

Demonising Wind Energy in Australia: The South Australian Blackout

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From the time when energy became a state ambition and the central, almost paranoid platform of security, its messiness became apparent. Energy reserves needed to be controlled; corrupt regimes with access to such resources needed to be placated, or, if not, overthrown and replaced by compliant puppet governments. The world of energy is one governed by invasion, acquisitive brutality and resistance.

Even within countries less susceptible to regime change via energy exploitation, the tendency to politicise the issues surrounding access and acquisition remain. Cleaner, more sustainable options are deemed unpatriotic, draining traditional industries and jobs. The sense that the climate change phenomenon is an exaggerated bogey of politics persists.

At stages the argument has been panicked. The violent storms in South Australia last month, so-called “act of God” events which inflicted an energy blackout through the state, did not draw sympathy from the federal government, which persists in its autistic policies on the environment. The opposite was the case.

According to Australia’s Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, the blackout was exacerbated by poor energy policies, notably of the environmentally inclined sort. The finger, he argued, could be pointed to renewal energy targets at the state level deemed “extremely aggressive, extremely unrealistic.” It did not take long for the suggestion to be made that the Greens, and those sympathetic to green policies, be hauled out and given a public dressing down.

Various political figures were also lending their voices to the vitriolic mix, adding good lashings of distortion. After all, South Australia is something of a golden boy in the renewable revolution in a country often hostile to it. The figure of 41 percent of the state’s energy generated from renewables, much of it drawn from wind, was condemned as a feature of irresponsibility rather than praised as a matter of foresight.

Permanent school boy Deputy Prime Minister Barnaby Joyce might well be a fanatic when it comes to repelling the introduction of biosecurity threats into Australia (remember the Depp affair), but tends to be softheaded on the greening of the economy.

Earlier this month, Joyce suggested that the mid-latitude cyclone, which generated several tornados, should not be saddled with the dramatic devastation. He had found the indisputable culprit. “It wasn’t a hurricane. It was a severe thunderstorm. They’ve had severe thunderstorms before.” Wind energy, in short was “obviously not working” given the dramatic consequence.

Having made the erroneous deduction that South Australia, having had similar events

before, should have been more resilient in the face of the usual, he condemned recent spikes in energy prices in the state, and the “appalling management” on the ground.[1]

Similar views could also be heard from the muddled Energy Minister Josh Frydenberg, who remains a customary conquistador indifferent to the renewable industry, and South Australian senator Nick Xenophon, wind energy’s permanent critic.

The searing spotlight had moved to demonising wind and the uneven nature of renewable targets across the states. “Federal and State renewable energy targets being different,” he explained to Radio National, “does create a problem, because it skews investment in an inefficient way”. The theme here: money, investment, rather than environmental conscientiousness.

Frydenberg went on to tell the 7.30 Report that, “questions are raised by the virtue of the increasing amount of renewables”, a point he twinned with an admission that “South Australia lost its power due to the most extreme weather event there in half a century”.[2]

Wind energy, as Australia’s Chief Scientist Alan Finkel explained, had become something of a handy scapegoat. Not that his views mattered. “If you had a natural gas generator there, and the voltage was collapsing, and the frequency was collapsing, that natural gas generator would have taken itself off the grid just as rapidly as the wind farms had taken themselves off” (ABC News, Oct 6).

In the populist bilge, the exceptional nature of the weather event, advanced by the energy experts, was ignored. The views of engineers, gathered from such sources as ElectraNet, which installed temporary transmission towers in the state’s mid-north, were discounted.

A regulatory report released this month by the National Energy Market Operator examining the outage came to the sensible conclusion that weather’s destruction of infrastructure, not environmental mismanagement, was the catalyst. The authors of the report acknowledged a sudden loss of wind energy, but preferred to focus on the effects of the storm. The result of the damage to transmission lines increased pressure on the main interconnector with Victoria, resulting in a tripping of the system after an inevitable overload.

Admitting that at the political level would be sensible, but in the ruthless and often misinformed world of energy politics, it would be unexpected. The point is made more acute in a country where climate change denialism, along with a continued insistence on fossil fuels, prevails with stubborn determination. In all this, the de-greening of Turnbull’s faux credentials in this entire process is perhaps the most striking feature of the debate.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-10-06/appalling-management-to-blame-for--prolonged-black-out-in-sa/7908032>

[2] <https://newmatilda.com/2016/10/09/black-friday-brain-fades-black-outs-and-josh--frydenbergs-awkward-day-in-canberra/>

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