

CLIMATE SECURITY UP FRONT

TRANSPARENCY, SECURITY RISKS &
THE GOVERNMENT'S DUTY OF CARE

APRIL 2023

A photograph of Adm. Chris Barrie, an older man with glasses, wearing a dark pinstripe suit, a white shirt, and a patterned tie. He is gesturing with his right hand, palm facing forward, as if speaking. The background is dark and out of focus.

**IN DEFENDING THE RIGHTS
OF ALL AUSTRALIANS,
A GOVERNMENT HAS NO
GREATER DUTY THAN TO
FULLY ASSESS ALL THE RISKS
TO SECURITY AND BE FRANK
WITH THE ELECTORATE ABOUT
THE THREATS WE FACE AS A
NATION AND HOW TO RESPOND.
CLIMATE DISRUPTION IS NO
EXCEPTION. INTEGRITY AND
TRANSPARENCY ARE TWO
SIDES OF THE SAME COIN.**

Adm. Chris Barrie (Retd)

Former Chief of the Australian Defence Force

SUMMARY

The government and the media have a duty of care to ensure a balanced and transparent focus on security risks, including climate disruption, not the privileging of some threats whilst others are hidden away.

- The government has a duty of care to fully assess and be transparent about security risks to the Australian people.
- The greatest risk is climate disruption, described by both the UN Secretary General and US Secretary of Defence as “existential”.
- Whilst a great deal of media and political attention is focused on China, new weapon systems and AUKUS, there is at present little to no attention on climate security from either parliament or the commentariat.
- The Office of National Intelligence has, for the first time, conducted a climate and security risk assessment, which was requested by the government and delivered to them in late 2022.
- The government to date has not publicly acknowledged the assessment, released a non-classified version, or indicated when that will be done.
- Climate risk must be the first priority for the government, whether from security, emissions-reduction policy, budget priority or international relationship perspectives.

THE TICKING CLIMATE TIME BOMB

"The climate time bomb is ticking" said UN Secretary General António Guterres on 20 March on the release of a new IPCC report which warned that the world is on brink of catastrophic warming.¹ Now that sounds like a threat to global human security that should be at the forefront of any government's concerns.

Yet the recent commentary and discussion on the AUKUS agreement and purported imminent war with China is dominating the debate about security threats to Australia and regional stability. The intense focus on China has been justified as the need for the Australian people to be fully informed of threats to the nation. But the same rationale has not been applied to the security threat of climate change, a far greater risk, the response to which will be far more costly and extensive.

Until a few months ago, the climate-change security threat had never been comprehensively assessed by any Australian government, abrogating the government's primary responsibility to "protect the people".

But in late 2022, an Office of National Intelligence (ONI) initial climate risk assessment — an election promise of the Albanese government — was distributed to members of the federal cabinet. It addressed external but not domestic climate threats. Since then there has been no government response to, or public communication of, the assessment's findings.

Could we be shocked by what the intelligence community has told the government? Was the government itself shocked by what it was told? Home Affairs Minister Clare O'Neil's comment last December to the National Press Club that "climate change is creating massive movements of people that may become unmanageable" suggests that may be so.² We won't know the answers until a declassified version is released, just as the government has promised with the Defence Security Review.³

Facing existential climate risks, a government can only lead, and the community can only fully participate in overcoming the threat, if the government is open and transparent about the magnitude of that threat.

There needs to be a clear-headed security analysis of our region, including an assessment of the extreme vulnerability of both China and India to climate-disruption-driven escalating water crises. The balance of all security risks must be assessed, including recognising that what China does or does not do will not drown small island states, nor desertify the dry subtropics, nor drive a global decline in crop yields, kill the Barrier Reef, salinate Kakadu or force the displacement of tens of millions of people. But a hotter climate will, probably in significant measure even before a full fleet of nuclear submarines has been commissioned in the 2040s.

The furore about China and imminent war is being stoked by a group of national security influencers, several with links to institutions who receive a benefit from the arms industry. But barely a word has been said by those influencers recognising that climate disruption, not China, is the greatest threat to global, regional and human security. Talking loudly about the China threat whilst lips are sealed on climate threats is a catastrophic and irresponsible failure in security analysis.

