

Pub: Sydney Morning Herald
Pubdate: Saturday 04th of September 2004
Edition: First
Copyright:
Section: Good Weekend
Subsection:
Page: 20
Wordcount: 5063
Classification:
Industry/Electricity/Alternative Energy
Weather/Greenhouse Effect
Geographic area:
Australia

An ill wind blowing CONTROVERSY

John van Tiggelen

Greenhouse gases need to be curbed, but is opening up Australia's coastline to a new species of high-rise development the way to do it? John van Tiggelen investigates one state's plans to harvest wind.

On top of the baldest of the Bald Hills, exposed between a sky and landscape shot through with wintry gloom, beef and lamb farmer Lindsay Marriott seems numb to the piercing south-westerly blasting off Bass Strait. But he can taste it. "This is the best kind of wind!" he shouts above the whooshing. "It's thicker, heavier, moister than warm air. Packs more punch." And he can sense its speed. "Eighteen metres a second, I'd say. Twelve is enough for top capacity." And he can almost count the cash its harvest will bring him, free of hardship. Though he prefers to keep that quiet. "It's not really relevant," says Marriott, jamming his hands in his pockets. "Enough to allow us to stay on the land, I'll admit. But if I didn't think it was the right thing to do, I wouldn't be in it." The Bald Hills barely rumple the plains that sheet down to the sea from the Strzeleckis, the rugged ranges south-east of Melbourne. Few of the urban hordes that descend to the South Gippsland coast each summer would ever have noticed them. But they will soon. Although the highest bald hill, the one Marriott has just parked his ute on, is a mere 90 metres above sea level, it will shortly bear a wind turbine jutting a further 105 metres skywards. So will some 50 other nameless hills, hummocks and knolls along a seven-kilometre stretch to the shores of Venus Bay.

Other wind farms are planned nearby, to the west, north and east. It's a similar story on the other side of Melbourne, towards the Portland end of the Great Ocean Road, where at least half a dozen wind farms are on the books. All up, in five years' time some 600 whirling pylons, each 30 to 40 storeys tall, are expected to stand sentry to the State Government's green credentials, mostly along the coast.

Greens are indeed pleased. As are most people. Survey after survey shows that not only are Australians overwhelmingly in favour of wind power, they are willing to pay extra for

electricity in order to support it. Greenhouse gases must be curbed, after all, and wind energy is clean and renewable. It is also, for now, out of sight, out of mind and out of earshot.

But then, some will have to live with the turbines. Like Marriott's neighbours, many of whom now give him the cold shoulder.

He no longer drinks at the local pub, dinner invitations have dried up, and scores of angry yellow anti-turbine signs hang from trees and gates en route to his farm. One-time friends have written letters to the local paper vowing to shun the Marriotts and the other families renting their land to the wind farm developer.

That people "have got their jollies off" was to be expected, says Marriott. For one thing, beauty is in the eye of the beholder - one person's graceful windmills are another's industrial power plant. Two, they're jealous: "Put it this way, if we weren't getting paid, there wouldn't be this protest."

"What it comes down to," he says, "is, are we in favour of renewable energy or not?" It's this last line, trotted out by wind farm developers and state governments whenever objections are raised, that most sticks in the craw of the likes of Ross Macaw. "It's a no-brainer, really," says Macaw, a Melbourne QC who turned down an offer to co-host a wind farm on his 120 hectares overlooking Wilsons Promontory, east of the Bald Hills. "Of course everyone supports renewable energy. The average metropolitan voter probably thinks that this question and its answer are enough. But surely it's not the only question that needs to be asked. At what cost? At what government subsidy? And where do we want them?"

Macaw realises those same voters will dismiss him as a nimby. But he implores: "By not allowing the debate to reach any level of sophistication, we are leaving it to the wind power lobby to come up with the answers. That's a recipe for disaster, whether it's in my backyard or anyone else's."

South Gippsland is traditionally a low-maintenance kind of place. Nestled south of the Great Divide, it suffers none of the dramatic droughts, fires and floods that ravage so much of the nation. Neither is it a place where great fortunes are made. There was no gold rush and there's no squattocracy. The settlers simply came, they cleared, and they clung on. They nicknamed the Strzeleckis the Heartbreak Hills and built towns conspicuously lacking in colonial grandeur.

Ensuing generations remained a sober, community-minded lot. When the Kennett government axed half a dozen country train lines, rural Victorians revolted - except South Gippslanders. They said they liked the bus. In recent years, the area has absorbed thousands of seachangers, with few of the tensions seen elsewhere. "It's not that the locals are particularly receptive," says one recent arrival. "They just don't like to make a fuss."

