

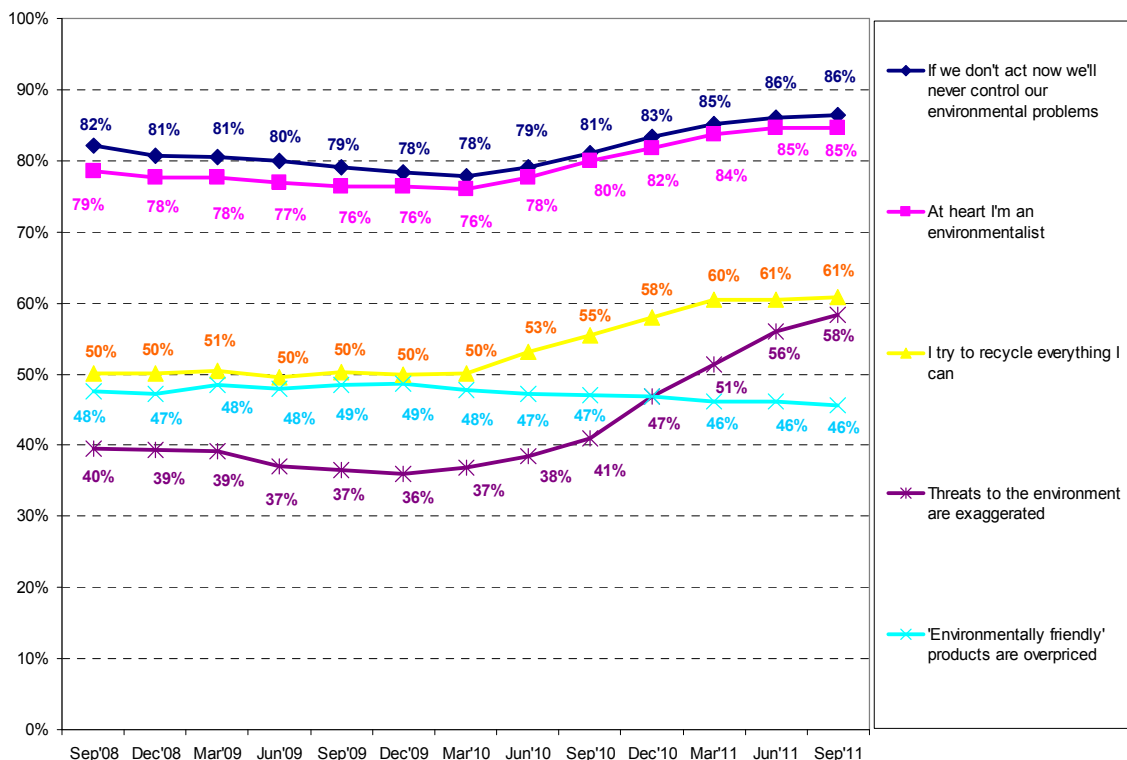
Year ends with no change on climate

Another year has come to an end, and none too soon. If there has been any reason to celebrate, most achievements have been individual. Collectively, as nations, there has been little to feel good about. The exceptions can be counted on fingertips, too few to influence the fortunes of the human race.

This country is one of the few exceptions. Against the backdrop of dark clouds, the Indonesian economy has survived the winds blowing from across its shores. It is in remarkably good shape. But all too often, we measure progress by what we have achieved economically, not by the major failures on other fronts that fundamentally assault our humanity. On one such score, Indonesia joined the other 193 nations in dismal failure, unable to make any meaningful progress in Durban. Many would argue that every single one of the delegations failed their people, failing to protect the interests of the citizens they represent. With due respect to the arguments offered by climate change sceptics, the will of the people as a whole is overwhelmingly obvious in country after country.

Take Indonesia for example. Considering the socio-economic realities of education and poverty, the voice of the common man is loud and clear. There are no sophisticated trappings to their earthy conclusions. Tracking steadily over the years, a growing number of Indonesians believe that “if we don’t act now we’ll never control our environmental problems”. With almost nine out of ten Indonesians in agreement, the leadership is not short on political clout. There’s a lot of talk, but not nearly enough action. Rainforests are still being cleared, rivers are still being polluted. The worn-out mental massaging by oil, paper and mining companies continue in the media. Undeterred, 85 percent of the voting public now say “at heart I’m an environmentalist”.

HOW INDONESIANS FEEL AND ACT ON CLIMATE CHANGE



To the critics who ridicule such sentiments, I say they need to be more holistic in their judgements of their neighbours. To begin with, individual cleanliness and environment consciousness is not one and the same thing. For a nation to become collectively conscious, basic systems need to be put in place and then managed every day. Garbage collection, recycling and disposal is one such basic need. Despite the lack of resources, six out of ten Indonesians across the country “try to recycle everything I can”. This is creditable, regardless of economic need or emotional desire to re-use possessions. With more resources and greater encouragement, such inclinations can be fostered among a growing number of eco-friendly people from all cross-sections of society.

Exemplifying the growing maturity of the common man, almost an equal number of Indonesians now believe that “threats to the environment are exaggerated”. With most people watching television every day, the viewer has learnt to accept the plausible and reject the ridiculous. Not easily frightened, the average Indonesian is taking stock of the changes they see in the skies, in the air, in the earth, in the waters around them every day. Yet, the political leaders have failed to recognise one of the Top 5 issues of concern to the voter in this country: the environment. They would do well to look across the seas, not too far away.

With no political capital in hand, Australian Prime Minister Gillard took courage from public opinion, broke a campaign promise, and introduced a carbon tax few were keen to stomach. Initially, the protests against the call for action were so loud they appeared to herald the end of her career. Weeks later, the indications today signal her triumph, climbing steadily in the Roy Morgan polls conducted each week. The example set by the European Union added to her own determination, putting the world’s only known but unpopular deterrent in place. She disregarded the petty arguments put forward by traditional allies like the United States. Only mental midgets could disregard the blatantly obvious: two centuries of carbon pollution by the wealthy developed nations, the relatively tiny emissions per capita from the developing economies, and the right of these countries to industrialise and prosper as well.

By walking away from the Kyoto Protocol, Canadian Prime Minister Harper illustrated the burden carried by conservatives and sceptics everywhere. By berating his liberal predecessors for their “irresponsible actions” and the “cost to the average Canadian”, he underlined their incomprehensible logic. Wealthy Canadians not paying a carbon tax today but suffering from a host of other possible miseries tomorrow, illustrates both a dearth of vision and a lack of courage. By continuing to sit on the fence, President Obama has lost yet another opportunity to demonstrate American leadership. His Republican opponents seem set to give him an easy race into a second term. Unfettered then, his true mettle will become apparent the world over. It isn’t easy to give up on Hope and Change.

Could it be that Kyoto, Bali, Cancun and Durban are too scenic to be appropriate venues for discussions on climate change? A flood-prone river bank in Bangladesh may well produce better results the next time another talk-fest is contemplated.

The opinions expressed are my own. The conclusions are based on Roy Morgan Single Source, the country’s largest syndicated survey with over 26,000 Indonesian respondents annually, projected to reflect almost 90 percent of the population over the age of 14.

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