1 [washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/03/20/climate-change-ipcc-report-15/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/03/20/climate-change-ipcc-report-15/)

2 minister.homeaffairs.gov.au/ClareONeil/Pages/national-press-club-address.aspx

3 theguardian.com/australia-news/2023/feb/22/anthony-albanese-to-flag-additional-military-investment-ahead-of-landmark-defence-review

TRANSPARENCY

A declassified version of the climate risk assessment should be released by the Albanese government as a matter of urgency, in part because the nation is in the middle of an intense conversation about security and defence.

National security is not an either/or argument. Great power contestation and debilitating climate change can occur at the same time, with a conflation of events that can threaten many. It is a mistake to think we can apply a slow piecemeal approach to the potential risk of one threat and then move onto the next. Indeed, the national security apparatus must be transparent about the wider range of threats and our Nation's vulnerabilities to compounding and interlinked crises.

The government should be upfront with the electorate on the full range of climate risks. The rhetoric by commentators and politicians on potential war with China has been justified as the need for the Australian people to be fully informed of threats to the nation. With other security threats, Australian governments have been transparent, making a point of sharing with the community their knowledge to gain support for action; for example cyber security, Covid, North Korea and more. But the same rationale has not been applied to the security threat of climate change, which is a far greater risk.

It is extraordinary that with climate change, the greatest threat of all, we see no such transparency. There is no reason to make climate disruption an exception.

With existential climate risks, the community can fully participate in actions to overcome the threat only if the government is transparent about the magnitude of that threat and builds community support for action. Australian governments have learned from bitter experience that making sure that vulnerable communities are fully informed in advance, with practical actions and options, is the key to being prepared for natural emergency threats which are now exacerbated by climate warming.

Experiences with pandemics, bushfires and floods show that underestimating or downplaying the size and risks of future events leads to bad outcomes, and government responses being overwhelmed.

The government needs to manage the risk of brand damage if it sits on serious advice and knowledge about risks to the security and health of Australians, and fails to disclose and act upon that advice, as was the case with Robodebt and the previous government.

EXISTENTIAL CLIMATE RISKS

Climate change now presents a grave, and potentially existential, threat to society and human security. Today, unimaginable new climate extremes confront us: record-breaking droughts and floods, cruel heatwaves, unstoppable bushfires, broken infrastructure, and coastal inundation. Worse is to come.

In vulnerable countries, governments have collapsed and civil wars have erupted, forcefully displacing millions of people looking for a safe haven. Instability is on the march. A new insecurity shadows our lives and the relations between nations.

Experts increasingly affirm that climate is an existential threat to human civilisation, a fact UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres repeatedly emphasises, and US Secretary of Defence Lloyd J. Austin III along with Climate Change Minister Chris Bowen have noted.⁴

The recent World Economic Forum Global Risks Report 2023 listed the six greatest risks over the next ten-year period as: the failure to mitigate climate change, failure of climate-change adaptation, natural disasters and extreme weather events, biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse, large-scale involuntary migration, and natural resource crises.⁵

Policies enacted as a result of national emission-reduction commitments under the Paris Agreement will result in climate warming of around 3°C by 2100 and perhaps more.⁶ The impacts of 3°C of warming will

likely be existential for some nations and peoples, where existential risk is understood as an adverse outcome that could curtail sustainable development and threaten the very sovereign existence of communities and states alike.

ASLCG's 2021 report, *Missing in Action*, explored whether the security consequences of climate disruption could include a billion displaced people.⁷ The 2018 Global Catastrophic Risks report says that even for 2°C of warming more than a billion people may need to be relocated.⁸ Another study from 2020 found that warming of 2°C could provide more than 500 million people additional incentive to emigrate, whilst warming of 3°C could provide additional incentive-to-emigrate to well over a billion people.⁹ This is one climate issue amongst many the government must face publicly and with the best analysis available.

Given the extent of the risks associated with climate change, the likelihood is the government was told some uncomfortable things in its recent risk assessment prepared by the Office of National Intelligence. A good indication of this can be seen in the UK's most comprehensive climate-security risk assessment done two years ago by one of the UK's leading think tanks, Chatham House. This assessment concluded that the risks are compounding, and "without immediate action the impacts will be devastating in the coming decades", especially for food security. It concluded that we are heading to warming which will "drive political instability and greater national insecurity, and fuel regional and international conflict".¹⁰

4 defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/2582828/secretary-austin-remarks-at-climate-change-summit; skynews.com.au/business/energy/climate-change-an-existential-threat-to-pacific-island-nations/video/843e7e658396be172d2ae0556fefe944

5 weforum.org/reports/global-risks-report-2023/

6 washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/03/20/climate-change-ipcc-report-15

7 aslcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ASLCG_MIA_Report.pdf

8 globalchallenges.org/initiatives/analysis-research/reports/

9 Chen, M and Caldeira, K, 2020, 'Climate change as an incentive for future human migration', *Earth Syst. Dyn.*, vol. 11, pp. 875-883.

