

This is the author version of an article published as:

Wilson, Jason and Saunders, Barry and Bruns, Axel (2007) Digging Deeper. In *ABC News Online: Club Bloggery*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

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Digging Deeper

By Jason Wilson, Barry Saunders, and Axel Bruns

Climate change dominated a couple of days of Federal Election campaigning earlier this week, with the major parties both fumbling in laying out their responses. Peter Garrett and Malcolm Turnbull were punished by the mainstream media for, respectively, revealing something approximating a real opinion about how climate change agreements should work, and for being involved in a debate about Government policy before it's implemented.

Australia's bloggers have been more nuanced in their coverage of environmental challenges over a much longer period, and unlike the mainstream media, they have been able to carry out [analyses](#) and host [conversations](#) that reveal the range of community opinions on what kind of shape our environment is in, and what we can or ought to do to remedy it.

The mainstream media gave lots of space to Peter Garrett's "[gaffe](#)", and portrayed Malcolm Turnbull's cabinet room defeat on Kyoto as evidence of coalition "disunity" – devoting so much space to such celebrity politics that there wasn't much left over for any detailed analysis of either party's actual policies.

There also wasn't much room for the Greens or other minor parties to outline their approaches. Once again, though, as we've shown of other issues in previous Club Bloggery posts, the blogosphere – which is not hitched so tightly to the campaign caravan – has been better able to offer in-depth analysis, discussion and deliberation about climate change policy.

There are long-held positions on the reality of and strategies to address climate change that can be found across the Australian blogosphere. Many writers who have approached the issue over a long period have been following the election campaign closely, and are offering their own assessments of the parties' environmental announcements.

John Quiggin, as an ARC Federation Fellow and University of Queensland economics professor perhaps the most highly credentialed academic blogger in Australia, has been a tireless [educator](#) of the immediate danger of climate change, and he has long argued for the necessity of a response not only for the benefit of the environment, but for the [long-term viability of our economy](#).

Last Monday, rather than wading into the [election theatrics](#) provided by Garrett and Turnbull Quiggin [criticised policy arguments](#) for dumping Kyoto as an international framework for dealing with climate change.

Presumably, moves by either side of politics to endorse Kyoto would need to draw on the thinking of blogger-experts like Quiggin in making carbon-reduction measures work.

On the skeptical side, Graham Young over at Ambit Gambit takes great delight in [skewering](#) what he sees as the more inflated claims of climate-change boosters. As a former political strategist for the Queensland Liberals, Young's blogging combines a wide-ranging interest in policy with an acute sense of political and strategic realities. In contrast with the MSM's focus on the day-to-day tactics of polities under pressure, Young's blog gives us not only right-of-centre policy advocacy, but a sense of the organisational strategies involved in realising and selling policies over the long term. "The same day that Quiggin was trying to rebut a Nature article that supported scrapping the Kyoto protocol, Young was arguing that the Liberals failure to use the report in campaigning was just more evidence that the party's campaign was off the rails".

The combination of insider's experience, policy understanding and strategic acumen makes Young's blog compulsive reading during this campaign, on this and other issues.

As we have noted [earlier](#), the [Greensblog](#) has the potential to explain its party's policy positions in depth, and Greens politicians have made good use of the medium in addressing the climate change issue. Whether you agree with their political position or not, it is obvious that the entries on the Greensblog are actually [addressing the issue](#), not the superficial horserace and pointscoring journalism that's taking place elsewhere.

There's something to be said here, too, about the temporal constraints that the mainstream media operate within during campaigns. For the most part, professional journalists have tended to report on day-to-day slip-ups which fit neatly into the daily news cycle, but seem to be unwilling to invest the time required to explore the parties' policy positions in any depth.

On Youdecide2007, using no more than what for some politicians and journalists still appears to be a relatively alien research tool, Google, we were able to determine that the Member for Herbert, Peter Lindsay, had [removed forceful arguments](#) in favour of the domestic use of nuclear power from his website, just in time for the election campaign.

Uncovering such significant corrections to politicians' publicly stated views is now fairly simple, and provides voters with much deeper insights into a candidate's real views, behind the façade of leaflets and party advertising. Tech-savvy amateurs (like the contributors to our citizen journalism site) who are prepared to track the development and communication of policy over a longer period can turn up stories for which the novelty-driven MSM do not appear to have a long enough attention span.

Similarly, by turning up to suburban community fora that are seemingly no longer of interest to the pros, we have managed to uncover some diversity in ALP views on the environment. The views of ALP candidate for Ryan [Ross Daniels](#) on green housing, uranium mining and economic growth are some distance from his leader's more cautious pronouncements. Whether seen as a gaffe or as a refreshing indication of diversity of opinion: only citizen journalists have so far been able to report such scenes from life on the sidestreets of the campaign trail. The pros are too busy following the caravan.

First published at *Gatewatching*:

<http://gatewatching.org/2007/11/05/club-bloggery-5-digging-deeper/>

Also published in a condensed version at *ABC Online*:

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2007/11/02/2079524.htm>