Like Australia, South Korea had a change of government last year. And like Australia’s, Korea’s new government was keen to distance itself from its predecessors’ legacies – particularly its “Green Growth” initiatives. Yet Korea’s president has since re-embraced the previous government’s climate policies and embarked upon “Green Growth 2.0”.

The contrast with Australia could not be stronger. Here, the Coalition government continues to pursue the dismantling of institutions Labor created to help green the economy. It began by disbanding the Climate Commission. The Senate is considering legislation to abolish the carbon tax, the Climate Change Authority and the Clean Energy Finance Corporation (CEFC).

The Coalition made climate policy its key point of difference with Labor. The Abbott government is clearly committed to its promise to repeal the carbon tax – there is little political wiggle room there. But the package of repeals before the Senate extends far beyond the carbon tax.

The institutions the government is seeking to dismantle were hardly mentioned during the election campaign. That leaves plenty of scope for a policy reversal, if the government so chooses. The Korean experience tells us that such a reversal is not impossible.

Seoul’s change of heart
Korea’s president Park Geun Hye spent her first eight months in power distancing from her predecessor’s “Low-Carbon, Green Growth Strategy” – or “Green Growth 1.0” as it’s now known. Then suddenly, in October 2013, Park changed her tune and openly embraced her predecessor’s climate policy approach. Korean policymakers now speak widely of “Green Growth 2.0”.

Similarly, upon coming to power, Park “downgraded” the high-level co-ordinating body for Green Growth 1.0 – the Presidential Committee on Green Growth – to a prime ministerial committee. Again, the aim was to distance herself from her predecessors for political purposes. Yet the committee retained the authority it enjoyed in its previous life.

One of our recent discussions with committee chairman Professor Seung-hoon Lee reveals that he intends to use that authority to vigorously pursue the previous administration’s green growth strategy. These policies are principally focused on creating, commercialising, producing and exporting green technologies, products and processes.

If the government’s approach to Green Growth has undergone any substantial change of note, it’s in the substance of the Green Growth Committee’s work. Green Growth 1.0 was focused on “platform building”. Green Growth 2.0 is focusing on implementing and extending even more ambitiously the initiatives set in motion from 2008 to February 2013.

Take, for instance, a smart grid test-bed created on Jeju Island in 2009. The smart grid infuses information technology innovations into the existing power grid. The goal is to achieve higher levels of efficiency and increase the amount of electricity available for use.

The mass introduction of renewable sources of energy and wide demand for new renewable energy uses, such as electric vehicles, all depend on the existence of a smart grid. With the conclusion of the testing of key technologies needed to operate the smart grid, the Korean focus will shift to commercial trials. The first will be in one major metropolitan city and then trials will steadily expand across the nation.

Of course, as in other countries moving to lead the way in a clean-tech future, such as China, institutional obstacles remain. Korea has to overcome these before implementing a world-first infrastructure.

Will Canberra see sense?

The question for now is whether the Australian government – which also made commitments to greening and growing in 2008 and faced significant political opposition to elements of these plans – will perform a similar about-face to Korea’s, and re-embrace the goal of leading the charge into a clean-tech future.

What are the chances that the Abbott government will have a change of heart about scrapping bodies – such as the CEFC – that exist to support the development of local green industries? While the Korean case shows that such an about-face is possible, we suggest it’s highly unlikely. This is not because a good political and policy case cannot be made for such a shift.
The CEFC, for example, is certainly delivering on its goals of promoting the creation, commercialisation and manufacture of green technologies, products and processes. It’s a stellar example of effective “direct action” actually in action. The CEFC could easily be made compatible with the government's own climate policy approach.

While climate policy in Australia has been a politically poisonous issue in recent times, it was no less poisonous in Korea. Political dissatisfaction with the controversial Four Rivers Restoration Project was a key factor undermining popular support for former president Lee Myung-bak’s popularity – it was his carbon tax, so to speak. But this hasn’t stopped president Park from continuing the Lee government’s clean-tech industry projects.

The main obstacle to a similar rethink in Australia is lack of political will on the part of our leaders. This is the very thing that has thwarted the building of Australia’s renewable energy industry in the past.

Of course, the lack of a “seriousness of purpose on the part of the government” is not helped by “a fractured political constituency for renewables that is unable to form a united coalition against fossil fuel producers”, as environmental politics researchers John Mathews and Elizabeth Thurbon have argued. Even if the renewable energy industry was speaking with one voice, it’s unlikely that the Abbott government would hear it, simply because it doesn’t want to.

The outcome of the Senate’s deliberations will, it must be hoped, reveal that this lack of political will is not bipartisan. Many speeches in defence of the CEFC highlight that there are elected officials who believe we should invest in the clean-tech industries of the future.

Retreating now from supporting the further development and commercialisation of Australia’s established portfolio of green technologies will undoubtedly set back the achievements made thus far. The governments of Australia’s neighbours to the north, including not only Korea but also China and Singapore, are moving ahead full steam.

The choice for Australia is a relatively simple one. Do we want to establish a presence in the industries of the future? Or will we simply let our competitors leave us behind? The Abbott government might not be listening, but hopefully the Senate is.

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