

Recovery must be low-carbon

Helen Liddell

The economic recovery must not undermine our efforts to tackle dangerous climate change. This is the greatest challenge. A high-carbon recovery will be no recovery at all.

The downturn presents us all with enormous economic and social challenges, which extend beyond rebuilding the global economy to ensuring that the recovery is sustainable and resilient and places us in the strongest possible position to face a post-downturn world.

Last week, political and business leaders gathered in Davos. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and Australia's Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, met to discuss the economic downturn. Britain's aim, reinforced at Davos, is an internationally agreed low-carbon recovery. If we do not reduce our emissions from their present path — by at least half, globally, by 2050 — we will bring upon ourselves a human and economic catastrophe that will make today's crisis look small.

Moving to a low-carbon economy is an urgent political imperative. Tackling climate change is not an issue that we can treat as pending, it is an issue that is affecting us now and will do so increasingly in the future.

The Australian government's new stimulus package is in the mould of initiatives around the world to drive recovery in a sustainable way. Practical measures such as insulation and solar rebates boost jobs while cutting carbon emissions. This determination to tackle climate change and promote energy efficiency is commendable. It's more than that: it's critical for sustaining a low-carbon future.

Sustainable, resilient recovery is becoming clear and its shape is low-carbon with an emphasis on major investment in energy efficiency. This means a fundamental shift towards renewables and carbon capture and storage, a re-engineering of electricity grids to enable dynamic demand and supply, accelerated roll-out of low-carbon transport and increased research and development of new energy technologies.

To have the greatest chance of success, these things must be done in a new partnership between government and business. In Davos, Brown called for a new business-led mission in support of these objectives, supported by economic and policy leaders. This will help us design a new global framework that will drive investment in the low-carbon economy and secure jobs and growth for the future.

This business-led taskforce will release its first report in time for the next meeting of world leaders at the London summit in April. I am confident that through the collective action of these leaders, and of societies across the world, we can address this challenge.

As an important member of the Group of 20 industrialised nations, solutions to global challenges will increasingly reflect the Australian vision of prosperity, responsibility and fairness. The London summit is crucial and Australia's role in it will be crucial. Between now and April, I will ensure the best ideas from Australian business and civil society are fed in.

Working apart we will surely fail, but working together we can, and will, succeed.

■ *Helen Liddell is British high commissioner to Australia and a former UK energy minister.*