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Reporting that silly $4bn climate funding gaffe

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Abstract
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This could change after today’s release of a report from the Climate Institute, based on modelling from Sinclair Knight Merz/MMA and Monash University’s Centre of Policy Studies.

The report found that the coalition’s Direct Action Plan would not achieve its target of 5% reduction in emissions by 2020 unless they spent a further $4.07bn. Based on the coalition’s currently projected expenditure, the report estimated emissions would rise by 9%.

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The Guardian’s Lenore Taylor led the reporting on the issue with a typically detailed and thoughtful analysis which called the report “devastating” for the Coalition.

Other reports by the ABC and in Fairfax papers also covered the report, with some News publications running the AAP version of the story.

Abbott was questioned at his Launceston press conference but simply batted the question away saying climate spokesperson Greg Hunt had examined the report and they disagreed with its findings.

Reporters were not well enough briefed nor interested enough to ask the tough follow-ups that would have put Abbott on the spot over such an unsubstantiated dismissal.

When the ABC followed up their initial report, Greg Hunt went on the attack calling the Climate Institute’s analysis “one of the silliest reports” he has ever seen. He also called the Institute “a clear partisan political organisation” which backs the ALP.

The Climate Institute’s chief John Connor shot back:

“We do all of this work independently,” he said.

“At the last election we did a similar assessment which actually had the Coalition doing better in terms of emissions reduction than the ALP and Tony Abbott was quite happy to quote that at the time so I don’t think that’s a well-founded claim.”

Neither Hunt nor Abbott pinpointed where they think the Institute’s estimates or modelling were wrong. Nor were they required to do this by reporters. But perhaps no line of questioning would have helped. Taylor had tried to question him for her report and wrote:

“On Wednesday Abbott refused to address the modelling’s findings, saying: “I simply don’t accept the report.”
I would make three observations about this story.

Firstly, it points to the fact that the media and the political parties are not the only players in an election campaign and its reporting. External groups including lobby groups, academic researchers, and think tanks can play a key role in generating interest and commentary on an issue.

Any analysis of the media’s accountability role needs to be placed in the context of this broader public sphere and the way these various groups act in concert.

Secondly, right of reply or balance reporting such as stories covering Greg Hunt’s dismissal of the report, provides an appearance of objective reporting but does not actually provide any useful information for readers. At worse it is complicit with the Liberal strategy of sowing doubt about the bona fides of the report and its authors without doing the heavy lifting of combating its content.

In this instance the ABC’s second report has tried to guard against this by providing detail on the report’s argument. But their headline: “Greg Hunt rejects ‘silly’ Climate Institute report on direct action policy,” features Hunt’s unsubstantiated claim and therefore gives it undue gravitas.

The header is absolutely factual and in terms of reflecting the punchy battle of the campaign it is arresting. As an editor in the daily cut and thrust of electoral reporting I probably would have used it myself. But I would have also wanted more detail on his argument.

Thirdly, it will be interesting to see how this plays out over the news cycle of the next few days. While the sex-appeal gaffe and the fashion-fad gaffe played repeatedly in commentary, analysis and follow-up stories, my hunch is that this $4bn funding gaffe will not get so much attention. I hope I’m proven wrong.

Lenore Taylor’s certainly not going to let it go. She came out with a superb, hard-hitting column this afternoon:

“All that “direct action” can’t work to reduce carbon emissions. It’s that the Coalition’s Direct Action plan – cobbled together in a couple months after Tony Abbott took the Liberal leadership and ditched the Coalition’s support for emissions trading – can’t work for the money that’s on the table.

“And almost no one thinks it can. Not the business groups that have for years now been unsuccessfully seeking detail. Not academic experts who have studied the various sources of carbon abatement it proposes. And not anyone who has sought to model it.

She calls Abbott out on his refusal to give detail. That’s the beginning of accountability journalism. More please.