

Post-pandemic recovery must include action on climate change

May 27, 2020

This was [the plea](#) from Federation member and Glen Innes TA Councillor Abigail Sparks last December, after her community of Wyaliba was devastated in unprecedented and deadly bushfire conditions.

Of course, Abigail was referring to the subject of climate change.

Throughout the catastrophic Australian bushfire season, the denialists launched attack after attack on anyone who dared to acknowledge the scientific evidence and link between the fires and climate change.

Those on the ground, like Abigail, spoke their truth bravely and powerfully. They didn't want to see more communities like Wyaliba destroyed due to the wilful ignorance and inaction of governments.

Fast-forward nearly six months and while the threat is a new one, many are asking the same question that Abigail asked back in December: "If not now, when?"



It is almost universally acknowledged that the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is going to require massive government-funded economic stimulus.

Coronavirus has already killed off Treasurer Josh Frydenberg's dreams of a "back in black" surplus, so why not spend government money on projects that will have long term economic, social and environmental benefits?

What a golden opportunity to invest in publicly-owned renewable energy infrastructure, creating thousands of new unionised jobs and slashing carbon emissions. A vibrant, fully-funded TAFE system would be at the centre of the recovery, skilling new workers and retraining those working in the dying fossil-fuel industry.

Australia has seen a largely consensus response from all levels of government to the coronavirus threat and the science that underpinned that response. The expert advice was to act swiftly and decisively to reduce the threat and "flatten the curve". Surely we can take the same approach to flattening that other curve, namely, climate change?

So far, the signs aren't good.

Exhibit A is the National COVID-19 Coordination Commission (the NCCC), set up by the Morrison government in March "to help **minimise and mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 on jobs and businesses**, and to **facilitate the fastest possible recovery of lives and livelihoods.**"

Sounds promising, except that it's become apparent that the NCCC was set up without terms of reference for over a month, its appointees are all reportedly "captain's picks" by the Prime Minister and there is very little evidence of any transparency and accountability mechanisms overseeing its work.

Even the [scrutiny of a Senate Committee](#) couldn't break the veil of secrecy. The Committee did, however, elicit an admission from the NCCC Chief Executive Officer Peter Harris, who under questioning used the word "opaque" to describe the work of the NCCC.

It gets worse. The Prime Minister's choice of Chair of the NCCC is Neville Power, a former Fortescue Metals chief and current board member at gas company Strike Energy. Taxpayers will fund his remuneration of \$500,000 for the six month duration of the Commission.

Mr Power has shot out of the blocks with his public support for expanded gas mining in Australia. According to [The Saturday Paper](#) in May he gave a webinar presentation to the Trans-Tasman Business Circle telling the audience that the priority now was getting the economy running again, and "debates about climate change" could wait until the crisis was over.

The gas cheer squad want to encourage greater manufacturing in Australia of, as Mr Power described them, "agricultural and fertilisers, and things like that.

Speaking of fertilisers, [The Saturday Paper](#) also reported that one of Mr Power's Commission colleagues, who heads the manufacturing taskforce sub-committee advising the NCCC, is Andrew Liveris. He is the former chair and chief executive of the Dow Chemical Company, one of the world's biggest chemical manufacturers and a major producer of fertiliser, who is currently on the board of the Saudi petroleum giant Aramco.

The Senate committee managed to [extract from their questioning](#) of the NCCC CEO Peter Harris that as a mere "advisor" to the NCCC, Mr Liveris is not required to sign any declarations of corporate interests or otherwise.

While the functions of the NCCC might be — to borrow the expression of its CEO — "opaque", what is in the public domain to date is of serious concern. On 21 May, [The Guardian](#) revealed details of a leaked draft report by Mr Liveris' manufacturing taskforce sub-committee recommending that the Morrison government make sweeping changes to "create the market" for gas and build fossil fuel infrastructure that would operate for decades.

The gas-as-a-transition-fuel rhetoric has long been used as a stalking horse by the desperate fossil fuel lobby. Trouble is, gas is just replacing one bad fossil fuel with another. While "natural" gas does produce only about half the carbon dioxide emissions of coal when it is burned, as noted by Senior Researcher at the [Climate Council](#) Tim Baxter, he says that any benefit is substantially eroded by the emissions created when gas is vented or flared during the exploration, extraction, transport and distribution processes.

Irrespective of the science, Scott Morrison and his Minister for Energy and Emissions Reduction (not a typographical error) Angus Taylor are already well and truly on the gas bandwagon. Mr Taylor has said: "[I like to think of the other side of COVID-19 as being a gas-fired recovery](#)".

[Further, he said](#) "Gas is one of many technologies that can play an important role here. It's very important in the short-term."

There is no short term, Angus! As the [Climate Council](#) chief Amanda McKenzie has stated, "new gas projects will create huge investment losses, stranded assets and colossal environmental harm."

The Prime Minister is also seriously overstating the benefits of gas. In January, even before he appointed Neville Power to the NCCC, he told the [National Press Club](#) "There is no credible energy transition plan, for an economy like Australia in particular, that does not involve the greater use of gas as an important transition fuel."

Not true, Prime Minister! The Australian Energy Market Operator's own planning and modelling [show a decline in gas consumption](#).

Greg Jericho, commenting in [The Guardian](#), described the government's gas obsession as "like a smoker switching to low-tar cigarettes."

It's possible that this year a reduction of emissions will be recorded, attributable to the pandemic.

As the world locked down, images of clean, unpolluted cities and environments restoring were beamed across

the internet. The story of dolphins in the Grand Canal may have been fake news, but there was no doubt that the Venetian canals enjoyed the cruise liner-free time.

However, it won't last. And more importantly, the current threat to human life, the economy and livelihoods is an unacceptable cost of even this minor environmental recovery.

So, when is the time to talk about climate change?

It's now.

The fossil fuel executives may have had a head start, but there are many, many other people and organisations out there that are not giving up, instead building momentum for public investment in evidence-based renewable projects that will actually have long lasting economic, environmental and social benefits.

The Australian Conservation Foundation's 'Rebuild, Recover, Renew' [report](#) outlines the job-creating benefits of broad-ranging environmental protection and small-scale renewable energy programs — explicitly linking the recovery process to building resilience against future crises, while mitigating emissions.

The Grattan Institute released a [report](#) into the potential for Australia to manufacture 'green steel' and export it overseas, which would "generate tens of thousands of jobs and an export market comparable to Australia's coal industry".

The recent [Stimulus Summit](#), co-hosted by the Smart Energy Council and RenewEconomy, detailed ten [key](#) mega-projects that could supercharge a renewables-led recovery.

The Australia Institute's Centre for Future Work released a report showing [that](#) "some 80 to 90 per cent of Australians support both the Australian manufacturing sector and a more assertive transition to renewable energy".

It's appropriate to leave the last word, for now, with Greta Thunberg. Marking Earth Day 2020 on 30 March, speaking on a virtual panel via YouTube, she said, "During a crisis like this, there is a big risk that people try to use this emergency to push their own agenda or their own interests. We need to make sure that doesn't happen. I cannot stress enough how important it is that we are active democratic citizens, so a crisis like this doesn't slide in the wrong direction."

Further information:

School Strike for Climate
Australia Institute
350.org Australia
[Australian Climate Roundtable](#)
Information-Rick Morton, the Guardian's Environment Editor
Have launched "Fossil Fuel Watch"
The Australia Institute
Renew Economy
GetUp
NPANSW
350.org

[Read more about bushfire recovery here.](#)