

# Opinion: Like it or not, morality dictates that we wean ourselves off coal

October 30 2015, by Jeremy Moss

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A coalmining moratorium would tackle the problem at its source. Credit: TripodStories/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY

Kiribati's president Anote Tong recently led Pacific leaders in calling for the world to [consider a moratorium on new coal mines](#). This week, an open letter from several dozen prominent Australians [strongly supported his call](#).

The overall case for such a [moratorium](#) is strong. As the International

Energy Agency has [argued](#), if we are to have a reasonable chance avoiding dangerous climate change, we can only extract and consume around one-third of the world's known fossil fuel reserves, including coal.

As an effective means of weaning ourselves off coal, a moratorium is an obvious practical step. But this claim is bolstered by significant moral arguments.

For a start, a moratorium targets the right agents, morally speaking. Banning new coal production will impact large companies, rather than simply taxing consumers. As we know, taxes can often be dodged or end up burdening the wrong people.

Many people, [including Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull](#), decry this proposal on the grounds that if we don't do it, someone else will. This is wrong, for at least two reasons.

For one, it ignores the impact that the banning of new mines will have in the local country and elsewhere. As divestment campaigners point out, these campaigns are not just about reducing carbon emissions directly, but also about stigmatising heavy polluters to change public perceptions, which in turn increases the impetus for change.

Second, we should not blithely ignore compelling moral obligations not to harm others. The fact that other countries are prepared to sell uranium to dictators does not give us a moral right to do likewise. It is up to each country to take moral responsibility for the consequences of allowing its coal to be developed and consumed elsewhere. Morality is about setting high standards, not living down to others' low ones.

This may sound implausible until one thinks of all the other exports to which we apply this same principle. Uranium, tobacco, and even live

sheep are all things upon which nations impose controls (with varying degrees of success), because of the potentially bad consequences associated with their use.

What the above examples have in common is that they cause harm in a morally significant and blameworthy way. Avoiding causing significant harm should provide a powerful and important constraint on our actions – or else we should rightly be held liable for the consequences.

## **Coal quandary**

What does this mean for the future of proposed new coal mines in places like Australia? In the simplest terms, it means that there shouldn't be any. If we propose a new mine, some way will have to be found to make room for it in the world's carbon budget. And as with so many budgets, this one is already in crisis.

In practice, a moratorium should also extend to exploration rights as well as new rail links, ports, associated infrastructure and the subsidies that go with them.

If there is a criticism of the moratorium proposal it is that it does not go far enough. It is likely that much the same argument can be made to restrict gas exploration – particularly unconventional gas, which has issues with fugitive emissions that make its "green" credentials harder to justify, but that is a different story.

There is a lesson here for the climate movement.

The recent Federal Court decision to block the environmental approval of Queensland's Carmichael coal mine (since re-approved) is a step in the right direction. But we need much more than legal intervention. Governments need to stop approving such mines in the first place.

I suggest that climate campaigns should focus on influencing public opinion to the extent that political parties cannot afford to ignore this issue. In the long run, that will be much more important than campaigns to get us to reduce our own individual emissions.

Finally, one of the most misleading claims in this debate is the implied suggestion that without coal there is no way out of energy poverty. It is true that coal has allowed countries to industrialise and improve their standard of living. But this is not the same as demanding that coal production continue to expand in response to alleviating poverty. In the same way that a piece of string and a door handle are no longer good for dental hygiene, coal is not the answer to our long-term energy future.

If those opposing a moratorium on coal really want to behave morally by helping the poor, then stopping old [coal](#) and embracing new clean energy is a safer moral bet.

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