



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

COMMITTEES

Select Committee on Wind Turbines

Report

SPEECH

Thursday, 9 February 2017

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

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Speaker Back, Sen Chris	Question No.

Senator BACK (Western Australia) (17:56): by leave—I thank the chamber for its indulgence to speak on the government's response to the report of the Senate Select Committee on Wind Turbines. I know I am amongst friends on both sides. The Senate Select Committee on Wind Turbines reported to the Senate on 3 August in 2015. The government did not respond to the recommendations until 8 December 2016, some 16 months after the select committee had put its report into the Senate. That is exceedingly disappointing given the amount of work that was done.

In March 2016, the chair of the committee, Senator John Madigan, moved a motion signed by the crossbench members requesting the government response by 10 May 2016. Parliament was dissolved for the election, so that did not happen. On the first sitting day of this parliament, the 45th Parliament, on 30 August, Senator Leyonhjelm lodged a motion signed by every member of the new Senate crossbench asking the government to respond by 21 November 2016. So it is somewhat disappointing, then, that we have only just had the government's response now.

There were 491 submissions to the committee. The committee, under the chairmanship of then Senator Madigan and the deputy chairmanship of then Senator Day, held eight public hearings across Australia. An enormous amount of work was undertaken. I take this opportunity to thank all members of the community who wrote submissions and came forward to provide evidence. It was very, very emotional for many of them. In some instances submissions needed to remain confidential for people's personal safety. In fact, there were many, many witnesses who had great apprehension about appearing before the committee. Also, whilst I am thanking people, I take the opportunity to thank the secretariat for the work that they did.

There were 15 important recommendations in the report that addressed the ongoing issues associated with industrial wind turbines in Australia. I must say that they are recommendations that have remained without response until now. I am sure Senator Leyonhjelm will have his own comment to make on that as well.

During the time since we had the inquiry, we have seen the wheels come off the wagon of the renewable sector, particularly that which resides in industrial wind turbines. You do not have to think back too far—you only have to think back to this time yesterday when, as usual, in South Australia, where some 40 per cent of energy is now supplied by renewables if the wind blows, the wind did not blow, so South Australia suffered what probably might be its fifth blackout since August-September last year. At the time, in the minds of many people this particular issue was unimportant. In fact there was a degree of ridiculed associated with this inquiry, the conduct of it and the people who were appearing. I can assure you that the people of South Australia are not laughing today. They are very, very concerned about the circumstance of a state that cannot keep the lights on and cannot keep the power up: businesses losing staff, losing money and going to the wall. This is probably not the most important in terms of overall scale, but in the big blackout in the spring of 2016 they were so ill prepared in South Australia that the airport could not operate, hospitals could not operate, surgeons had to stop operating in theatres; but, worst of all, the Flinders Medical School, which held the frozen embryos and hopes of so many families in South Australia, could not keep up the power, and those frozen embryos were destroyed. I think that is a real personal indication of what we are talking about and the impact on families that occurred.

In the time left to me I want to focus on two of the recommendations. Recommendation 14 was:

The committee recommends that the Australian Government direct the Productivity Commission to conduct research into the impact of wind power electricity generation on retail electricity prices.

It has to be done. We are getting so much conflicting information from so many different sources around this country from those who support renewables, particularly industrial-wind-turbine-generated power, to those like me who do not, although I declare myself to be a strong supporter of renewable energy, for example through

solar, tide, wave action and of course hydroelectricity. But it is the case that this analysis has not been done. We are 16 years into a renewable energy scheme and nobody knows the cost.

We do know that the cost of subsidising industrial wind turbines is massive. As we draw closer to 2020 the shortfall charge payments could reach \$1.5 billion a year, or more than \$20 billion by 2030. Indeed, it is possible, if the policies of some of the governments of this country come into place, that we could be seeing a figure of \$40 billion in cost by 2030. That is \$1,600 for every man, woman and child in this country. I do not think consumers know that when a wind turbine generates electricity in this country they are paying \$850,000 per wind turbine per year by way of subsidies. That is when they actually generate anything and sell any power. As I said, only yesterday we had a situation in which South Australia could not keep the lights on. The spot price for electricity hit \$14,000 per megawatt hour. In any event the forward spot price for electricity in South Australia at the moment is \$150 per megawatt hour, while it is only \$50 in Victoria. But do not let the Victorians get any relief out of this, because their state Labor government, having made the decision to close coal-fired power stations, is also rushing towards a so-called renewable platform. I can tell them that they are rushing towards an absolute train wreck. A cost-benefit analysis of the effect of wind turbines has never been so important. The results will show that the nation, now and certainly should the federal Labor Party come to government and enact a 50 per cent renewable energy policy, is absolutely and utterly unsustainable.

