

# Ardern disputes Greta Thunberg's criticism of New Zealand climate policy

Prime minister says New Zealand is doing more than activist suggests after Thunberg tweets about 'so-called climate emergency declaration'



New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Ardern said Greta Thunberg's reference to the country's policies were 'not the totality of our plans on climate change'. Photograph: Hagen Hopkins/Getty Images

## **Phil Taylor in Auckland**

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The prime minister, **Jacinda Ardern**, has responded to criticism of New Zealand's climate policies by Swedish climate campaigner Greta Thunberg, saying New Zealand is doing more than she might realise.

Thunberg retweeted a story critical of the government when it came to climate change and referred to New Zealand's "**so-called climate emergency declaration**". She took a line from the piece which said: "In other words, the government has just committed to reducing less than 1 percent of the country's emissions by 2025."

Ardern said she hadn't seen the tweet but that it had been described to her as a "reference to our public service carbon neutral goal of 2025".



### New Zealand declares a climate change emergency

"I would, of course, give the context there that, if that was the sum ambition of any government, then that would be worthy of criticism.

"It is not our sum ambition. And it is not the totality of our plans on climate change," she said. "But again, I think that it's actually for us just to get on with the business of fulfilling our obligations and expectations."

The 1% figure came from a **Newsroom story**, which Thunberg, 17, shared with her 4.4 million followers. It is not clear whether Thunberg thought a 1% reduction was the only emissions-cutting action New Zealand was taking, however the tweet caused a stir, with climate change minister James Shaw saying the government was working as quickly as possible and Thunberg was essentially pointing out what was already known.

"That we have a long way to go to narrow the gap between what our emissions are right now, and what they need to be in the future," he said

Last week, Ardern declared a climate emergency, and said the government sector will be required to buy only electric or hybrid vehicles, that the fleet will be reduced over time by 20% and all 200 coal-fired boilers used in the public service's buildings will be phased out.

An accompanying motion tabled in parliament sets up a Climate Change Commission tasked with putting the country **on a path to net zero emissions by 2050**, making New Zealand one of few countries to have a zero-emissions goal enshrined in law.

On Monday, Ardern said she was not going to pass judgment on whether Thunberg should have done more research, before her tweet.

“But equally I think it’s only a good thing [that] there are people out there continuing to urge ambition in action.”



*Jacinda Ardern receives a standing ovation after declaring a climate emergency in Parliament. Photo: Lynn Grieveson*

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Marc Daalder is a senior political reporter based in Wellington who covers Covid-19, climate change, energy, primary industries, technology and the far-right. Twitter: @marcdaalder.

**COMMENTS BY** Grahame Savage, Steve Green

**COMMENT**

# What if we create a better world for nothing?

***The declaration of a climate emergency is just virtue signalling if it isn't backed up by immediate, radical action to reduce emissions, Marc Daalder argues***

With the declaration of a climate emergency and a pledge to decarbonise the public sector by 2025 (or, as seems likely, make up the difference by spending millions of dollars on carbon offsets), New Zealand will have another heyday in the international headlines as a climate leader.

But we're actually so far behind that the Government is unable to tell me what impact a carbon neutral public sector would have on our annual emissions. Just eight out of 46 government agencies can provide complete and up-to-date data on their emissions.

The best estimate a spokesperson for the Prime Minister's office could give me is that the energy and transport needs of the Government result in a whopping 483,000 tonnes of greenhouse gases a year - which sounds like a lot until you realise we emit about 78.9 *million* tonnes a year as a country. In other words, the Government has just committed to reducing less than 1 percent of

the country's emissions by 2025, even as it notes in its own motion to declare a climate emergency that countries need to nearly halve emissions by 2030 to limit warming to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels.

New Zealand, for the record, will come nowhere close to meeting the IPCC's recommendation that countries reduce emissions to 45 percent below 2010 levels by 2030. In 2030, our net emissions will be just 6 percent below 2010 levels, according to projections from the Ministry for the Environment.

## **Leading by example**

The Government says its net zero public sector target is leading by example.

That's true - and there's value in leading by example, but you can't lead by example alone. Right now, the Government is modelling what it wants us to do - buy EVs, live and work in more energy efficient buildings and reduce emissions in all other aspects of our lives - but expecting us to pick up the burden without giving us the regulatory tools to do so.

Take Covid-19, an emergency of comparable urgency and magnitude that New Zealand has genuinely handled well.

