

Securing the Australian city: What is the national adaptation role in a climate-constrained future?

Wendy Steele



Urban Research Program

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Executive summary

Within the major Australian cities - where the majority of people live - the immediacy and potentially catastrophic nature of climate risk (i.e. storm surge, fire, drought) pose considerable challenges to contemporary models of governance. In response to climate change conditions that Spratt and Sutton (2008) describe as having entered the realm of a 'code red' emergency, there are growing calls for a much stronger national security role. This paper draws on critical securitisation theory to explore the democratic dilemmas and potential of a greater national adaptation role for Australian cities within a climate constrained future. The paper concludes by highlighting the implications of this approach to climate governance for Australian cities.

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Adapting to weather of mass destruction

Climate change is accepted by all Australian governments as an issue of national security and significance (ATSE, 2010; Australian Government, 2008). Yet as the “greatest moral challenge of our time”¹ climate change has not generated the urgency and speed required to address the twin issues of mitigation and adaptation outlined by organisations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Unlike the focused and co-ordinated approach from the Australian government to the ‘war on terror’ and ‘weapons of mass destruction’, national policy action around the catastrophic risks posed by climate change has been tentative, slow and deeply divided.

At the aggregate level the stalled *Australian Emissions Trading Scheme* (ETS) was a market-based approach of which the national government was to retain control of certain key elements. Its demise and the delay on climate change action contributed to a protest vote against the government in the recent 2010 federal election. Whilst at the individual level the \$3.9 billion *Energy Efficient Homes Program* promoted green consumption as a means by which to “to help tackle climate change and action that’s good for the economy and green jobs” (Garrett, 2009, p.1). The now abandoned home insulation scheme was a political failure that served to further intensify a climate of risk and political uncertainty.

Community disenchantment and cynicism regarding national leadership and action on climate change are growing in this context. The government’s recent announcement to create a ‘citizens’ assembly’ to investigate the climate science and the consequences of emissions trading in order to determine the need to act is indicative of the highly uncertain politics around the risk of climate change in Australia. According to the Government the assembly would have a year to examine “the evidence on climate change, the case for action and the possible consequences of introducing a market-based approach to limiting and reducing carbon emissions” (Gillard, 2010, p.1)². As the Prime Minister explains

If I am wrong, and that group of Australians is not persuaded of the case for change, then that should be a clear warning bell that our community has not been persuaded as deeply as required about the need for transformational change...I will not allow our country to be held to ransom by a few people with extreme views that will never be changed. But I want to see a process that directly involves a representative range of ordinary Australians (Gillard, 2010, p.1)

But is this too slow to respond to the climate change crisis? In *Requiem for a Species*, Hamilton (2010, p.225) argues that governments that delay taking action on climate change will find that “the global system will have shifted course and the future will be taken out of our hands”. This growing sense of urgency around the need for action on climate change has led to calls for a swift, coordinated centralised governance response similar to wartime (Gleeson, 2010; Stretton, 2005). A ‘code red’ emergency that requires “an imaginative, large-scale programme comparable in scope to the war economy” (Spratt and Sutton, 2007, p.1). This echoes the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon who describes global warming as an emergency situation requiring emergency action.³

In an article entitled *Weather of Mass Destruction?* Brown (2007) observed that the climate change debate was shifting to a national security focus. History has demonstrated that the ability to capture political imagination around matters of national risk and security tend to bring with it the institutional capacity to generate - with speed - extraordinary measures that reside outside normal

¹ ‘Rule of reckless vows’ *The Weekend Australian* 27–28 December 2008 p. 20

² ‘PM pledges ‘people’s assembly’ on climate’, <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/federal-election/pm-pledges-peoples-assembly-on-climate-20100722-10myh.html>, accessed on 6/9/2010

³ Cited in Logorio, J. (2007) ‘U.N.’s Ban says global warming is “an emergency”, posted at <http://uk.reuters.com>, 10 November 2007

democratic routines and governance processes. However the use of the security framing and rhetoric required to elevate issues in this way has been deeply criticised as an inappropriate basis for sustainability issues or ecologically transformative politics (Deudney, 1990). For example Barnett (2000, p.273) has argued that adopting a security approach to sustainability constitutes an “inappropriate colonization of the environmental literature”. The fear is that “hanging the climate change debate on the security hook to speed up implementation” (Brown, 2007, p.2) is a double-edged sword that can undermine the most basic principles of civil rights and democracy.