Until now. In 2000, in a perfunctory nod to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol on global warming, the Howard Government implemented its Mandatory Renewable Energy Target, under which the renewable energy sector would be guaranteed a 2 per cent slice of the energy market. Given that wind-generated electricity is twice as expensive to produce as that from coal or gas, this amounts to an effective subsidy of more than \$100 million a year. State governments leapt to the cause. Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania all had wind to burn, so to speak, and investment meant jobs - a rare case of the bush vote coinciding with the green vote. The Victorian Government announced it

wanted 1000 megawatts of wind power capacity in place by 2010 - enough to supply about 5 per cent of its overall energy demand. Power companies didn't need to be told twice. A guaranteed market, subsidies and unqualified government support - investment didn't get better than this. There were just two things missing. The first was land. The second was rules.

Wind turbines need to be spaced well apart, as "milled" wind requires some 500 metres to shed its turbulence and become "clean" again. In more scarcely populated inland areas, where single properties are big enough to host a wind farm without affecting neighbours or tourists, wind farm developers have been able to strike deals with landowners with a minimum of fuss, as at Crookwell, near Goulburn, in NSW.

But in coastal Victoria it's a different proposition. Landholdings are small, and getting smaller with the advent of seachange-style subdivisions. An added complication is that wind farms are more profitable in relatively populated areas, because the closer they are to the national grid, the cheaper it is for the developer to plug in.

If anyone in government had an inkling of the land rush coming, they forgot to warn those living on the ridges. Windy, scenic South Gippsland was a sitting duck. Power companies from Canada, New Zealand, Germany and interstate - many with other energy interests, such as hydro-electricity or coal - swooped. So did a brace of white-shoe speculators, many of whom had graduated in property development. (Just how many companies scouted South Gippsland is unclear, but the South Australian Government, which unleashed a similar push for wind farms, is currently evaluating 25 wind farm locations put forward by 17 companies.)

Suddenly the hills seethed with gossip. Reports started emerging in the rural press of farmers being lured with improbable sums of money. Many developers employed what are known within the industry as "land breakers", prospectors with local knowledge who knew how to "play" the farmers.

The basic strategy was to sign up as many landowners in a targeted area as possible for a confidential "Stage One" agreement, committing them to providing access for wind monitoring for at least two years, in exchange for a modest rent (from \$500 to \$1500 a quarter). Once

a large enough block of farmers was signed up, the developer would come in and lock them in to "Stage Two", committing them to "co-hosting" a wind farm for up to 25 years, pending government approval.

All negotiations were confidential. Even farmers involved in the same wind farm were urged to sign individually, although most were wily enough to collude in some fashion. By 2002, when the Victorian Government finally issued its Policy and Planning Guidelines for Development of Wind Energy Facilities, there was hardly a windy ridge left in the state without an energy company having erected a monitoring tower to stake its claim. Once the dust settled, something else became clear as well. Neighbours had stopped talking to each other. Lifelong friends were at loggerheads. Businesses were being boycotted. On Victoria's south-west coast, an environmental panel noted that the wind farms planned for the Portland region's three headlands had split the community. In South Gippsland, the mayor described the developments as the most divisive issue in a generation.

"The degree of community schism has been baffling," notes Dr Charles Meredith, who runs a consultancy which evaluates wind farms for their environmental impact. "It's not

the normal reaction you get to a major development, even an open-cut mine. People either think wind farms are great, or they are the devil incarnate. Why? I just don't understand it."

Local proponents of wind farms say it is all about money - those who are paid are happy, those who aren't are either jealous or fear for their property values. Opponents say it's all about aesthetics - the turbines will pollute both the landscape and lifestyles with their triffid-like forms, industrial noise and giant flickering shadows. Meanwhile the Government blames local National Party MPs for whipping up nimby concerns. Certainly, some objectors have done themselves few favours by playing up dubious claims about reflecting sunlight, mental health effects and stress to cattle. And there's something faintly hypocritical about farmers invoking Aboriginal concerns and threats to birdlife in an area as comprehensively cleared and dispossessed as southern Victoria. Perhaps it comes down to something else: trust. "It gets back to the way rural communities function," says Trixy Allott, who's fighting a wind farm proposal in the hills above Welshpool, a township on Corner Inlet.

"In Welshpool we've got 400 people and 35 volunteer organisations, and we band together whenever we can. To suddenly find out that the neighbours who were your friends will sell you out - it's heartbreaking. The carpetbaggers have ripped the soul out of our community."