The second recommendation to which I refer is recommendation 15:

The Renewable Energy Target should be amended so that all new investments in renewable energy between 2015 and 2020 will be eligible to create renewable energy certificates for a period of no more than five years—

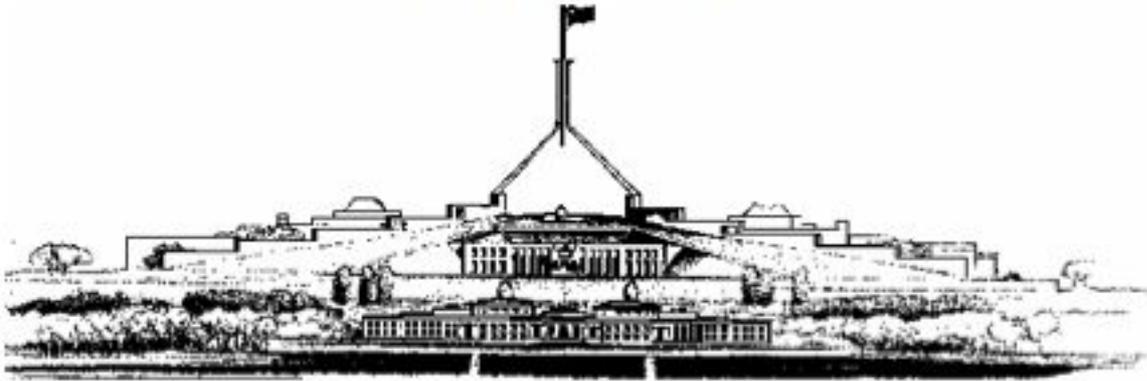
—accepting the grandfathering of those that were already in existence. Indeed, because we have the excellent system of the Emissions Reduction Fund organised by the coalition government through direct action on climate change, we do have Australian carbon credit units. I believe and the committee believed at that time that there is a tremendous opportunity to morph from these renewable energy certificates, which at the moment are at a cost of about \$88 per certificate and apparently relieving about one tonne of carbon dioxide, through to the carbon credit units, which are about \$10 to \$11 per unit and again are giving about one tonne of carbon dioxide equivalent.

At the time, the comment kept being made, and even in its response the government said that it 'notes that wind farm approvals are a matter for individual state and territory governments'. I have had long discussions with the federal minister. I have spoken in this place and in the public arena. If we look at the events in South Australia in the last few days and the events that we are going to see in Victoria, Tasmania and particularly in Queensland, which says that it is going to 50 per cent renewables, I have to say that the community of Australia expects the federal government to take a leadership role in the provision of safe, sustainable, reliable and economic power. It is fundamental to all Australians that this happens. The states who have undertaken this have failed, and I believe the recommendations of this report remain current today.



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Senator LEYONHJELM (New South Wales) (18:07): I rise to speak on the government's response to the final report of the Senate select committee report on wind turbines. I was a member of that committee and contributed significantly to both its interim and final reports. I have taken a keen interest in ensuring that those reports did not gather dust, like so many other reports have done. In fact, we had some success in getting the government to respond to the interim report. But I regret to say its response to the final report has been anything but praiseworthy.

The committee submitted its final report to the Senate on 3 August 2015. On 16 March 2016, the chair of the committee, Senator John Madigan, moved a motion signed by the Senate crossbench calling on the government to respond by 10 May 2016. No response was received, and parliament was dissolved the day before that. On the first sitting day of the 45th Parliament, 30 August 2016, I lodged a motion signed by every single member of the new Senate crossbench asking for the government's response to the inquiry to be laid on the table by 21 November 2016. On 21 November there was still no government response. In fact, the government did not respond until 8 December 2016—16 months after the report was tabled. The required time for responding to Senate reports is three months. This is a mockery of our Senate process.

