).

Indeed, not to be outdone, the coal industry has also sought to promote its future despite the dramatic falls in the price of thermal coal on global commodity markets. Promoting a future for coal in a worsening climate crisis fuelled by carbon emissions has involved some heroic claims by the industry. These have comprised arguments that Australian coal is ‘cleaner’ and more efficient than its export rivals (Pearson, 2015), as well as promoting new technologies such as ‘high efficiency low emissions’ (HELE) power plants and carbon capture and storage (CCS) which are seen as ‘solutions’ to the need to reduce carbon emissions while maintaining a high-carbon industry (Constable, 2020). However, as critics have noted, such claims are nothing new and have failed to eventuate despite significant government financial support (Holmes à Court, 2018; Hudson, 2017). Indeed, despite the increasing economic, social and environmental critique, politicians and industry representatives continue to promote a future for fossil fuels. In a recent visit to a Queensland coal mine, the Prime Minister, replete in high-visibility vest, hard hat and COVID-19 face mask continued a long tradition of politicians talking up the benefits of fossil fuels:

‘These mines have got, you know, 10, 20, 30 years to run...And that’s a lot of opportunity for those communities...But what’s important is that we continue to extract and get the value from the opportunity and wealth that’s there that really benefits the rest of this country’ (Crowe, 2021).

In a similar vein, representatives of the CFMMEU have continued to lobby Labor politicians to show support for the industry, arguing that ‘Australian energy and manufacturing would be dependent on coal and gas ‘for a long time yet and that should be reflected in [Labor’s] language and ... policies’ (Coorey, 2020).

To create a fossil-fuelled future, the industry has employed a combination of a rhetorical projection of the future as necessarily involving fossil fuels, as well as advocacy for continued government investment to shore this up. The next iteration of fossil fuel hegemony is thus both anchored and pushed forward; by articulating the impossibility of alternatives, the current hegemony is stabilized. The interests of workers, the government and industry are linked and positioned against the notion of a counter-hegemonic decarbonization. With monetary commitments and material infrastructure allocated to the fossil fuel industry, the temporal certainty of the hegemonic position of the industry is pushed into the future, further limiting any possibility for difference in the temporal repetition of its hegemony.

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate how fossil fuel hegemony is held together by articulations that reinforce the prevalence of three key discourses: ‘creating collective well-being’, ‘the threat of decarbonisation’ and ‘a fossil fuelled future’. The hegemony supported by these discourses has been articulated publicly and repeatedly by the industry, unions

and representatives from both the major Australian political parties. The continuation of extracting, exporting and consuming fossil fuels is linked to the identities and interests of the actors, as a hegemonic practice that is part of national identity and well-being. This continuous rearticulation reinforces a 'common sense' view that the nation is dependent on fossil fuel energy and exports.

By contrast, challenges to this worldview are seen as extreme and irrational. A political frontier has thus been established with clear lines for or against the continuation of fossil fuel dependence. This tension has arguably been best illustrated within the union movement, where some members occasionally note the need for a transition away from fossil fuels but continue to articulate the idea that they are a long-term necessity (see, e.g. Maher, 2016). Nevertheless, as noted above, when members of the aligned Labor party are seen to go against this common sense of fossil fuel hegemony, they have been publicly pressured by the unions to change tact (Coorey, 2020; McCauley, 2019). As such, the political frontier is upheld by demonizing opponents and policing actors within the key group to ensure a united front.

This hegemonic temporal linearity illustrates how past articulations condition and limit the possibility to change. The past is projected into the future, i.e. a particular past is employed performatively in producing a favourable future. This can be seen as hegemonic time (Mazzolini, 2020), with a dominant historic bloc reinforcing an epoch during which the hegemonic struggle takes place (Filippini, 2017). Temporal articulations not only shape interests and identities in the present, but they also form how history is to be understood. By articulating the fossil fuel industry's 'positive' contributions to the development of Australia as a nation, current political struggles are anchored within this narrow conception of the historical role of the industry. Within this hegemonic time, alternative conceptions of progress and alternative readings of history are excluded.