10 chathamhouse.org/2021/09/climate-change-risk-assessment-2021

DUTY OF CARE

UN Secretary General António Guterres has noted that “We face a direct existential threat” from climate change as “we career towards the edge of the abyss”.¹¹ This is a stark warning to all governments, about their responsibility to understand, act and communicate,

At the heart of the liberal-democratic project is the concept of responsibility: responsibility for oneself, for the community, and for protection of those who need care. In other words, the first duty of a government is to “protect the people”, their safety and well-being. A government derives its legitimacy and hence its authority from the people, and so has a fiduciary duty: a responsibility to take reasonable care and act in accordance with the interests of all the people of the nation with integrity, fairness and accountability.

Internationally, private-sector company directors are facing legal action and personal liability for having refused to understand, assess and act upon climate risk, or for misrepresenting that risk. Compensation is being sought from carbon polluters for damage incurred from climate impacts. Legal opinion suggests similar action in Australia would be firmly based, and this duty has been recognised in several quarters, including by some public sector financial system regulators.

Section 25 of the *Public Governance Performance and Accountability Act 2013* is the public sector equivalent of corporate directors’ duty of care and diligence under section 180(1) *Corporations Act 2001*.¹² It says an official of a Commonwealth entity must exercise his or her powers, perform his or her functions and discharge his or her duties with a high standard of care and diligence. An explanatory memorandum says as a general principle, officials in the public sector should not be held to a lower standard of account than employees of publicly listed companies. If anything, they should be held to a higher standard. This duty of care includes not only ministers and senior public servants, but regulators and board members of statutory authorities. That duty in the public sector has already been successfully tested in the courts in The Netherlands.

The eminent jurist and former Chief Justice of the High Court, Sir Gerard Brennan AC, KBE, QC argued this duty to protect cannot be subordinated to political interests: “Power is reposed in members of Parliament by the public for exercise in the interests of the public and not primarily for the interests of members or the parties to which they belong. The cry ‘whatever it takes’ is not consistent with the performance of fiduciary duty”. Thus “all decisions and exercises of power should be taken in the interests of the public”, and that duty cannot be subordinated to, or qualified by, the interests of the cabinet minister or parliamentarian.¹³

¹¹ [un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2018-09-10/secretary-generals-remarks-climate-change-delivered](https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2018-09-10/secretary-generals-remarks-climate-change-delivered)

¹² finance.gov.au/government/managing-commonwealth-resources/pgpa-legislation-associated-instruments-and-policies

¹³ aspg.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/2018-David-Solomon.pdf

This duty has a particular sharpness in the new era of climate disruption and existential risks that will manifest as a consequence of the global failure to act. It is a pressing question as to whether the Australian Public Service (APS) is properly exercising those fiduciary responsibilities given the existential threat, and the damage caused by a decade of denial-and-delay governments from 2013 to 2022.

The government has a clear responsibility, and that includes a duty of care to be transparent with the electorate on the risks facing the nation.

This is important because climate change impacts are escalating dramatically around the world and on every continent, not least in Australia. The social and economic cost is already a major burden not just on lower-income countries who have done little to deserve it, but on the higher-income countries, such as Australia and the US, who have been primary contributors to the causes of these climate impacts.

Yet the Australian community remains blissfully unaware of these implications due to the lack of official transparency. It is critically important, in both the public and the government's interests, that this deficiency be rectified urgently.

This should be done constructively, without panic, to build support for the difficult decisions which lie ahead. Without transparency and well-formed public understanding of these threats, implementing serious climate policy will continue to be slow and a political nightmare, with disastrous outcomes for the Australian people.

The government and the media both have a duty of care to a balanced focus on security risks, not the privileging of some, whilst others are minimised or hidden away.