This paper draws on securitisation theory to explore the dilemmas *and* potential of a greater national adaptation role within a climate constrained future. In the first section of the paper the salience of security theory is reviewed as a potentially useful lens for examining the construction of climate risk at the national level. Secondly, this lens is applied to the ways in which the national role is framed in response to the threat of catastrophic climate change within the Australian city context. Most of the ‘climate security’ related discussions focus on the foreign policy implications of international climate risk, destabilisation and conflict (Barnett and Adger, 2007; Dyer, 2008). The point of departure for this paper is to turn the lens inwards to explore the national adaptation response to climate risk within Australian cities. For a ‘nation of cities’ (Hamilton, 1976) there has been little co-ordinated national policy attention to the *urban settlement* dimensions of climate change adaptation in Australia. The paper concludes by highlighting the implications of the security approach to climate governance in the Australian context.

Through the security glass darkly?

The emphasis of the security studies approach is that ‘security matters’ (Williams, 2008). As a lens for understanding institutional and governance climate change responses it is inherently political as well as theoretically and methodologically contested. Originating within the fields of International Relations early security theory was focused on a realist approach to war, military interventions and the role of the state. This focus was later widened in the wake of the socio-political upheaval (e.g. the fall of Soviet Union and Berlin Wall) to include other threats to human well-being as well such as the economy, environment and/or technology (Waever et.al, 1993). However both the narrow and wide versions of early securitisation theory revolve around the ‘security’ as a pre-existing object or fact.

A counter-critique to both the Realist and neo-Realist approaches emerged in the later social constructivist work of the Copenhagen School. Here the focus is on examining the ‘securitising speech-acts’ through which specific threats are shifted from the realm of the ‘normal’ (i.e. the arena of democratic rules and decision-making procedures) to the ‘exceptional’ (characterised by the highest urgency and priority). To this end Buzan et. al. (1998, p.24) argue that “security is thus a self referential practice, because it is in this practice that the issue becomes a security issue – not necessarily because a real existential threat exists but because the issue is presented as such a threat”.

The Copenhagen school approach is distinctive through its emphasis on the social and inter-subjective processes around whom or what is being secured - and from what. In this way any issue is capable of securitisation if it can be “intensified to the point where it is presented and accepted as an existential threat” (Waever, 1995, p. 51). In particular three inter-linked criteria are central to this approach:

- the casting of the security issue as an ‘existential threat’;
- that necessitates the use of emergency measures;
- this shifts beyond the everyday norms and routines (Buzan et. al. 1998, p.26).

The logic of securitisation differs from a risk management approach which deploys a preventative focus on the potential rather than the concreteness of any given security act or threat. The intent of the risk management rationale is pre-emptive through measurement, evaluation and other actuarial methods of risk surveillance, control or reduction. As Foucault (1978 cited in van Munster, 2005, p.7) observes, risk management “does not have to draw the line that separates the enemies of the sovereign from his obedient subjects; it effects the distributions around the norm”. The processes of securitisation are thus a political choice and act. A sense of political community is re-established and the “we-ness” and societal identity powerfully reinforced (Williams, 2003, p.518).

The Australian response to the global security climate around the ‘war on terror’ in the wake of the 9/11 World Trade Centre tragedy exemplifies this approach. At the national level the then Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer (2004, p.1) invoked the following security rhetoric to mobilise the nation:

How can we fight a war against a tactic? Who is our enemy? Why do they attack us? How do we know whether we are winning or losing? The sad truth is that 9/11 did change the world we live in. We are engaged in a war to protect the very civilisation we have worked so hard to create - a civilisation founded on democracy, personal liberty, the rule of law, religious freedom and tolerance... The terrorism challenge we face does have the dimensions of a war. Its prosecution requires: clear-sighted political commitment; national vigilance and preparedness; an informed and resilient public; and a commitment of energy and resources that must be sustained over many years.