Now that it has responded, there are several aspects about its response that warrant comment. One of the priorities of the inquiry was to examine the impact of wind farms on those living and working in close proximity to them. The committee heard how some of these people were suffering ill health, that their health improved when they moved away and deteriorated when they returned. It heard how these health effects were not understood by the medical world, were commonly dismissed and that the suffering of those affected was made worse by their shabby treatment. It heard how the wind industry and its cheerleaders in the media, academia and health belittled those adversely affected. One retired academic with no qualifications or even expertise in medical matters promoted the lie that only people in English-speaking countries were claiming to be adversely affected.

Some plausible explanations were put forward to explain the ill-health effects, mostly relating to infrasound or very low-frequency soundwaves. Evidence was given that infrasound is a known cause of ill health in humans and that wind turbines emit infrasound. What we do not have is confirmation that the infrasound emitted by wind farms is sufficient to cause adverse health effects. Not everyone is affected, and those affected are not always invariably affected. As one who is easily affected by seasickness when others are not, I did not find that very difficult to understand. But, apparently, it is good enough for the wind industry, or 'big wind', as I describe them and their skills, to discredit those poor individuals who are made ill.

The committee also heard how the process for approving wind farms was a farce, with state policies ranging from non-existent to something that might as well not exist. It heard about: buck-passing between state governments and local governments, with nobody accepting responsibility for outcomes; how, once a wind farm is built, nobody is interested in whether it complies with its approval conditions; and that those approval conditions do not even include infrasound.

Some of these problems were highlighted in the interim report of the committee. Based on that report, I led a crossbench delegation to see then Prime Minister, Mr Abbott, to accept some of the recommendations. That led to the creation of the position of wind farm commissioner, the establishment of an independent committee to advise the minister and the commitment of funds to a proper scientific investigation of the health effects of wind farms. The wind farm commissioner has made some progress towards dealing with some of these issues. Complainants now have someone who will listen, and at least some wind farm operators now realise they should cooperate in investigating why people are getting sick. I understand they might even agree to release their operating data so that it can be correlated against symptoms. That would, indeed, be progress.

But, beyond that, very little has changed. In particular, there were some very important recommendations in the final report that have not been treated seriously by the government in its response. The government has observed that wind farm approvals are a matter for individual state and territory governments and that it, therefore, cannot

address the manifest inadequacies in their regulatory regimes. This is profoundly wrong. Unless a wind farm meets Commonwealth requirements, renewable energy certificates cannot be issued. Without the certificates, the wind farm cannot sell them to electricity retailers. And selling certificates is its source of revenue. A wind farm needs the Commonwealth government more than it needs a state government. The Commonwealth is abdicating its responsibilities.

The government response says state government planning regulations require a noise monitoring regime as part of wind farm development approvals for both approval and operational stages. This is not always true. And, in any case, no state requires monitoring of infrasound. The response says the government is moving to develop national wind farm guidelines. This should be a priority, given its significance to state governments. It is a golden opportunity to address the impact of wind farms that were raised in evidence. And, yet, the government is dragging the chain.

The response says the government does not want the Productivity Commission to examine the impact of renewable energy, of which wind is the main component. Its impact on electricity prices was discussed by Senator Back in the previous address. The government says that the Australian Energy Market Commission produces an annual report on retail electricity price trends and that it does not believe further analysis is required by the Productivity Commission at this time. When is the right time to find out how much this utterly indefensible policy is costing the Australian economy or what the social harm being caused by energy poverty is? Do poor people have to die of cold or heat exhaustion before the insanity of ever-rising electricity prices is stopped?

Australia's postwar prosperity is attributable to the fact that we had a reliable source of cheap energy. Cheap, coal-fired power is what has kept the lights on and people in jobs for over a century. It also ensured that everyone could afford to stay warm in winter and cool in summer, no matter whether they were poor or rich. That is no longer the case. How many dead people are an acceptable price for Australia's contribution to combating climate change? I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.