The epicentre of the rift is 15 minutes west of Welshpool, in Foster, a bustling town of 1300 people where every second shop displays a "no more turbines" sign. Foster is the hub of the popular "Prom Coast", named after Victoria's premier national park, Wilsons Promontory. At one stage, wind farms were planned in every direction, covering scores of properties and encroaching on a dozen small towns from Welshpool to Walkerville, and Sandy Point to Stony Creek. All up, more than 50 surrounding landowners are believed to have signed an initial deed of agreement.

When word got out, people couldn't believe it. In a region where farmers traditionally share machinery, bale each other's hay and drop in for morning tea, somehow neighbours had been kept in the dark about the 120-tonne turbine soon to tower over their back fence. But the money was simply too good. For every proposed turbine, based on either an annual rent or a percentage of its output, farmers were promised between \$10,000 and \$15,000 a year. Large landholders were being offered up to 12 turbines, which amounted to more money than they earned from farming, but even those with a 4-hectare block found it hard to decline one.

"You can't get cross at the farmers for taking the money, although it's tempting," says Lee Grenfell, who'd hoped to build a retreat on her 12 hectares in the Welshpool hills before a developer signed up her neighbours. "It's the companies I blame. They portray themselves as environmentally sound but they're just hard-nosed industrialists in green clothing."

Tales of dubious corporate ethics abound. Grenfell's partner, Peter Whelan, owns a slice of land integral to the proposed Welshpool wind farm. When he refused to sign, the land breaker told Whelan's consenting neighbours (in a letter sighted by Good Weekend) that they would receive less rent than initially promised because Whelan refused to play ball. "Talk about pressure," says Grenfell. "That's how these companies operate: divide and conquer."

Heinz Abels, whose land was integral to a different wind farm, remembers a land breaker turning up with a cheque for \$6000 stapled to a consent form. He was also told that his neighbour, the barrister Ross Macaw, supported the proposal, which wasn't true. Says another farmer, who did not want to be named: "It was like something straight out of Texas, with these prospectors crawling all over the joint. It was like wind was the new oil."

Brian Hall runs the Australian operations of the most active developer in the region, Meridian, a New Zealand company with established hydro and wind energy interests. At one stage, Meridian had signed up farmers in six sites within 20 kilometres of Foster, all overlooking Wilsons Promontory. Meridian has since given up on four of those sites (mostly due to resistant landowners like Abels and Macaw, and "bird issues" - see box, next page).

Hall says he has not had a single report of unethical behaviour on the part of the company. "We do go above and beyond the call of duty to be as transparent and as open and as accessible to the community as possible."

When Good Weekend mentions Macaw's correspondence with Hall, in which Macaw accused Meridian's representatives of "inappropriate conduct" and engaging in a "pattern of misleading statements in order to induce land owners to sign", Hall denies any memory of it. "He has never, as I recall, complained to us about the way we have conducted ourselves."

Yet Macaw counters: "Companies like Meridian pretend they engage in community consultation, when it's actually just a futile exercise that they go through after they have enough people signed up."

Last month, some three years after farmers were first approached, Meridian opened an information office locally about its so-called Dollar Wind Farm. (One of the consenting farmers, who stands to make about \$100,000 a year in rent, told Good Weekend he'd convinced Meridian to name it after Dollar, a long-extinct locality, because "that way all the weekend cowboys and hobby farmers over at Foster North wouldn't realise it was in their backyard until all was said and done".) But Hall denies the new showroom is merely a public relations exercise. "Let's face it, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Some people like turbines, some don't. [As a company] there's only so much you can do." Yet some people like turbines, and then don't. Of the two existing wind farms in western Victoria, both the original major landholders regret having given their consent. Says Marie Anne Mackenzie, who hosts 15 of the 35 turbines at Ararat's Chalicum Hills wind farm, "I got into it for green reasons, but I was naive. Our farm is now an industrial site, with a substantial road running through it, as well as power lines, less trees, workpads pressed into the hills, an ugly substation and a passing parade of workers." Her experience has changed her view of wind energy. "The business imperatives overrule the environmental ones. If we just put wind towers everywhere so we can use energy with impunity, then we haven't made any progress at all. The problem with the focus on renewable energy is that it has lessened the impetus to conserve and clean up the energy we already do use."