As a matter of national security the Howard Government fast tracked new legislation to protect against the threat of global terrorism including new control orders, preventative detention orders and questioning powers (Ruddock, 2007). The government committed \$3 billion to protecting Australia against terrorist threats with a further \$400 million given to Australian intelligence, security and law enforcement agencies in order to further strengthen the nation’s response (Downer, 2004). As Ruddock (2007, p.3) notes the community had misunderstood that it is a “necessary premise of any constitutional order and system of government is that people are alive...serious threats to national security must be addressed”. The Director-General of ASIO concurred

Australia continues to face a challenging and dynamic security environment. We continue to be a terrorist target and the threats of attack are likely to be with us for many years. An attack in Australia remains feasible and could well occur. (O’Sullivan, 2007, p. 129)

This military emphasis on enemies and focus on the centrality and institutional power of the sovereign state in matters of national security are not without its critics (see McSweeney, 1999). A key point of contention has been the dangers of fostering or legitimating a singular social identity that often reinforces conditions of intolerance and conflict. The post 9/11 call to arms by US President George W Bush offered a stark choice; “...either you are with us or you are with the terrorists”.⁴ Dyzenhaus and Thwaites (2007, p.9) argue that in the name of national security this leads to policy discourses that are “deeply, even dangerously misleading...despite the best efforts of our leaders to convince us otherwise”. For Williams (2003, p.519) it is “precisely under the conditions of attempted securitisations that a reified, monolithic form of identity is declared...and their negotiation and flexibility challenged, denied or suppressed”. To this end Huysmans (2002, p.47) suggests that speaking and writing about security is never innocent and holds with it the potential for the analyst to become part of the same technology that constructs and manages fear, control and order. The issue for security analysis becomes one of how to engage with securitisation discourses without replicating dominant and exclusionary modes.

⁴ George W Bush, post 9/11 'for us or against us' speech, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpPABLW6F_A, accessed on 22/9/2010

A second normative critique of securitisation as a mode of social analysis is that it lacks a critical or ethical frame by which to discriminate between violent or irrational claims of threat and emergency (Wyn Jones, 1999). To this the response has been that “the process of social construction can be studied and the security quality of the phenomenon understood, without actually legitimizing it” (Waever, 1995, p. 66). The Copenhagen School does not view securitisation as positive, with a strong emphasis on *de-securitisation* in order to “move issues off the security agenda and back into the realm of public political discourse” (Williams, 2003, p.523). Proponents of the approach argue that by scrutinising the limits of securitisation acts or processes, limitations or injustices can be challenged. This is particularly evident at the level of ‘national’ security not often exposed to rigorous debate within the public sphere.

The evolution of a more critical approach to securitisation takes a number of diverse forms that seek to offer “progressive alternatives to the security status quo” (Wyn Jones, 2005, p.218). Work by Hansen (1999) for example investigates the absence of securitisation in circumstances when it is clearly required. Other studies have focused on questions of political power and challenged the role of elites over contested resources (Dalby, 2007). The larger geo-political/eco-political contexts of food, water and oil for example have generated a range of theoretical and analytical perspectives that intersect with human security (Kahl, 2006). This global nature of environmental issues that transcends state boundaries and policies is highlighted (Elliott, 2009). As is the need to more actively explore the role of civil society and private authorities as more than simply “an artefact of statist ontology” but as both system-reforming and system transforming agencies (Gale, 1998, p.345). For the non-traditional security scholar climate change triggers a range of environmental security risks and ‘insecurities’ related to (but not limited to) human displacement, resources scarcity and refugee migration (Dupont and Pearman, 2006).

New directions in security studies have sought to re-frame security as a positive or constructive agenda that can hold emancipatory goals (Floyd, 2007). This has challenged “the restrictive understanding of national security that has dominated realist theories ... for a more comprehensive framework for understanding security that takes human well-being and ecosystem integrity, rather than states, as the fundamental moral and analytical reference point” (Eckersley, 2004, p. 256). Central to this approach are calls for more imaginative responses to security threats, the need to learn from previous security decisions embraced, and to include sub and supra-state levels of security ambition and activity that expand the narrow state centric approach (Klein, 1997). This includes a rejection of the early military approach to securitisation, in favour of alternative modes expressed through deliberative democracy, education, and the values of compassion and caring (Dobson, 2004).