Imagine if, as our case curve went exponential in late March and cases of community transmission with no link to the border began popping up around the country, the Government had chosen to 'lead by example' like it has here. That would mean a lockdown for the public sector and a kind plea for the rest of the country to wash their hands and social distance, but no legal requirement to stay home.

Obviously, that wouldn't have worked. Neither has successive governments' reliance on behaviour change without regulatory intervention to reduce emissions. Transport, which has been a part of the Emissions Trading Scheme for more than a decade, continues to see the fastest growth in emissions of any sector.

And yet, while countries like the United Kingdom announces a plan to ban the import of fossil fuel vehicles by 2030, the Government is nowhere to be seen on reducing transport emissions.

## New Zealand's Gross Emissions Profile

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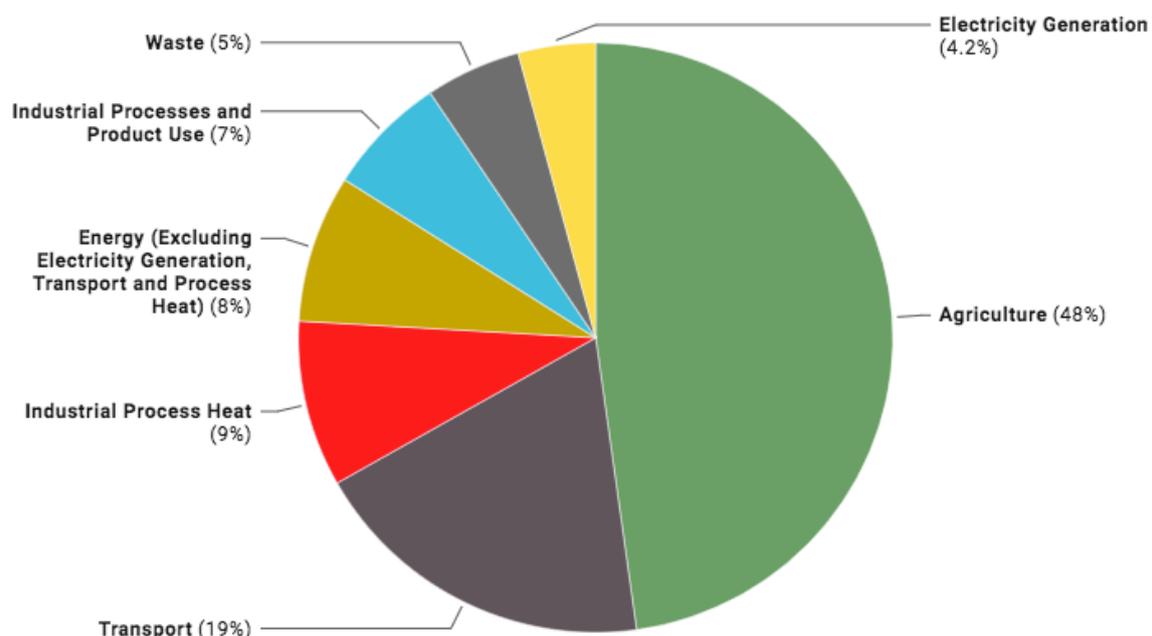


Chart: Newsroom • Source: Ministry for the Environment • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Then there's agriculture, which makes up almost half of our emissions. The Government has deferred the entry of agriculture into the ETS until 2025 - and even then it will receive such a steep discount that farmers will only have to pay an extra cent per kilo of milk solids. That's hardly likely to incentivise behaviour change.

While the Government dithers, climate change is real and it is only getting worse. Its impacts are being felt here as well and they will continue to be well into the future. A new study for the Deep South Science Challenge has found that **one in every 143 New Zealand homes** could lose insurance by 2050 due to the impact of sea-level rise.

Despite this, we can and should make a difference.