CLIMATE RISK ASSESSMENT

ADVOCACY & DEVELOPMENT TIMELINE

- On **20 April 2021**, the Australian Security Leaders Climate Group (ASLCG) was officially launched, beginning its advocacy for a whole-of-nation climate and security risk assessment, which is necessary for Australia to fully comprehend the scale, risks and impacts of climate change on global, regional and human security.¹⁴
- In **September 2021**, ASLCG published *Missing in Action: Responding to climate-security risks – Initial proposals to the Australian Government*, proposing that all political parties commit to undertaking a climate and security risk assessment as a matter of priority.¹⁵
- On **7 December 2021**, then Shadow Minister for Defence Brendan O'Connor said in a speech to the defence industry that:

Climate change has been identified as *the greatest threat to our national security*... An elected Albanese Labor Government will undertake an Urgent Climate Risk Assessment and Regular National Climate Risk Assessments and build an Australian National Prevention and Resilience Framework.¹⁶
- *Powering Australia*, the Australian Labor Party's climate and energy platform released in **December 2021**, committed the Labor government to commissioning a security-focused climate risk assessment.¹⁷
- On **23 March 2022**, Admiral Chris Barrie and other former senior defence leaders published a full-page open letter in *The Australian* calling on all those offering themselves as political leaders in the 2022 federal election to make climate change a primary focus and commit to mobilising the resources necessary to address this clear and present danger.¹⁸
- During the **May 2022** federal election campaign, Labor leader Anthony Albanese indicated that the risk assessment would be jointly handled by the Office of National Intelligence (ONI) and the Department of Defence.¹⁹
- In **June 2022**, ASLCG presented to relevant departments and ministers the *Australian Climate & Security Risk Assessment Implementation Proposal*, saying that the approach to climate-related security risks must be holistic, avoiding siloed, discipline-based analysis, taking account of system complexity and deep uncertainty. It said the assessment should be a transparent process led by a well-resourced, independent expert panel, and due to time and capacity constraints, the assessment should not be an interdepartmental process.²⁰

¹⁴ aslcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/ASLCG-Media-Release-April-2021-1.pdf

¹⁵ aslcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ASLCG_MIA_Report.pdf

¹⁶ rendanoconnor.com.au/news/latest-news/address-to-ai-groups-defence-council-national-executive-delivered-virtually-tuesday-7-december-2021/

¹⁷ alp.org.au/policies/powering-australia

¹⁸ aslcg.org/open-letter/

¹⁹ anthonyalbanese.com.au/media-centre/stronger-in-the-world-united-at-home-lowy-institute

²⁰ aslcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/ASLCG_RiskAssessment_Implementation-Proposal.pdf

- In **June 2022**, in a document submitted to the UN outlining Australia's new 2030 emissions target, the Albanese government confirmed it would order "an urgent climate risk assessment of the implications of climate change for national security, which will be an enduring feature of Australia's climate action".²¹
- The assessment was given a short deadline, because it was needed to feed into the Defence Strategic Review (DSR), and responsibility was handed to ONI. ONI's mandate only extends to external risks and does not consider domestic Australian risks. *The Strategist* reported in August:

The climate risk assessment will reportedly be led by the head of the Office of National Intelligence, Andrew Shearer, and Defence will 'provide input on defence-specific issues'. Because it is led by ONI, which is an internationally focused agency, we can surmise that it is an outward-facing assessment.²²
- In **August 2022**, ASLCG facilitated a presentation with the lead author of the Chatham House 2021 climate risk assessment for the UK government, Daniel Quiggin, to facilitate understanding of an appropriate risk assessment methodology.²³
- In **October 2022**, ASLCG made a submission to the DSR stating in part:

It is understood that the Office of National Intelligence is assessing global climate risks. There is an urgent need for a parallel domestic climate risk assessment to be initiated and incorporated into DSR considerations.²⁴
- Given the deadlines for the DSR, it is likely the ONI assessment was completed and submitted to the review and the government in November 2022. On **23 December**, *The Strategist* reported that "the [assessments] findings are classified."²⁵
- On **23 February 2023**, ASLCG wrote to the Prime Minister requesting that a declassified version of risk assessment be released, as is the case for the DSR.
- As of **5 April 2023**, the Australian government has made no official comment about the assessment, or released a de-classified version.

²¹ theguardian.com/environment/2022/jun/22/anthony-albanese-to-order-intelligence-chief-to-examine-security-threats-posed-by-climate-crisis

²² aspistrategist.org.au/australias-climate-risk-assessment-and-defence-review-must-work-together/

²³ aslcg.org/forums/

²⁴ aslcg.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ASLCG_DefenceStrategicReview.pdf

²⁵ aspistrategist.org.au/australia-needs-a-comprehensive-national-plan-for-adapting-to-climate-change/

