Report from ARRCC of interview between faith leaders and josh frydenberg

Earlier in August, six faith leaders met Australia’s environment and energy minister, [Josh Frydenberg](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/josh-frydenberg). Our group included Bishop Philip Huggins, the president of the National Council of Churches, a Uniting Church reverend, a rabbi, a Catholic nun and an ordained Buddhist. This is not the start of a joke, but a polite and serious exchange.

It might seem that religion has little to do with the environment or energy. Yet each of us at the meeting wanted to raise a matter that, when we consider the deepest values of our respective traditions, is of grave moral concern: the proposed Adani coalmine. We were there to ask the minister to revoke its environmental licence.

The delegation reminded the minister that a number of faith leaders from across Australia wrote him an [open letter](http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2017/04/28/4660734.htm) about it on 5 May, to which he had not yet replied.

Around the world a great many people of faith are deeply concerned about the climate crisis. Despite the reactionary nature of some in the United States, faith leaders are almost completely united and supportive of the science. The pope has issued his famous encyclical, [Laudato Si](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html), faith leaders were part of the successful movement in the US to stop the [Keystone XL pipeline](http://www.uscatholic.org/blog/2011/08/interfaith-leaders-protest-keystone-pipeline-white-house), and the [Dalai Lama has spoken of the need for strong action](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/oct/20/dalai-lama-says-strong-action-on-climate-change-is-a-human-responsibility). The co-founder of [350.org](http://www.350.org/), Bill McKibben, is a mild-mannered Methodist Sunday school teacher.

Of course, the faith traditions do not have a monopoly on morality. There are very proud secular and indigenous traditions in this struggle that we honour and respect. Yet we do have much to offer when it comes to ethics and morals. And on this issue, there is a significant groundswell.

In [Buddhism](https://www.theguardian.com/world/buddhism), the first precept is non-harm, or loving kindness, towards all beings. The tradition also points out the profound interconnectedness of all things, including all forms of life.

In Judaism, the first portion of the Torah, B’reshit, makes it clear that our human responsibility is to look after God’s world. We may use it, we may eat from it, but it is clear that we must maintain it in a healthy state to pass on to generations to come. In short, thousands of years before the term was coined, Torah has the strongest of mandates for sustainability.

Whichever way you look at it, this is the great moral issue of our time

Muslim leaders in the UK say: Allah in His Mercy has placed an amanat (trust) upon all of humanity to safeguard and nurture creation. He has appointed humanity as guardians of His creation, as “a khalifa (steward)” [Qur’an 2:30].

In the US, the evangelical Christian and climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe states: “The poor, the disenfranchised, those already living on the edge, and those who contributed least to this problem are also those at greatest risk to be harmed by it. That’s not a scientific issue; that’s a moral issue.”

Pope Francis writes in his encyclical: “Politics and business have been slow to react in a way commensurate with the urgency of the challenges facing our world … Those who will have to suffer the consequence of what we are trying to hide will not forget this failure of conscience and responsibility.”

Whichever way you look at it, this is the great moral issue of our time. Nothing less than the stability of civilisation and the viability of life on Earth is at stake.

Frydenberg told our delegation that, if Australian coal were not burnt in India, dirtier coal would be burnt instead, resulting in greater carbon emissions. We pointed out that one argument against the abolition of slavery in Great Britain was that they would just have lost market share to the Dutch and the French, who would apparently have treated the slaves worse. The minister rejected the comparison.

Frydenberg paints the Adani issue as more complex than we may appreciate. We need the employment. We point out how a fraction of the promised subsidies could employ more people, in clean, renewable energy jobs, while further coral bleaching and 500 extra ships per year through the reef would jeopardise thousands of tourism jobs. We emphasise the crucial truth that the world can only produce around 700bn tonnes more CO2 if we are to avoid climate catastrophe, and that global emissions are currently around 50bn tonnes a year, so time is extremely limited. Adani alone will add 4.6bn tonnes. We do appreciate the complexities; even so, this mine ultimately involves a simple moral choice.

Aside from the dangers of rising temperatures and seas, more intense storms, floods and droughts, World Health Organisation figures show that over 100,000 people each year will also die prematurely from lung diseases from burning the coal from this reef-wrecking mega-mine. The minister seems unmoved.

Rabbi Keren-Black asked the minister what he thought were the views of climate scientists employed by the Australian government about building this mine. Momentarily, Frydenberg seemed lost for words.

As the meeting came to a close, our Buddhist member, Tejopala, told the minister that he would stand in front of machinery if digging started and that other members of his order had said the same thing. Reverend Sangster concurred.

Faith communities have real influence. The minister probably only granted us a meeting because we are religious leaders. Perhaps the two most powerful things people of faith can do are to encourage moving our accounts from banks and superannuation funds that invest in fossil fuels, and to practice non-violent direct action – peacefully obstructing the worst coal, oil and gas projects by physically standing in their way.

As we stepped outside the meeting, Reverend Sangster turned to the group and said: “Well, then. See you at the barricades.” Indeed.

* Rabbi Jonathan Keren-Black is an environmental adviser within the Progressive Jewish Movement. Tejopala Rawls is a member of the Triratna Buddhist Order. If you would like to get involved in a faith-based response to the Adani coalmine or climate action generally please contact faithsforclimatejustice@gmail.com