Between Foster and Welshpool lies the township of Toora, at the foot of Victoria's first wind farm, owned by Stanwell, the Queensland Government's power company. Driving up the winding track into the hills for the first time, it's hard not to be awed by the vast, spidery shadows swirling on a canvas of bare green slopes. When the first turbine

suddenly materialises around a bend, it is enormous and, to this eye at least, rather elegant. Etched white against blue, the slender, curved blades, each the length of a cricket pitch, stroke the sky with a mesmerising effortlessness.

But they are noisy. On a mildly breezy day, when the wind itself isn't howling, the strokes make an industrial thrashing sound. Two homes are located amid the cluster of 12 turbines. One home, a lovely if slightly dilapidated weatherboard, comes without a turbine and belongs to Stephen Garito. Signs on his fence say "Not Happy Stanwell" and "Megawatts, Mega noisy". Relations with his once-friendly neighbours have deteriorated to slanging matches across the fence. Unable to sleep for the throbbing of the turbines, he now lives in town. The other, more solid home belongs to Wolfgang and Stella Piontek, who are very happy. Their living room yields views of turbines in three directions. The three to the east are on their land, bringing in about \$40,000 a year - more than enough for the Pionteks to spend the winter months in North Queensland, fishing. This year they are in Mission Beach.

Some nights, the noise of the turbines carries all the way back to Toora. For a time, particularly after having just lost their butter factory, locals pinned their hopes on the turbines. But predictions of a boost to "Toora-ism" have not come to pass, says Heather Bligh, who runs the caravan park, co-owns the pub and is the mayor of South Gippsland. "There have been people seriously disadvantaged by the turbines," she says. "I believe they should be compensated."

But her shire has been unable to get its concerns through to the Minister for Planning, Mary Delahunty. Letters and invitations have gone unanswered. As a last resort, the shire sent a posse to Melbourne requesting a meeting. Delahunty declined. "We're not in the loop," says Bligh. "They are not listening to us."

Delahunty handed down her wind farm policy two years ago. Under the guidelines, which were drafted by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Victoria with considerable input from wind power lobbyists, a number of obstacles to development were removed, including, most significantly, the right of local councils to veto large wind farms. Shortly afterwards, the Minister removed another significant check on development when she announced that applications would no longer be subject to the usual Environmental Effects Statement (EES), a process which provides for community input via a panel hearing, as long as the wind farm passed a "preliminary landscape assessment". "We're putting landscape values now front and centre," Delahunty declared.

But landscape values are notoriously slippery. Some see velvet beauty in bare green hills, others see only devastated forests. Delahunty's assessors evidently take the latter view. Earlier this year, she ruled that Meridian's 50-turbine Foster North wind farm would not require an EES because the preliminary landscape assessment "found that the area does not retain sensitive landscape values because it has been significantly modified by the removal of native vegetation".

In June, the Federal Government's decision not to expand its Mandatory Renewable Energy Target from 2 to 5 per cent was widely reported as a capitulation to coal interests. Lobbyist Libby Anthony, of the Australian Wind Energy Association, called it a dark day for wind farms and claimed it would cost the country \$5 billion in investment and 10,000 jobs. (Few of Victoria's current projects will be affected.)

But some involved with the wind industry breathed a sigh of relief. Professor Hugh Outhred, the director of the Centre for Energy and Environmental Markets at the

University of NSW, has expressed concern that wind farms are being "brought forward in an immature planning context". Outhred says wind farms should be spread over different regions, because if the wind isn't blowing in one location, it might well be in another. By allowing wind farm projects to bank up in single regions such as South Gippsland and around Portland, the Victorian Government is increasing the need for back-up generation on slow-wind days. It's also raising the risk of network instability.

Outhred is particularly critical of a stipulation in the Victorian planning guidelines that all applications will be considered on a case-by-case basis. "I think the most important planning issue is for state governments to jointly consider all wind farm developments that might take place in a region, rather than the present arrangement. The latter suits the interests of the wind farm developer but not those of the community."

Perhaps the Bracks Government realises it has got it wrong on planning. Even though the Government's own policy clearly states that "the Minister for Planning will be the responsible authority for all [large] wind energy proposals", Mary Delahunty refused to talk to Good Weekend and her office deflected all queries, including those specific to planning, to the Minister for Energy, Theo Theophanous. Not that this makes much difference. Asked about wind farm concerns, the Minister for Energy was dismissive. "It seems to be happening only in Gippsland. There's a small vocal group down there. I don't think it goes much beyond that."