By highlighting this temporal dimension, we contribute to theoretical discussions of hegemony by explaining how discursive struggle is formed by hegemonic time – dominating and unifying temporality. In our case, the past, present and future have been connected within a linear trajectory. While Nyberg et al. (2020) show how temporal constructs can act performatively as stepping stones towards a particular future, we show how hegemonic time as a fossil fuel epoch acts as a context within which the energy struggle takes place. Through repeated articulations, a narrow version of the past becomes 'common sense' history. Time becomes singular. Any discussion of the future is then based on the repeated conception of this particular version of the past.

To break this hegemonic epoch, we suggest that an alternative past needs to be constructed to promote a different future. While current counter-hegemonic initiatives promote alternative futures, they are not anchored in strong narratives of the past. With the impacts of climate change already being felt, and the various commitments from other nations, it may well be that the industry is being pushed to face a crisis that threatens to pierce the temporal linearity it has fought so hard to maintain.

Indeed, more recent events have seen the maritime section of the CFMMEU speak out about the need for the union to be more pro-active on climate change (Marin-Guzman, 2019), while the conservative Liberal New South Wales government has committed \$32 billion to renewable energy (McLaren, 2020). While these moves are yet to play

out, there appears to be at least some suggestion of potential fractures in the current hegemony, opening up the possibility for a countermovement. However, time is an important factor, and as we have noted, the hegemonic perception of a linearity of time in which progress and national well-being is based on fossil energy is well entrenched. To this end, any countermovement needs to reach across the established hegemony, to provide an alternative vision and create a future in which the nation's coal and gas is left in the ground, while promoting economic and social benefits for communities, workers and citizens more generally.

Finally, our analysis places particular emphasis on the role of capital and the state in the creation and maintenance of this hegemonic project. While industrial relations literature has begun to focus on the climate crisis in terms of its impact upon jobs and the labour movement (Goods, 2017; Thomas and Doerflinger, 2020), it has been less focussed on the pivotal role that corporations play in both contributing and responding to the political economy of climate change. While this no doubt reflects the traditional emphasis of industrial relations scholars on trade unions and patterns of collective bargaining as opposed to the role of capital and business interests, it is clear that in the area of climate change and energy, corporations and their industry associations play the dominant role in shaping policy outcomes, often in combat with environmental non-government organizations and climate activists. The organized labour movement has been a late starter to this critical area of policy debate, and as we have shown is often conflicted in its support for emissions reduction, let alone radical decarbonization. This suggests the need for industrial relations scholars to broaden the field of their analysis to embrace a more critical political economy of work that acknowledges the critical role of corporations in shaping societal responses to the climate crisis (Wright and Nyberg, 2015). There is also significant potential for industrial relations researchers to explore how labour movements might better develop counter-hegemonic discourses as part of broader social movements for climate justice.

Conclusion

Corporate and political elites have repeatedly emphasized fossil fuels as the key to the health and well-being of the Australian state and economy. In this article, we have shown how industry, government and unions in their public articulations have emphasized the primacy of fossil fuels to counter proposals for a transition away from fossil energy. Decarbonization is framed as a threat to national prosperity, the provision of government services and employment and the well-being of local communities. The invocation of the threat or danger in any transition away from fossil energy establishes an antagonism to an 'Other' that reinforces the fossil fuel industry's continued dominance in Australian political economy. This danger relies upon the conjoining of fossil fuels to the Australian economy and to the well-being of the state, discourses which rely upon early development tropes of natural resources and the teleology of modernization. In contrast, the fossil fuel industry presents a future which continues the past and present, a temporal narrative which reinforces the hegemony of fossil fuels in the Australian economy. While there are now clear signs of a move towards the decarbonization of

economies based on regulatory, market and technological changes (Newell, 2020), any countermovement to the prevailing fossil fuel hegemony needs to not only challenge prevailing narratives of national prosperity based on fossil energy, but also create a new frontier and public discourses which align the long-term interests of workers, communities and citizens in an increasingly climate-challenged world.

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