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Climate calculus:
Does realist theory explain the Howard Government's decision not to ratify the Kyoto
Protocol?

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Benjamin Paul Dempster

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ABSTRACT

Climate change caused by greenhouse gas emissions has the potential to cause widespread damage to the environment. As scientific and political consensus converged on the necessity to take action, a large number of countries negotiated the Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1997, with the goal of limiting these emissions.

Australia under the Howard Government initially played an important part in these negotiations, but refused to ratify the Protocol. The government cited the lack of binding targets on developing countries and the potential for harm to the Australian economy as the reasons it rejected the agreement.

International relations theory studies large-scale political forces and analyses their interplay in the global political system. Realism is a model of international relations that views countries as self-interested, security-driven bodies that exist in a state of international anarchy.

This study examines whether realist theory offers a satisfactory explanation for the Howard Government's decision not to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. The study focuses on six realist ideas and examines the evidence for each. Based on thematic analysis of textual data taken from official political archives and newspapers from 1998–2004, it suggests that realist theory does provide an adequate explanation of the Howard Government's rejection of the Kyoto Protocol.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABARE	Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics
ALP	Australian Labor Party
CoP	Conference of the Parties (i.e. parties to the UNFCCC)
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
NGO	Non-governmental organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

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