

Submission to the Senate Select Committee on Climate Policy

This submission specifically relates to section (A) (ii) of the terms of reference, i.e. “long-term incentives for clean energy...”

For the past five years I have been analysing the social, environmental and political impacts of wind farms in the context of their power generation efficiency.

1.

Globalisation notwithstanding, Australia is still a late adopter of many foreign ideas and technologies. It remains provincial. One would expect that Australia would therefore be able to avoid manifest errors and inefficiencies by learning from the experience of others. But it does not. The cultural lag of the province prevents this. Wind power is a case in point. It is now clear that wind turbines in Europe fail to reach even 20% efficiency. In northern Germany, with a windier climate than typical Australian sites, the “load factor” is barely 17%. In other words, turbines produce only 17% of their rated capacity per annum. This exposes the claims of wind farm companies of “30-35%” efficiency as false. Consequently their claims that wind farms will provide “x-thousand homes” with power are grossly exaggerated.

2.

The Europeans are now retreating from wind power. They realise it has been an expensive mistake. German and Danish CO₂ emissions have not fallen after the spread of wind power, they have risen. Germany is now building gas power plants to do the job that wind cannot. So is the State of Victoria.

3.

There are many other technical factors which cripple wind power. It is not only three times more expensive than other forms of generation, but it is hopelessly unreliable. Denmark dumps most of its wind power at bargain prices into the European grid because wind power is typically generated when demand is low or average. Being a tiny country with miniscule power generation, its wind power is a minor inconvenience to the European grid. In Australia as in Europe, peak demand is in the depths of winter and the height of summer, when wind is usually minimal. Wind power is therefore a pointless luxury: available in small, unpredictable quantities when the grid

needs it least, and absent when it might be beneficial. The argument that a very wide distribution of wind farms would even out power production is false. Stable high pressure systems in Australia, as in Europe, are in effect continental in scope. If it is a hot still day in Adelaide, it is usually hot and still across the whole south-east of the country. The obverse in winter.

4.

When wind power capacity exceeds about 10% of total grid capacity, it is difficult for the grid to manage, as the input is random. So-called “base load” generation cannot be ramped up and down to suit random wind power. Conventional generation carries on regardless. Wind turbines cannot substitute for or eliminate a single power station. Therefore the claimed greenhouse gas emission reductions for wind are a fantasy.

5.

The notion that wind power is somehow “clean” energy is false. The 128 turbine Waubra wind farm in Victoria required 40,000 tons of concrete just for the tower base pads. Hundreds of kilometres of new roads were constructed along environmentally sensitive ridge lines. Then there are hundreds of kilometres of cable, ancillary plant and equipment to be considered. The “footprint” of a wind farm is huge. The Waubra wind farm has industrialised hundreds of square kilometres of some of the most beautiful countryside in the Goldfields.

6.

The previous Minister for Agriculture described wind power as “a total fraud”. This fraud is not merely one of economic relativities between competing modes of power generation, but social, political and environmental. Why do wind power companies operate with such extreme secrecy while pumping out a relentless flood of propaganda? Because they know that people now realise that having a wind farm nearby slashes property values, causes serious psychological stress not least through infrasound, kills numerous raptors, migratory birds and bats, and presents a serious bushfire threat. Note how wind farm companies recruit beneficiaries: they approach individuals in secret and gag them contractually. Why? Because they know that one landowner’s greed is another’s economic catastrophe. A tiny number of landowners benefit while

hundreds lose. Rural communities are permanently split by bitter hatred. There is no compensation. The planning process is a mere fig leaf. Now the Victorian government is planning to truncate even this sham of due process. The political demand for wind farms is so intense that we see the unedifying spectacle of social democratic governments sacrificing people and landscapes in the most brutal and cynical manner.

7.

Why is this political demand so intense? The answer is simple: the Green credibility of governments is at stake. The first priority for both the ALP and the Coalition is the economy, i.e. GDP growth and jobs. Yet both are pressured by the Greens (and from within their own ranks) to make some progress on “the environment.” Currently, the paramount environmental issue is anthropogenic global warming caused by CO₂ emissions. The plethora of environmental issues such as land degradation, biodiversity, salinity, weed and feral infestation, national parks, ruthless over-fishing, etc., etc. are now all on the back burner (with the exception of water use in the Murray-Darling basin). This is not the place to debate the plausibility of climate modelling: the point is simply that the myriad empirical environmental degradations are now relegated to insignificance because of the imperious urgency of CO₂ emissions.

8.

But all governments are now aware that wind power will make no significant difference to CO₂ emissions. They also know that wind farms will cause some deterioration to the environment. They know full well that once an entire region is infested with wind farms, the effect on that region’s economy will be severe unless it is an unpopulated semi-desert (such as the proposed Silverton (NSW) and Hallett (SA) wind farms). Attractive regions within two or three hours of capital cities- such as the Victorian goldfields- are now being targeted by governments and wind farm companies. The hypocrisy of this is breath-taking. The Victorian government realises it cannot build more coastal wind farms (where winds are stronger) purely because of intense local resistance. So politically weaker, poorer areas such as the Goldfields are the next choice, regardless of the inferior wind “resource”. The government knows that these regions are politically weak and naive. They can be lied to with impunity. Very few jobs of any kind result from wind farms and those few that are generated are based in cities or large towns outside the affected areas. Two deleterious economic effects on blighted regions are immediately evident: the flight of tree-change

capital and a decline in tourism. These poor agricultural areas have only two economic drivers: in-migration and new capital inflows. In other words, tourism and life-style migrants. Wind farms subvert both. Yet the political parties lie to the locals in a quite sickening manner. They boast of “investment” when they know the billions spent will have no beneficial effect on the region whatever. They proclaim their green credentials knowing that wind farms are nothing more than a political gesture which masks their environmental impotence. The motive is purely political: to assuage urban constituencies. When these urban voters, who will never live near a wind farm, venture forth into the hinterland, they can admire the 120 metre towers with their blades turning “slowly” at 300kph, secure in the belief that “the planet” is in safe hands. They will know nothing of the misery of those living nearby, trapped in unsaleable homes. Many of the beneficiaries will leave the district, funded by wind turbine rents, living on the coast in a final act of hypocrisy.

9.

All parties to the wind farm fraud are engaged in a complex web of deceit: companies, beneficiaries and political parties. To this list must now be added superannuation funds, specifically trade-union super funds. The chairman of Pacific Hydro, the most active wind farm company in Victoria, is Gary Weaven, a former union official. Ordinarily, these union-based funds would be just one source of capital among many, but the current financial crisis has all but eliminated capital for useful projects, let alone superfluous ideological exercises such as wind farms. Trade union super funds are therefore crucial. The state government is intent on using its influence to extract capital for wind farms from these funds. The advantage to the funds is that these “investments” are government guaranteed. This guarantee stems from the forced subsidies the government demands from the consumer, i.e. compulsory sale at high prices for wind power. Thus even in a severe recession, where very scarce capital should be used in the wisest, most productive manner, capital will be siphoned into wind farms.

10.

Wind turbines are tombstones of dead capital. Governments know this, but they are pursuing political not economic capital. Wind farms generate political power, not electrical power. They also generate intense distress without the possibility of relief or elementary justice. Witness the thousands

of anti-wind farm groups that have sprung up across Europe. The same is happening in this country.

11.

Meanwhile, the environment is dying the death of a thousand cuts. There is much that can be done, but only when attention and resources are redirected to rehabilitation of the continent. Squandering both on the wind farm fiasco is a recipe for permanent environmental degradation. There should be no “long-term incentives” for wind power.

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