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“In Support of Progress”

Newsletter

Energy and Climate

**Local Government
and Planning**

A musing

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Energy – and Climate

What a mess this has all become!

Whenever the issues of energy and climate are raised, most of us turn off. It's all got so confusing, with claim and counterclaim, all in the name of “science”. Positions of belief and ideology have well and truly taken over from rational debate (“If you don't agree with me, then you are wrong, a “denier”, or an “alarmist”.) And science is being cherry-picked to suit the argument.

Until recent times, the national grid was supplied by large (thermal and hydro) generators, which provided both power for use and inertia or “grunt” for stability. Thermal power came from coal-fired plant (and to a lesser extent gas). In Tasmania, hydro-electric power has been the main game, with additional supply coming from Victoria via BassLink. And a backup gas-fired generator that was for most of its life mothballed.

The national energy market allowed the generators to bid quantum of power into the grid, with the cheapest bid being dispatched first, and all succeeding successful bidders benefiting from the highest price dispatched.

Wind power has been a more recent development, encouraged through what is tantamount to a tax-subsidy arrangement, being RECS (renewable energy certificates). Thermal generators buy certificates from renewables generators.

Wind power was “backed up” by the grunt of these large generators, which means that even though wind was providing power the generators still had to be working to provide system stability.

Unfortunately, the NEM did not allow for the more varied wind generation supply, which tends to bid negative into the market in order that it be dispatched first. As such, the thermal generators, which rely on continual production to be efficient, become less so. So with more and more wind power coming on-line, there is less reliability in the system - and less certainty.

Wind generation, and solar too, NEEDS back-up. And backup costs. To counter this weakness, much effort has been put into battery technology to take on the role of providing supply as well as providing the “grunt”. However, there is a way to go before such a facility can be used competitively on such a large scale.

Coal is cheap, but until now it has been relatively inefficient, with a conversion rate of around 30%. Recent technology advances have shown that efficiency can be doubled – ie half the coal for the same output - thereby halving emissions for the same amount of power produced.

However, coal is presently being demonised, as it produces carbon dioxide gas on burning, which is emitted into the atmosphere. It is now quaintly - and wrongly - being described as a “carbon polluter”. Pressure continues to be placed on coal fired generation in the form of a tax on emissions (by whatever name) with that tax being used to subsidise renewable energy production.

The end result is that energy from thermal generation has become more expensive to support an unreliable and even more expensive renewable energy source, and thermal generators are now closing their doors.

Meanwhile, coal exports remain unaffected, which suggests a certain moral ambiguity. And uranium, of which Australia has a plentiful supply, remains off the agenda.

With climate change being the latest "big thing", politics has taken over from science. Those who fear imminent environmental collapse are calling for a total "decarbonisation" of the energy system, which means the closure of all coal-fired generation plants, and a probable de-industrialisation of the economy. Decarbonising the economy essentially means a greater reliability on wind and solar, which is a higher-priced energy and a less reliable supply. Those who are sceptical of such claims of environmental catastrophe state that any move towards a carbon-free economy will bring about an economic collapse.

All of the above is fact.

Anyone venturing into the middle ground is now attacked from both sides of this political debate. In fact if you believe the environmental argument you are deemed to be politically "left" and if you question the establishment view of rising seas and a man-made warming world you are deemed to be politically "right". In such a climate, science takes a back seat.

Such is the case with Chief Scientist Dr Finkel, whose report on energy policy was released last weekend. Already the claims are being made that the report does not address the real issue – the real issue being whatever each political view regards as being the real issue.

It seems to me that the fact that the climate is in a continual state of change (the mediaeval warm period around 900AD when horticulture thrived in Greenland, and the mini-ice age when the Thames froze over in the 1600's) 2wesq2ais conveniently ignored when proselytising a particular point of view.

What hope is there for a reasoned debate? The fact of the matter is that thermal generation will remain part of the energy mix, coal will continue to be exported to countries that are not affected by the Paris Agreement to reduce carbon emissions, and subsidies will remain the mainstay of renewable developments, including those windfarms recently announced in Tasmania.

In fact Tasmania has much to gain from the move towards renewables as it has a strong and stable "renewables" environment, being water for hydro and wind. With the mainland states moving to a more unreliable and expensive energy environment, Tasmania can yet again promote its difference, as a place that can keep the lights on.

Local government and planning laws

With two Councils (Huon and Glenorchy) now in limbo, and with the government now seeking to recover monies spent on inquiries from the ratepayers of said municipalities, the Minister will still not address the real issue, which is the breakdown in relations between a popularly elected mayor on the one hand, and a popularly elected Council on the other. I again make the point that the election of the mayor by the Councillors themselves is a better way to resolve such matters, and I fail to understand why the Minister will not amend the legislation to allow this to occur. After all, he has no reservation in taking on the Councils when it comes to TasWater. Meanwhile...

At Glamorgan-Spring Bay, we have witnessed the need for a development application regarding a proposal for a salmon farm's shore-based facilities to be re-advertised because Council did not advertise the proposal in the right way.

The Kingborough Council has done a real doozy. After three years of planning, Council put forward a development application to itself for a development on Kingston beach, involving the local surf life-saving club and a restaurant consortium. It then knocked back its own application because it did not comply with its own planning scheme.

This is Pythonesque in its stupidity, and places the Council in an absurd light. What has been the cost to the proponents, including the Council itself? In time, effort and money? What will be the recompense? Ratepayers should demand accountability for this sheer and utter incompetence.

In Hobart, the Battery Point Planning scheme does not allow for houses to be made available for short-stay accommodation. With AirBNB now firmly on the agenda, and with tourism booming, this archaic planning requirement is now being practiced in the breach big-time.

I have been a critic of restrictive planning laws – and their administration - for some time now. They inhibit more than they allow. Planning laws must be able to adapt to changing circumstances and changing conditions, but time and again we see rigid and out-of-date application being applied to such matters.

Will the state-wide planning scheme make any difference? Somehow I doubt it.

A musing

Last week on the radio I heard yet another activist argue there was a need to “have a discussion with the community” regarding a particular matter. There are so many of them these days, I forget which particular cause it was. And the phrase “social licence” is often used as a rationale for such discussion to occur, as it was on this occasion.

For me, that translates to “I haven't got the numbers yet, so I am in lobbying mode, and will continue until I get my way”. All the more so, because when/if the numbers do eventually stack up, any attempt by opponents to also “engage in a discussion with the community” is met with derision and contempt by the very same people that wanted the discussion in the first place.

Obviously having a discussion is a one-way street, and is only worthwhile until one gets one's way.

And finally -

For those of us who are in the south of the state, enjoy Dark MoFo. My congratulations to the organisers for yet another successful and challenging season.