As a lens for understanding climate change policy action a critical security agenda offers a means to assess the ways in which security policy furthers particular political interests. Climate security narratives could be analysed by investigating what climate change security (insecurity) discourses exist both within and between the different parts of the broader democratic governance system. This might allow a fresh approach to critical security theory free from the polar constraints of either the ‘police frame’ (nationalistic and military association) or the ‘priest frame’ (non-military, egalitarian, norms, agencies and strategies) that has shaped the security debates over the last three decades. It is to the national adaptation role for Australian cities through the critical security lens that the paper now turns.

Risk in the city – adaptation as a national security agenda?

The battle to prevent catastrophic climate change will be won or lost in our cities...

(C40 Cities, 2010, p.1)

Cities and urban regions are increasingly seen as key players in the national security response to the risks posed by climate change. The C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group for example advocates urgent recognition and action from national governments around the **crucial role of cities** if the ‘battle’ to prevent catastrophic climate change is to be ‘won’⁵. A report by the Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering (ATSE, 2010) concludes that “the high degree of urbanisation in Australia, together with the observation that cities are major consumers of energy, water and food and emitters of greenhouse gases, means that managing our cities is an essential national issue as climate change adaptation and mitigation become increasingly important” (p.33).

In Australia, where nearly 70 percent of the population lives in the five largest cities largely located on the vulnerable Australian coastline, the security risks around climate change have a necessarily urban overtone. The highly concentrated nature of urban populations coupled with the relatively fixed nature of much of the metropolitan built form serves to magnify climate-related risks from extreme weather and natural disasters (i.e. sea-level rise, heat waves and drought). These include: food, water and energy scarcity; population displacement and movement; key infrastructure destruction and damage (i.e. rail, telecommunications, sewerage); and the spread of infectious diseases (Dupont and Pearman, 2006). The urban impacts of climate change have been viscerally highlighted in the *State of Australian Cities Report* (Australian Government, 2010):

Climate change is expected to alter the frequency of extreme weather events such as droughts, bushfires, storm surges, cyclones and hail. This is expected to increase damage to infrastructure, disrupt key services, increase insurance costs, increase risk to human life including respiratory disease, heat stress, post-event disease outbreaks and other health-related impacts. ... The 2009 January heatwave in Melbourne resulted in the buckling of train tracks, collapsing transport networks across the city. In addition, city morgues exceeded capacity as they managed more than twice the number of bodies than in the same period of the previous year. (p.94)

The speed and immediacy of climate change impacts on Australian cities poses considerable challenges to existing institutional and governance structures. Located within Australia’s three-tier federal government system the largest cities are now recognised as having or nearing ‘world city’ or ‘global city’ status (Hambleton and Gross, 2009; Kubler and Randolph, 2009). They act as significant international nodes for economic, political, communication and cultural exchanges. Yet all Australian cities currently suffer from an absence of clear and effective institutional arrangements for the planning of urban development and the coordination of urban services (Gleeson et. al, 2010).

A stronger national policy role for Australian cities has long been advocated by urban researchers who have pointed to the disjuncture between the concentration of population and yet the absence of dedicated structures for urban decision making for welfare and well-being at every scale, from the individual to the nation (Stilwell and Troy, 2000; Lennon 2007). In her keynote address for the 2007 *State of Australian Cities Conference*, McQuirk noted that in Australia “national public policy settings have had a tendency to be spatially blind despite their deeply spatialised impacts” and that as a result “urban governance capacity clearly needs to be lifted on to the national agenda” (p.9). At the core this is envisaged to involve the development of nationally

⁵ See C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, accessed on <http://www.c40cities.org/>, 5 September, 2010

defined urban policy priorities that focus on enhancing the sustainability of cities within a post-welfare neoliberal context. The lack of action on climate change at the metropolitan scale has further exposed this democratic deficit, bringing with it increased calls for greater levels of state steering as a means by which to secure the Australian city.