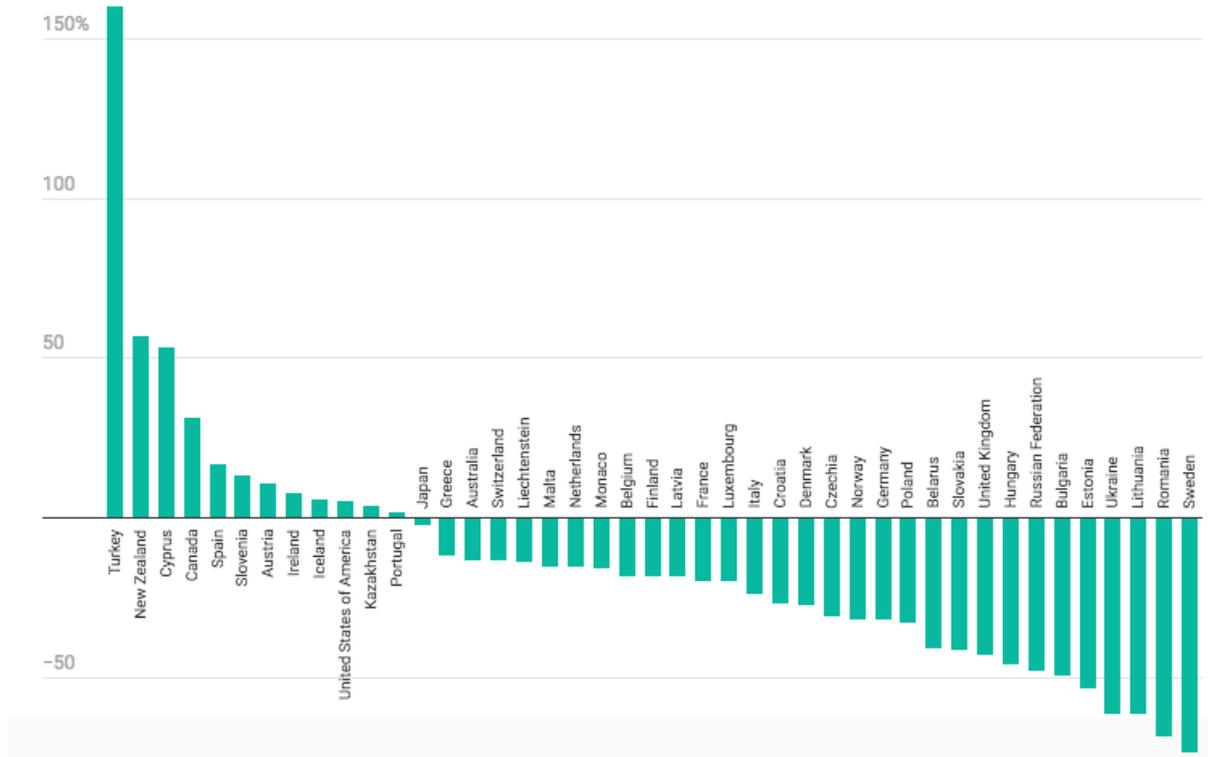
While do-nothing advocates will rush to remind us that New Zealand makes up only 0.2 percent of global emissions, they usually forget to note that we have just 0.06 percent of the world's population. We are emitting more than our fair share and contributing inequitably to the global issue of climate change.

There's also value in taking global leadership. But we are at risk of losing not only the opportunity to be global leaders but even the chance to be global followers on climate change. New Zealand may be **excluded from a summit of high-ambition global leaders on climate change** over concerns in the international community that we are not doing enough to reduce emissions.

New Zealand's clean, green image is increasingly sloughing off to reveal the climate laggards that we truly are. Of the 43 Annex I countries - which the UN defines as industrialised nations which have benefited the most from greenhouse gas emissions and therefore have the greatest obligation to reduce emissions - just 12 have seen net emissions increase since 1990. New Zealand is one of those.

## **Change in net emissions since 1990 among Annex I countries**

## Change in net emissions since 1990 among Annex I countries



Source: [UNFCCC](#)

In fact, New Zealand has seen the second-greatest increase in emissions (in percentage terms) among Annex I countries. And our emissions are still expected to increase through 2025, before beginning a slow decline that sees us falling well short of meeting our Paris Agreement target and the 2050 net zero target enshrined in the Zero Carbon Act.

If this Government truly believes that climate change is an emergency, then it's time to act like it. That means venturing beyond leading by example into true leadership.

**What if we create a better world for nothing?**

Climate Change Commission chair **Rod Carr told me recently** that climate change is a problem that requires leadership to solve.

