



Perspectives

Wind beneath their contempt: Why Australian policymakers oppose solar and wind energy



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Australia
Renewable energy
Policy capture
Psychology of policymakers

ABSTRACT

Renewable energy has met with hostility from policymakers. This is particularly true of Australia, which has ample wind and solar resources. Explanations of this hostility have so far focussed on material and ideological factors, especially policy capture by fossil-fuel interests. This article gives examples of discursive and policy hostility to renewables, before examining the material and ideological factors that partially explain policymakers' hostility. It then discusses psychological and psychoanalytic perspectives, specifically Mannheim's cohort effect and Becker's 'Terror Management Theory' as additional explanations. Limitations of the study, and scope for further action and research opportunities are discussed.

1. Introduction

Renewable energy¹ is often met with hostility from policymakers. Some of this can be explained by incumbents' defensive actions ([1,61]) and from the general inertia of socio-technical systems [57]. However, the level of hostility towards energy systems more conducive to meeting decarbonisation goals is extreme, despite being generally popular with the electorate [2]. Australia is case in point, where, with its abundant wind and solar resources, and its research capacity, it has potential become a world leader [3]. Explanations as to why this hostility is so extreme and prolonged are lacking. At time of writing a (conservative) Federal government is refusing to set targets post-2020 for renewable energy, is actively seeking to undercut state-based schemes that seek to go beyond the relatively low level of ambition enshrined in the national scheme, and is attempting to change the rules of its Clean Energy Finance Corporation to enable new coal-fired power stations to be built.²

Transitions are as much cultural battles as they are political ones (indeed, these iterate and imbricate over time). The study of policymakers' cognitive frames and needs are a key part of the burgeoning study of the politics of socio-technical transitions ([4,62]). This article turns this attention to Australia, where renewable energy is in trouble. In early 2017, at the beginning of the political season, there were murmurs amongst senior figures in the Liberals and National Parties of state support for the construction of new (so-called) "High Efficiency

Low Emissions" coal-fired power stations. In early February, the Australian Treasurer, Scott Morrison, came to parliamentary Question Time with a large lump of coal, provided by the Minerals Council of Australia, the peak trade association for mining companies. The coal was lacquered so as not to undercut the message that coal was 'clean'. Meanwhile, the main opposition party, the Australian Labor Party (ALP) has recently retreated from the "50% renewable energy by 2030" target [5], that activists had laboriously campaigned for [6].

This article proceeds as follows. Firstly examples of 'discursive hostility' are provided – surrounding alleged aesthetic, health and environmental impacts, decarbonisation ineffectiveness, and finally the purported inability of renewables to 'keep the lights on'. This is followed by a brief overview of the policy-hostility displayed by the Coalition government, but it should be noted that in office the ALP also moved slowly to introduce institutional support for renewable energy [7,8]. The main body of the article begins by outlining the various material and ideological explanations that have been put forward, before turning to necessarily more speculative explanations around the worldviews, psychological motivations and blind spots of policymakers. The article concludes by anticipating critiques of these speculations, and suggesting a research – and action – agenda.

2. Discursive and policy hostility

Discursive hostility to renewable energy has been a consistent

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¹ As per reviewer comments, this is a broad term that can include renewable electricity, biofuel, passive heat, solar thermal. For the sake of brevity, here I use it to refer to large-scale (wind-farms and solar plants) and small-scale (e.g. rooftop solar) *electricity* generation.

² The data for this perspectives piece have mostly been collected during my PhD thesis, which studies the strategies and tactics of incumbents faced with challenges during a socio-technical transition. They are illustrative and indicative rather than attempting to prove a set of hypotheses.

theme in Australian climate politics for more than a decade, mostly originating from conservative parties. There are at least four discursive subcategories argued – the purported ugliness of wind-turbines, the purported health impacts, the alleged ineffectiveness of renewables in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, the costs involved and the inability of renewables to ‘keep the lights on’.

The relative beauty of windfarms is clearly a determined by a complex interplay of individual values and tastes. Early proposed sites in Victoria were defeated on grounds of their impact on the beauty of the landscape and its value as a tourist destination [9]. From the mid-2000s, senior conservative politicians were vocal in their opposition. In July 2006, the Treasurer Peter Costello stated in a doorstep interview, ‘Well if you are asking me my view on wind farms, I think they are ugly, I wouldn’t want one in my street, I wouldn’t want one in my own back yard.’ [10: 254]. The next Liberal Treasurer, Joe Hockey said, on both radio talkback shows and at energy summits that he found the wind turbines around Lake George ‘utterly offensive’ ([64]). Former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott made many similar statements [11].

The health of both humans and non-humans have been central to the claims of windfarm opponents. Conservative politicians have lent support to the unsubstantiated claims that wind turbines have a deleterious impact on human health [12]. In early 2014 the new Abbott government began funding studies into this [13,14]. Shortly before he was deposed as Prime Minister, Tony Abbott argued that windfarms may have ‘potential health impacts’ [15].

The potential impacts on wildlife have been a similar discursive strategy. For example, in 2006, the Bald Hills windfarm was delayed because the Federal Environment Minister over-ruled state approvals ostensibly to protect the endangered orange-bellied parrot [10].