In his polemic essay the former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd specifically referred to climate change as ‘a potent’ exemplar of social democracy that the face of abject market failure has highlighted “the role of the state as fundamental” (Rudd, 2009, p.1). In particular he pointed to the nation-state as the primary actor responsible for positively responding to the current crisis: 1) in rescuing the private system from collapse; 2) in providing direct stimulus to the real economy because of the collapse in private demand; and 3) in the design of a national regulatory regime in which government has ultimate responsibility to determine and enforce the rules of the system. However as Eckersley (2005, p.159) reminds us there are “few green theorists who are prepared to defend the nation state as an institution that is able to play, on balance, a positive role in securing sustainable livelihoods and ecosystem integrity”. Democracy, particularly in its more deliberative forms operates far beyond the nation state, constitutional frames and electoral cycles (Dryzek, 2009).

So how could a national security approach to the climate-risk city be democratically framed? Australia’s National Security Statement (NSS) refers to climate change as a fundamental national security challenge for the long term future (Australian Government, 2008). National security has been defined as “freedom from attack or the threat of attack; the maintenance of our territorial integrity; the maintenance of our political sovereignty; the preservation of our hard won freedoms; and the maintenance of our fundamental capacity to advance economic prosperity for all Australians (Rudd, 2008, p.1). In Australia a number of quite different national security imaginings around the climate-at-risk city have emerged that range from visions of reformist nation-building, strategic defence agendas through to radical ‘guardian state’ change. Each security narrative works to reframe climate change adaptation in cities as a national issue in quite different ways and will be outlined in the following sections.

National security narrative 1 – nation-building, infrastructure and planning

Meaningful adaptation to climate change is about creating more resilient and equitable urban settlements that cannot be considered independent of planning and “the very large deficits and deficiencies in basic infrastructure” (Satterthwaite et. al., 2009, p.7). As part of a broad national response to climate change adaptation the enactment of the *Infrastructure Australia Act 2008* created new federal agencies such as *Infrastructure Australia* and the *Major Cities Unit* responsible for key infrastructure and planning in Australian cities. The establishment of the Cities, Housing and Planning Unit by Federal Treasury has further emphasised the commitment of the Australian Government to its urban settlements.

In its December 2009 Communiqué the *Council of Australian Governments* (COAG) stated the need to “.....ensure our cities have strong, transparent and long term plans in place to manage population and economic growth, plans which will address climate change, improve housing affordability and tackle urban congestion”. To this end all capital cities will have strategic plans that meet national criteria around sustainability by 2010 upon which national funding will be linked with annual contributions starting at \$700 million from 2012–13 (AURIN, 2010, p.8). This is a ‘soft’ security response because climate change is subsumed under the over-arching agenda vision for Australian cities that are “productive, and globally competitive, with integrated land use, transport and infrastructure planning driving more efficient investment and outcomes” (Australian Government, 2010, p.1). Its ambitions are for long-term city security and resilience through the funding and development of strategic plans and key urban infrastructure.

National security narrative 2 – a strategic defence and military agenda

A quite different national security approach from the nation-building narrative is an emphasis on strategic national defence and military agenda. In a Special Report by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) a number of recommendations are made that support the need for urgent attention to urban adaptation in light of the “potentially devastating climate change impacts on Australian lives and property” (Yates and Bergin, 2009, p.2). This is envisaged to include the need for a stronger mandate (and thus funding arrangements) for security agencies such as the Australian Defence Force (ADF) as a means to provide the personnel, technologies and capabilities needed to adequately respond to climate change threats.

As the *Hardening Australia* report points out the military army provide important services for urban settlements through the provision of logistic support, emergency shelter and search for bodies in emergencies such as bushfires, floods and drought. The argument posed is that the challenge of climate change for cities should be acknowledged as a significant national (homeland) security threat. This “will add urgency to the issue of climate change adaptation and pose questions for long-term defence force structure decisions in areas such as remote sensing, logistics and military engineering” (Yates and Bergin, 2009, p.3).

