

Weaponizing Coal: Australia Gives Ukraine a Gift

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*Few would forget the antics of Australian **Prime Minister Scott Morrison** who, as Treasurer, entered Parliament with a lump of coal and proceeded to praise it with the enthusiasm of a fetish worshipper. “Don’t be afraid,” he told fellow parliamentarians. “Don’t be scared.”*

He has, with deep reluctance, conceded that climate change is taking place and, with even deeper reluctance, that human agency might be involved. But under his leadership, the fossil fuel lobby of Australia has no reason to fear. Denialism has simply become more covert.

This month, **Industry Minister Angus Taylor**, the government’s premier ignoramus on climate change, [promised](#) AU\$50.3 million to fossil fuel entities to guarantee Australia against “the devastating impacts of a gas supply shortfall, as seen recently in Europe.” His government was “accelerating priority gas infrastructure projects that will protect Australia from potential energy shortages, keep pressure on prices and create jobs in regional Australia as part of our plan for a stronger future.”

Indeed, the lobby has every reason to be delighted with that other recent announcement by Morrison to enlist Australian coal in Ukraine’s war effort. With a shamelessness only he can muster, the Prime Minister has managed to make digging and exporting coal, even in small amounts at great cost, virtuous. In an official statement, Morrison [claimed](#) that,

“in response to a direct request from Ukraine, Australia will donate 70,000 tonnes of thermal coal. This will help Ukraine’s power generators operating and supplying electricity to the power grid at this critical time.”

Little by way of logistical or pricing detail was given. We know who benefits the most from this. A triumphalist Whitehaven Coal will supply it, and the cost to the Australian taxpayer will be in the order of AU\$31 million. Given that Whitehaven Coal [has been a Liberal Party donor](#) – AU\$98,000 has been given over the last five years – the whiff of something rotten in the land of coal is strong.

The company's board would have been delighted by the recent spike in its share prices. It also remains unclear whether the company offered a discount on the coal to the government. One thing is beyond doubt: Canberra is offering to foot the transport bill.

The coal, according to the Prime Minister, was needed "before the end of May and we have arranged the shipping for that to take place and are working with other countries to ensure it can get to Ukraine." With beaming delight, Morrison could say that "it's our coal. We dug it up. We've arranged the ship. We've put it on the ship and we're sending it there to Ukraine to help power up their resistance and to give that encouragement."

Richard Denniss, an economist based at the Australia Institute, [is doubtful](#) about the whole operation. "Sending a ship load of coal to Ukraine via Poland is just conservative virtue signalling." If anything, the measure was insensible, given that Poland itself had "lots of coal. If we really thought Ukraine needed coal (I doubt it) we could just give them some money to buy Polish coal."

The request is also slightly odd given that it was conveyed to Canberra from Poland itself. "It was made to me," claimed Morrison, "through the Polish Prime Minister and we're very pleased to be able to meet that need."

The amount of thermal coal is also raising eyebrows amongst those not inclined towards astrological numbers and fantasy projections. Australia is sending a mere 10th of Ukraine thermal coal reserves, [described](#) by **Resources Minister Keith Pitt** as making "a real difference for the people of Ukraine by providing continued energy security, ensuring continued electricity supply to homes and industry". With little justification, Morrison is also making the claim that a million Ukrainian homes will be powered, though left the duration of that effort in doubt.

The answer to such a crisis is not coal nor, in fact, fossil fuel exports masquerading as humanitarian rescue. Bernard Keane of *Crikey* [makes a relevant observation](#): "the clear lesson of Putin's aggression in energy terms is the need to get out of fossil fuels as quickly as possible, removing the volatility and strategic weakness that reliance on global commodities brings."

Whether the coal will ever reach its intended recipients is a question worth asking. If the coal transits through Poland, it will have to be transported via rail to Ukraine, which raises issues of viable infrastructure. Sea access is also bound to be unlikely, and even if that is taken, one analyst pithily [notes](#) that a vessel "should be quite a sitting target if the Russians knew what it was and where it was coming from."

The Morrison government has made a habit of celebrating the announcement rather than the execution of detail. Mendacity and incompetence are twinned in this government's insignia, and Ukrainian officials best ready themselves for disappointment.

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