The cycling season in Europe is now in full swing – the Giro D’Italia is well underway and when over, attention will turn to the Tour de France. I mention cycling in our discussion today because there is a cycling metaphor that helps shed light on the role of individual political leadership in the context of climate change. Bear with me for a moment on this.

Cyclists in a road race speak of an invisible elastic band keeping the peloton or smaller groups of riders together. This elastic entwines the bunch – so that those at the front are figuratively pulling those at the back along the road. When there is a move up front, and someone tries to get away, or when there is slowing at the back, the elastic is stretched. Ultimately the band can be pulled to breaking point, and if that happens the race dynamic can change entirely. Out of the slipstream, it takes immense physical and mental strength for those left behind to get back in the competition.

We should not push the analogy too far, but this notion of elasticity is, I think, apposite for understanding leadership on climate change. Leadership to address global warming requires a substance and style of leadership that is willing to push to the front, potentially well in advance of community attitudes. Those states most likely to adopt the right mix of mitigation and adaptation policies will be those where political leaders can take the policy to the extreme in terms of what is necessary, while not losing the confidence of key constituencies. In short the challenge is to keep the elastic band stretched as far as it will go.

The scientific consensus concerning climate change has now largely been built, and is being expanded and strengthened through a growing body of research. As Dr Graeme Pearman, former head of the Atmospheric and Marine Sciences Division of the CSIRO told a gathering here at the Lowy Institute in April, the coordinated analysis of climate change science by thousands of scientists through the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is unprecedented in human history. Thanks to the IPCC’s Fourth Assessment Report to be released in full this year, there is now very good knowledge
about the climate change that has taken place to date, and the chances of future warming if no action is taken to limit and reduce emissions. Science is the first and arguably most important driver for policy action on global warming.

The second engine behind policy change is changing community attitudes. The 2006 Lowy Institute Poll showed that Australians considered climate change a major threat to the country’s future. More recent studies have confirmed this concern. We can see therefore that community attitudes have shifted to be broadly in line with what the science is telling us. There is also enormous community goodwill to do something about the problem – this is seen in events such as the Walk Against Warming and the Earth Hour in Sydney in March.

But the debate about climate change has thus far has had a degree of unreality. There has been little real engagement with the kinds of far reaching societal and economic changes that are necessary to our livelihoods. There is a perception that things can broadly continue as they have to date – except perhaps in a Toyota Prius rather than a Landcruiser. Yet as some present and future leaders have recognised, more radical transformations are necessary if we are to face up to the existential crisis of climate change. While global warming is certainly not the first global environmental problem to be confronted its intimate connection with human livelihoods across the planet means that any attempts to deal with it require a substantial reordering of societies and economies.

One leader in the arena of climate policy is the UK Environment Secretary David Milliband, who is feted by many as a potential future British Prime Minister. Milliband has given us a taste of what may be to come in climate policy, by being brave enough to float the idea of individual carbon rationing. It seems a necessary step in the transition from a carbon intensive, to carbon constrained to carbon neutral world. It would involve a carbon price being put on all commodities and services, and individuals and companies being given a certain allowance to be used over a specified time. Allowances could also conceivably be sold. Carbon rationing in this guise presents itself as a fetter upon human freedom and liberties unseen in the last century in the Western world save for periodic episodes of global warfare.

The fact that the idea of carbon rationing seems to come straight out of a dystopian novel by Aldous Huxley or George Orwell highlights that the required leadership on the climate change issue is facing an unprecedented challenge in terms of addressing an environmental threat in a way that commands present community acceptance. The received opinion is that consumers and businesses will simply not tolerate massive increases in energy or other prices. Nor will we accept a reorganisation of our lives, so
that we have to live not only within financial budgets but also carbon budgets. Our political leaders have a high degree of sensitivity to these real or perceived concerns, and seek to exploit them at every available opportunity. While I think that they are overblown I do not want to downplay them entirely – groups such as the Brotherhood of St Laurence and others have rightly highlighted how the poorest sections of our society will be hardest hit when inevitable energy price hikes come.

There are two major problems of scale confronted in climate change policy – one temporal and one spatial. First, while we are already feeling the effects of a warming world, the most severe are yet to come. But because there is a time-lag in the system it requires action now. This means that our political leaders need to balance competing equities – intra-generational equity (concern for present generations) and inter-generational equity (concern for future generations). Second, there is the reality that climate change policy is a global problem, requiring a global solution and seemingly leaving little room for meaningful individual action. This is the argument made with monotonous regularity by the Howard Government – Australia emits around 1.5% of total global emissions. This argument is being challenged – Australia is no special case. France, Spain and the UK have similar emissions but do not use this as an excuse for inaction. And as US Supreme Court in its decision in April in *Massachusetts v EPA* noted (at page 23) that “[a] reduction in domestic emissions would slow the pace of global emissions increases, no matter what happens elsewhere.” Indeed some states are making a virtue of individual, unilateral action, to help kick start greater international agreement. In March the United Kingdom Government released for public consultation its Draft Climate Change Bill which incorporates a binding 60 per cent by 2050 emissions reduction target, and sets up a system, including carbon budgeting, to reach it. One of the most striking features of the consultation document released with the Draft Bill is that the first stated purpose of the legislation is “to demonstrate leadership by example to help foster collective international action”.

Appropriate leadership therefore involves the stretching of the elastic of leadership almost as far as it will go. Suffice it to say I don’t think there is much danger of this happening in Australia unless there is a change of Federal government later this year. Quite the opposite has happened, the community has dragged the Howard Government reluctantly from its deep scepticism that climate change is in fact happening. It could be argued that this position is different not in kind, but merely in extent from those of other governments that mouth platitudes on climate policy but produce limited outcomes.

Should we worry therefore that our political system may not produce the kind of leadership that is required? In his best-selling *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, American geographer Jared Diamond explores the reasons why some societies and
leaders fail to anticipate environmental problems, then fail to perceive their true extent, then fail to solve them, and finally try to solve them but fail disastrously. He looks at the dynamics of group decision-making – from small cadres to societies as a whole. While one troubling conclusion from this is that we may get the leaders we deserve, Diamond also holds up examples of bold leadership such as President Kennedy’s efforts to step outside the groupthink that led to the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion to resolve the Cuban Missile Crisis, a security and environmental crisis of the highest order. The lesson of this crisis is that leadership can emerge, and frequently does, in times of need. The difficulty with climate change, of course, is that the crisis is not so condensed into a period of weeks, days, hours or minutes. It is stretched across time and across space.

In conclusion I’d like to pose some questions that I hope will provoke some discussion and debate. What political leadership is needed to address climate change? Can we realistically expect it to emerge? How can civil society and business inculcate such leadership? Is the problem not so much our leaders as our political system in its totality? But, most fundamentally, is democracy as we know it capable of responding to a massive process of gradual environmental change in which the effects are completely out of synch with short electoral cycles?