Both the ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ national security approaches to creating more adaptive and resilient become complicated however if “climate change exists because it is generated by the very economic, scientific and political institutions called upon to solve it” (Eckersley, 2006, p.254). As Spratt and Sutton (2010, p.1) reinforce “the obstacles to implementing climate solutions are political and social in character, not technological or economic”. Reform-led government investment and efficiency will not in and of itself resolve the paradox (Christoff, 2006). The incapacity of national governments to address urban risks at the local level, coupled with under-investment in urban infrastructure and the largely agonistic relationships between governments and low income groups has been highlighted in the climate change governance literature (Bicknell et. al. 2009, p. 15).

National security narrative 3 – towards the ‘guardian’ state

The need for a far more radical rather than reformist security vision around the emergency of climate-led change is part of the national imaginary around cities gaining currency. In his thesis on lifeboat cities Gleeson (2010, p. 104) argues that the urban Australian setting offers a set of countervailing adaptive possibilities: “a well spring of harm, and a field of possibility; a whirlpool of failing ambition and an island of refuge and renewal” (p.104). To this end he calls for the setting up of a ‘guardian state’ to steer increasingly eco-cidal cities through the current climate emergency. This is not a permanent institutional transformation but rather a “transitional state, just as in World War II, that knows it must dissolve at the first opportunity...rather than leaving the politics of our emergencies to the last possible moment” (p. 124).

At a practical adaptation level the guardian state would address climate risk and security in cities through a national settlement strategy as part of an ‘Australian Plan’ for navigating the climate crisis. This would then be devolved to communities and local authorities to manage through metropolitan commissions. Consumption rights *not* civil rights would be circumscribed in such circumstances underpinned by the three key ethical principles of *restraint, sacrifice and solidarity*. As Gleeson (2010, p. 142) describes

We enter the storm as yet ill prepared, our urban lifeboats far from secured and provisioned for the tough journey ahead....The new setting, towards sustainability and security, will require a changed urban course that will take our cities through the storm ahead to more resilient shores.

Conclusion: Navigating the urban storm

Cities are increasingly recognised as key institutional sites of national significance particularly vulnerable to climate change in ways complex and multi-faceted. Yet in the face of global recognition that climate change is capable of unleashing catastrophic ‘weather of mass destruction’, there has been little sign of the urgency and speed required to address adaptation within the Australian national urban policy context. Security threats are generally conceived in terms of an external ‘enemy’, but the same kind of urgency, response speed and strong state steering initiatives are also needed to combat the anonymous and ubiquitous climate emergency that threatens where most people currently live – the city.

Through the security lens a range of national narratives around urban climate change adaptation have been outlined from the reformist to the radical. Such an analytical approach focuses on critically examining *who* are promoting security measures and *how* these policies “form part of broader political projects and visions, and contribute to the construction of political authority as well as of political identities and subjectivities” (Risely, 2006, p.30). After all despite the compelling nature and urgency of the climate change imperative not all ways of presenting security threats are appropriate; not all ways of governing in a state of emergency are equal. To critically examine these emergent climate security narratives in ways that foster genuine democracy will involve better bridging or even transcending old debates around security theory, traditional academic disciplinary boundaries and developing research that is at its core, continually critically reflexive.

Adaptation to the climate risks facing cities is not possible without robust and effective democratic frameworks and governance structures in place at all scales from the national to the metropolitan. In the wake of the twin challenges of climate change and the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) there have been calls for a stronger national policy response to the climate risks facing Australian cities (Gleeson, 2010). Some of the national climate change rhetoric around cities does contain a war and/or military cast as advocated by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (Yates and Bergin, 2009). Others such as Spratt and Sutton (2007, p.1) contend that the urgency of the climate task requires emergency measures that must disrupt the institutional status quo by invoking actions that go “far beyond ‘business as usual’ and ‘politics as usual’ to bring about a rapid transition to a post-carbon, safe-climate future”.

Critically examining the complex democratic dimensions of climate change risk and security may open new spaces for exploring the radical potential necessary for climate action in cities both within and without the confines of the nation-state. It is envisaged that such a critical approach could include a focus on the national role but as part of the broader democratic system necessarily underpinned by progressive and deliberative ethical values and criteria. As Forster (2004, p.xvi) observes “it is our cities that determine how we live”. The question is will we be able to act quickly and decisively enough to support our cities to adapt to and mitigate climate change to the extent that we *can* live? In Australia at the national level this remains a profoundly uncertain governance question.

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