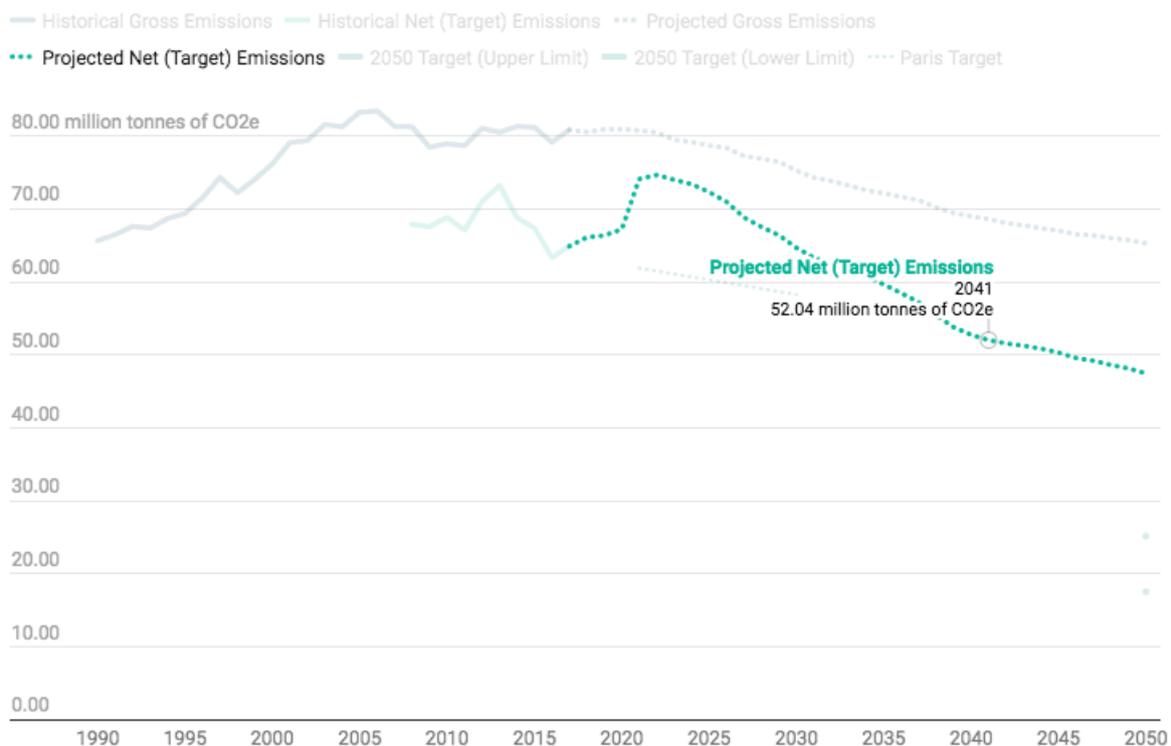
"We need our leaders to lead. This is an occasion where the nature of leadership is to draw a path, to reassure people about the options that lie ahead, to create both the sense of urgent action but also the sense of a better world," he said.

"This is not going to happen if people feel alienated and intimidated - they're not going to participate actively if they don't see the upside as well as some of the challenges we will face if we don't move. Leadership is being prepared to stake a position, having gathered some evidence, to then coach and guide and reassure others on a journey."

In this context, leadership means doing more than following along. The Government is waiting for the Climate Commission to release emissions budgets before staking out its plans for emissions across a wide variety of sectors, including transport and agriculture. But what's the harm in going hard and early now?

## **NZ Historical and Projected Emissions and Climate Targets, 1990-2050**

## NZ Historical and Projected Emissions and Climate Targets, 1990-2050



Source: Ministry for the Environment • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

Source: Ministry for the Environment

If the policies end up not being ambitious enough, then dial them up. If they're too ambitious, why would that be a problem?

As Carr told me, "If we're going after the least probability of regret, I think early bold action on climate that harnesses the community to walk with us, is going to be very important. If it turns out that we have slightly overreacted because technology breaks our way a little faster than we thought, or behaviours change a little sooner than we expect, then I would rather live with that regret than the alternative, which is we leave it longer and have higher regret later."

In 2009, as global leaders gathered in Copenhagen for what was then hailed as a landmark climate agreement - (New Zealand, by the way, just overshot its Copenhagen target by 27.7 million tonnes)

- *USA Today* published a cartoon by Joel Pett imagining a climate change denier challenging those at the conference.

Standing in front of a board listing the benefits of tackling climate change - preserving the rainforests, liveable cities, health children, clean water and air - the man asks, "What if it's a big hoax and we create a better world for nothing?"

At times, it seems like this Government is that fictional climate denier in Copenhagen. "What if we don't need to do as much as we think and we create a better world for nothing?"

Surely that's preferable to the alternative?