

Fuel plan beset by fossilised thinking

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Australia is perfectly placed to be the real energy superpower: the instigator and global leader in renewable electricity production. A country bathed in sun and ferociously windy in many locations, Australia could, with political will and vision, usher in a safe, carbon-free and nuclear-free future.

Instead, both Prime Minister John Howard and Opposition leader Kim Beazley seem fixated on the continued mining and burning of coal: a strategy which, at this juncture in the world's history, is environmentally contraindicated. Anyone who has seen Al Gore's extraordinary film *An Inconvenient Truth* will realise that the world must, urgently, stop burning fossil fuel.

Indeed, a draft report from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, presently circulating among Australian scientific, business and environmental groups, predicts global temperature increases of 0.3 to 3.5C degrees by 2050, and a sea level rise of 6m should the Greenland icecap melt. Life as we know it is in jeopardy, but the politicians proceed unimpeded on their march over the climate-change cliff, ignoring these stark facts and their ecological implications.

Equally alarming as his continued endorsement of the coal industry, Howard's answer to global warming is the expansion of Australian uranium mining, value-added enrichment of uranium, nuclear power for Australia and the possible storage on this continent of much of the world's radioactive waste. For his part, Beazley has announced plans to expand uranium mining. Never mind that the nuclear fuel cycle - encompassing uranium mining, milling, enrichment, reactor construction and decommissioning, and radioactive waste storage for 500,000 years - creates large quantities of global warming gases, including CO₂ and CFC.

Do Howard and Beazley not know, or worse, are they choosing to ignore, that nuclear power will have grave public health consequences, bestowing, as it will, leaking, long-lived nuclear waste facilities to future generations, a legacy that will engender epidemics of genetic disease and malignancies? We need politicians with knowledge, energy and courage who will move beyond the fossil fuel and nuclear eras. Is it possible to make that leap with available technology? Yes.

A recent invention in solar power by Professor Vivian Alberts at the University of Johannesburg, which uses a micro-thin metallic film, has made solar electricity five times less expensive than solar photovoltaic cells. For the first time, solar electricity is economically feasible and cheaper than coal.

Australian entrepreneurs, subsidised by the federal Government, should develop this technology as fast as possible. Every old building and house in Australia should be retrofitted with solar panels, and all new buildings similarly equipped. As solar technology becomes cheaper and more efficient, a huge market in Indonesia, the Philippines and India will emerge. A rising GDP, with thousands of people employed in a safe, clean industry, would usher Australia into a new era of prosperity and global leadership in the 21st century.

In the US, farmers are making more money building wind farms than growing food in a rapidly growing alternative energy market. Australia could emulate Denmark where wind electricity, which has minimal greenhouse gas emissions, supplies at least 20 per cent of the country's needs.

But in 2004, the Prime Minister, working with uranium and coal mining interests, devised a way to pull the rug from under the burgeoning Australian wind power industry. Some campaigners aiming to discredit wind power have links to well-known deniers of climate change.

British nuclear industry allies are also known to be connected to Australian anti-wind power groups.

Tidal power, geothermal energy, cogeneration and biomass combined with conservation are some of the resources yet to be explored by Australia. According to a Bostonian Synapse Energy Economics study, electricity conservation in the US could save 28 per cent in energy efficiency. Similar figures apply to Australia.

In other words, for the first time in human history, all electricity can be generated by a combination of renewable carbon-free and nuclear-free technologies. But the forces opposing these promising developments are very powerful and have the eye and ear of the PM and Labor leader.

We need, above all, politicians who are scientifically and medically knowledgeable, not just lawyers, business men and former humanities academics who seem not to comprehend the immensely dangerous problems threatening the survival of our children, descendants and 30,000 other species that cohabit this planet.

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