

Climate change action is urgent: Garnaut

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Federal government adviser Ross Garnaut is adamant Australia and other nations must press ahead with climate change initiatives regardless of the turmoil on world markets.

Professor Garnaut said the global financial crisis was a short-term problem that must not stymie efforts to solve the long-term issue of global warming.

But, he warned, it would take strong leadership across the globe for the issue to be dealt with under existing timelines.

"I think the world's got a big challenge (in climate change) and we won't overcome it unless enough governments take a long-term view," he said.

"The climate change problem will still be here tomorrow but our chances of dealing with it may not.

"It is bad policy to allow the approach to important long-term structural issues to be determined by short-term cyclical considerations.

"Certainly there are risks in the (financial) situation but there are also opportunities for leadership, and how we end up in Poland, in Australia, in the United States, it's going to depend on the quality of political leadership," he said.

"I think that we've got thoughtful leaders (in Australia) who are taking this issue seriously on both sides of politics at the moment."

Prof Garnaut said the proposals in his Climate Change Review, launched last month, continued to be manageable.

The current financial conditions were no reason for varying long-term policy, or delaying the 2010 start date for emissions trading, he said.

"I think that's still viable," he said.

Prof Garnaut made the comments at the launch of the book format of his review in Melbourne.

The 688-page book, being sold by Cambridge University Press for \$79.95, was launched by Governor-General Quentin Bryce.

Her involvement in the launch has been criticised as a political move that endorses a report promised by the Labor party during last year's election campaign.

In a carefully worded speech, Ms Bryce said climate change was "one of the most important conversations we are ever likely to have".

She said the issues were complex but the stakes were high and time was "largely not on our side".

"Change, whatever that may ultimately consist of, is inevitable," she said.

"As Australia acquires a new maturity and sophistication, a more discerning view of itself and the world, I believe we are well equipped as leaders, observers and participants in change."

Climate Change Minister Penny Wong reiterated Prof Garnaut's need for focus, saying Australia had a "moral" duty to tackle climate change and would not delay action because of the world economic meltdown.

In a speech to the London School of Economics, Senator Wong rejected calls from business and the opposition to hold off on emissions trading.

"There is a moral and personal dimension to this debate," she said.

"We have a responsibility to future generations to tackle climate change while we can.

"There will never be an easy time to make the transition to a low-carbon economy."

Prof Garnaut said he had received much international feedback on his report - both positive and negative - including criticism from Germany's environment minister that it had been too soft on Australia's contribution to the global solution.

"It's a conversation that this report is meant to generate because we want practical discussions about alternative programs that add up to a solution and if he's got a better one that adds up to a solution, then I'll talk to him about it," he said.

"So (there are) lots of good signs that others are engaging with the serious ideas that are presented in this report."