Not far from the Bald Hills lives Don Jelbart. Three years ago, a German company offered him nine turbines at an annual rent of \$15,000 each, for the life of the wind farm - almost \$3 million over 20 years. "I told them to piss off. Mate, if you live in paradise, why would you stuff it?"

But Jelbart says he respects Lindsay Marriott's choice to take the money. "I used to shear for him. You know, he's had a rough trot. His farm was on the market until this [developer] turned up. But I'm worried that Lindsay's going to get f...ed up the bum. First he was going to get 12 turbines, now it's seven or eight. If he loses a few more because of the [nearby] wetlands, then he'll have copped all of this grief for next to nothing." Jelbart pauses, then adds, "Lindsay actually said to me, 'Thanks for still treating me like a human being.' But I don't know that he'll ever come to dinner here again, you know what I mean?"

Over at the Bald Hills, Lindsay Marriott has a visitor. "Yes to Wind Energy", reads a sticker on the guest's Range Rover. It's Steve Buckle, the man behind the Bald Hills proposal. Buckle made his money building nursing homes, and claims he got into wind farming by accident. "I bought a farm in western Victoria. It was very windy and I thought, 'What am I going to do with this windy farm?' So I Googled wind farms and thought, 'That's a nice green side to a property developer.'" His company, Wind Power, already has the go-ahead to build a wind farm nearby, at Wonthaggi, and has proposals awaiting approval in Western Australia as well as central and western Victoria.

"There's a bit of a race on to fill the market. It's going to be first in, best dressed, in a lot of ways," he says. "I've got 65 farmers signed up around Australia and only two have said 'no' to me. And they were both rich squatters."

Wind Power is a shelf company with a paid-up capital of \$100. Its four shareholder companies have a paid-up capital of \$2500, \$100, \$2 and \$2. To build the \$220 million Bald Hills wind farm, superannuation funds will provide the equity. The guaranteed returns make everyone a winner - until the farm is decommissioned. Because one

pressing question remains: who is going to clean up the defunct turbines in 20 years' time?

"Dunno," says Steve Buckle. "We ultimately won't be the owner of the wind farm. The super fund will end up being the owner. But if the turbines stop making electricity, within six months they have to be taken down."

And if they're not?

"Then they revert to the landowner's property," says Buckle.

Marriott shrugs. "It's no problem. The scrap metal is worth a mint. I can just ring someone up to take them away."

Or so Buckle has told him. But scrap metal prices are notoriously fickle. Take California, for instance, where vast tracts of former wind farms are littered with the rusting debris of companies that have gone bust. Brian Hall, from Meridian, concedes today's turbines could well be worthless in 20 years' time. Instead, Meridian pledges to repatriate farmland by removing decommissioned turbines (but not the 500-tonne-plus concrete foundations - these are merely covered with dirt).

But Buckle gives no such guarantee. "Look, we're playing this game with no rules. The government is making rules up as we go." Marriott smiles uneasily, but Buckle laughs. "Thing is, wind power is good, right? It's a very simple industry. Why make it complicated? Why is everyone so freaked out when wind farms are all over the world? What are they saying? That wind will not replace coal? Well, f...ing der!"

The feathers fly

Wind turbines are getting bigger. In the early '80s, the standard propeller was just 15 metres in diameter. Today, some turbines in the north of Germany stand 180 metres tall, equivalent to about 50 storeys, with a bladespan of 124 metres. This growth in bladespan has ramifications for birds and bats. The longer the blades, the more daylight between revolutions. More than enough for a bird to take its chances. At a typical turbine, such as those at Toora in South Gippsland, each blade is 33 metres long and goes around once every three seconds. This means that the tip of the blade is travelling at 265 kilometres an hour. Not even the most eagle-eyed are going to see that coming.

The aim, therefore, is to keep turbines out of the way of avian flight paths, something that the Spaniards have found out the messy way. Some Spanish wind farms have been constructed directly in the route of birds migrating between Africa and Europe, resulting in large kills of birds including rare vultures and storks.

Australia has so far managed to avoid such folly. Early monitoring of Australian sites suggests that each turbine kills one to two birds a year.

"In terms of impact, generally you find there's not much difference between turbines and other things that birds run into," says Dr Charles Meredith, the director of Biosis Research, a company that assesses wind farms' environmental impact. "It's just another hazard, like high-voltage powerlines and cars."

Unfortunately, birds of prey are particularly vulnerable to "tip smear", as Meredith knows the phenomenon, because raptors "like to swoop and hover at rotor height". Several wedge-tailed eagles have been killed by turbines in South Australia and Tasmania. Thursday Island's two turbines, in the Torres Strait, have reportedly killed an osprey each, and the Codrington wind farm in western Victoria has wiped out numerous brown

falcons - "about one a week for the first two months", according to the farmer whose land supported eight of the 14 turbines.