Questioning the efficacy of windfarms toward decarbonisation has formed a cornerstone of conservative politicians’ arguments. It has been argued that renewables have an intrinsic lack of efficiency, that they require a 100% back-up owing to the ‘intermittency’ problem of renewables, or point to the increased emissions in other parts of the world. Environment Minister Ian Campbell told a Senate Inquiry in 2006 that ‘If you genuinely tell people that building a wind farm here will save the planet from climate change you are doing a massive disservice to the environment. It is an atrocious misleading of the Australian community’ [16]. In the same year, the Federal Industry Minister derided State incentives as ‘Mickey Mouse schemes’ [10: 254]. This hostility has continued to date [17].

Economic equity and viability are a further discursive frame deployed by Conservatives [55]. The argument often made is that renewable energy requires extensive government subsidies in order to compete with existing providers of energy (coal and gas) and that this is unsustainable and unfair – the language of ‘rent-seekers’ is extensively used [18]. Further, conservatives argue that this ‘inefficiency’ will drive up energy prices for domestic consumers and manufacturers, with devastating economic consequences. Economic modelling, commissioned by incumbent firms and trade associations, is used to make argue this case forcefully and regularly.

However, the most dominant argument deployed by conservative policymakers is that renewables simply cannot ‘keep the lights on’. It comes in both blunt and regretful clothing. The first is best demonstrated by a speech given by John Howard, who as Prime Minister of Australia had actively resisted ratification of the Kyoto Protocol. He told a group of business leaders in July 2006 that:

‘Renewables will play an increasing role in Australia’s energy mix, but pragmatism, rationality and flexibility also call for realistic expectations about this role for the foreseeable future. The cost of delivering low-emission electricity from renewables remains very high, with difficulties surrounding baseload power demands’ [10: 254].

That claim to ‘hard-headed’ pragmatism and rationality sometimes comes tinged with regret. For example Malcolm Turnbull, currently Prime Minister, told journalists in early 2007 that ‘You cannot run a

modern economy on wind farms and solar panels. It’s a pity that you can’t, but you can’t’ [10: 254].³

While state and Federal support for specific renewable energy applications date back to the 1950s, most commentators begin their policy analysis in late 1997 [7,8,September]. The Howard Government was seeking a 118% target for its greenhouse gas emissions at the forthcoming Kyoto conference of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Attempting to burnish his government’s credentials, both domestically and internationally, Howard announced a Mandatory Renewable Energy Target (MRET – 2% by 2010). After much lobbying from electricity providers, the legislation finally passed in 2001 [19]. Infamously, in 2004 it emerged that Howard and his energy minister had called a meeting of fossil-fuel companies asking for their help in suppressing renewables, which were growing faster than anticipated, or desired [20]. Renewables were not supported in the 2004 Energy White Paper, which was described as the fulfilment of a fossil-fuel industry wish-list [21].

Elected in November 2007, the Labor Government of Kevin Rudd took almost two years to increase the target, which was later replaced with targets for both large scale and small-scale generation. Under Julia Gillard’s Labor Government, two new bodies – the Clean Energy Finance Corporation (CEFC) and the Australian Renewable Energy Agency (ARENA) were created.⁴

Since taking power in September 2013, the Coalition government at first attempted to abolish the CEFC and ARENA, but was unable to do so [58]. It has instead reduced their funding, reduced their independence and changed their terms of reference. It also commissioned a review of the Renewable Energy Target by a climate change sceptic, Dick Warbuton. This has all contributed to massive policy uncertainty and a drop in investment in renewables [22].

3. Explanations

Having presented examples of discursive and policy-hostility towards renewable energy from elite policymakers, I now turn to explanations. These can be grouped in three broad categories (which, of course, can overlap and interact, either re-enforcing or undercutting each other). Therefore, the headings are somewhat arbitrary. To aid the reader through a relatively dense set of arguments, the following table is provided (Table 1).

3.1. Material explanations

Running election campaigns has become steadily more expensive. In Australia, Federal elections are held on three year cycles; political parties are always hungry for cash. As Keane [24] revealed, since 2008, the mining companies have disproportionately shifted donations to the Liberals and Nationals. Individual politicians need to consider their employment opportunities when (not if) they lose favour with either their own party leaders or the voters [25]. Unlike many large incumbents, renewable energy companies and trade associations do not have non-executive directorships and well-paid jobs (or sinecures) to hand out.

Australian commentators (e.g. Ref. [26]) argue that the capacity of the state to act consistently and effectively in response to persistent

³ After losing his position as leader of the Opposition in late 2009, because of his support for a Labor-proposed emissions trading scheme, Turnbull became briefly evangelical about the role of renewables in driving down emissions. For example, he spoke at the launch of the “Beyond Zero Emissions” group’s “Stationary Energy Policy” in mid-2010. This fervour did not survive his ascension to the Prime Ministership in September 2015.

⁴ Even here there was controversy. The Greens, then in coalition with the ALP, insisted the CEFC and ARENA be independent statutory authorities rather than departments of state. Milne [23] states that this was “to stop hostile Ministers from raiding and undermining the purpose for which they were set up. The compromise was Martin Ferguson as Energy minister retained them in his portfolio but had no power to wreck them.”

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