Perhaps the last word - certainly the longest one - on the issue belongs to the residents of Llanfynydd, in South Wales, who changed their village's name to

Llanhyfryddawelllehnafolybarcudprindanfygythiadtrienusyrhafnauole in protest over a Spanish company's plans to build 30 137-metre turbines on the surrounding ridges. The name means: "A quiet, beautiful and historic village with a rare kite under threat from wretched blades."

The problem with wind

Wind energy is cost-efficient in remote communities, such as the Bass Strait Islands, Coober Pedy and Thursday Island, because these traditionally rely on diesel generators, and diesel is expensive. But for those connected to the grid, fossil fuels are much cheaper. In Australia they are also plentiful. Victorian brown coal, for instance, isn't expected to run out for 500 years.

Fossil fuels, however, incur a global cost by producing the major greenhouse gas carbon dioxide. Being among the highest per capita greenhouse gas polluters in the world, Australia needs to develop alternative energy sources, including solar, hydro and wind. The problem with the last of these is that it is unreliable and can't be stored. Sometimes it blows too hard (requiring turbines to be shut down) and sometimes it doesn't blow at all. Thus a productive wind farm runs, on average, at a third of its capacity. Other power generators - brown coal and gas in Victoria, black coal in Queensland and NSW, hydro in Tasmania - must take up the slack.

This back-up capacity is expensive to maintain, as was borne out in a report on renewable energy for Britain's House of Lords last month. Coal-fired generators are slow to react and lose efficiency (belching more carbon dioxide per unit of electricity produced) when not running at full steam. The report further found that wind power becomes less cost-effective the higher its contribution to overall energy demand, and suggested "penetration much beyond 10 per cent" would be uneconomical.

Proponents of wind power like to haul in the Danes, who have achieved the world's highest penetration, of 16 per cent. To do this, however, Denmark has (a) had to install enough wind farms to amass a total capacity of 50 per cent of peak demand, and (b) relied increasingly on its neighbours for back-up. The Danish Government itself recently admitted that its goal had been "over-achieved".

In March, Germany's *Der Spiegel* magazine published a cover article entitled "The Windmill Madness". Germany has invested more in wind farms than any other nation, with more than 15,000 turbines supplying 5 per cent of its energy needs. The costs to Germans, however, include tax breaks for wind farm companies worth e1.1 billion, hidden subsidies offsetting the high cost of wind-generated electricity (2 1/2 times the going rate) and declining property values. The piece quoted a professor describing wind farms as "the worst devastation since the war".

But the biggest backlash is occurring in England, where the Blair Government has embarked on a quest to build wind farms totalling 8000 megawatts capacity, or about 6000 turbines. As in Victoria, protests began at a grass roots level after the Government empowered itself to override normal planning procedures. But the small-town objectors have gained some powerful supporters. The botanist David Bellamy regards wind energy

is a "huge con", an Oxford academic coined the phrase "green Stalinism" for the government's policy, and Prince Charles, who has consistently supported renewable energy, last month came out and labelled wind farms a "horrendous blot on the landscape".

The Tories, apparently smelling a vote-winner, have joined the fray, and the issue may yet become a political football in Australia, too. On the day the British Opposition leader announced he would rein in the expansion of wind farms if elected, the Treasurer, Peter Costello, was in South Gippsland, assuring locals that "wind turbines are ugly and it should be up to [local] councils to determine whether or not they are allowed".

Caption:

FIVE PHOTOS: In a spin: the small coastal communities of South Gippsland have been deeply divided over wind farm developments, like this one near the township of Toora. **PHOTO:** by IAN KENINS Tilting at windmills: (top) members of protest group the Prom Coast Guardians pose in front of Wilsons Promontory; (above) farmer Lindsay Marriott, at left, and Wind Power director Steve Buckle on top of a hill earmarked as a turbine site. **PHOTO:** BY IAN KENINS Winds of change: (below) Stella Piontek on the farm she and her husband share with several turbines; (bottom) locals protest against the proposed Bald Hills wind farm. **PHOTO:** by Joe Castro; Ian Kenins Big business: workers with one of Germany's giant wind turbines. **PHOTO:** by Peter Frischmuth/still pictures

Comments:

THE FEATHERS FLY and **THE PROBLEM WITH WIND** have been joined to the story.