

MATTERS OF PUBLIC IMPORTANCE

Energy

The PRESIDENT (18:34): Senator Dean Smith has submitted a proposal, under standing order 75, today, which has been circulated and is shown on the Dynamic Red:

The Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner's 2024 Annual Report demonstrates that regional Australia is shouldering the burden of large-scale renewable projects, transmission lines and storage developments, while Labor fails to provide a framework to deliver affordable, reliable energy to Australian households and businesses.

Is consideration of the proposal supported?

More than the number of senators required by the standing orders having risen in their places—

The PRESIDENT: With the concurrence of the Senate, the clerks will set the clock in line with the informal arrangements made by the whips.

Senator BROCKMAN (Western Australia—Deputy President and Chair of Committees) (18:34): It is an honour to speak on this motion on behalf of Senator Dean Smith. I will read the matter that is before the Senate. It is:

The Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner's 2024 Annual Report demonstrates that regional Australia is shouldering the burden of large-scale renewable projects, transmission lines and storage developments, while Labor fails to provide a framework to deliver affordable, reliable energy to Australian households and businesses.

This one is fairly self-explanatory, and we're seeing it play out. We're seeing it play out on our television screens. We're seeing it play out in the anger of regional communities ignored by this government's renewables-at-any-cost approach. These communities feel that they are being bullied, coerced and ordered into taking a particular approach to our energy grid with no consultation. There has been no impact assessment as to how these massive renewable energy projects and the transmission lines that accompany them will impact on the economy of local communities, the agriculture in local communities and the environment in our regional communities.

As I have said in this place before—I have on many occasions, but those opposite choose to keep on ignoring this fact—the energy in large part is not supporting those regional communities. Almost all of the energy is being pumped into our capital cities. But who bears the burden of these large-scale energy projects, the destruction of the environment, the destruction of prime agricultural land and the inability of farmers to farm in the way they have been? It is of course those regional communities.

In a previous report it was suggested that between 10,000 and 20,000 kilometres of transmission lines were going to be required to meet Labor's renewable-at-any-cost approach to our energy grid. They're not putting 10,000 to 20,000 kilometres of transmission lines through inner cities. They're not putting 10,000 to 20,000 kilometres of transmission lines through outer suburbia. Those 10,000 to 20,000 kilometres of transmission lines are going through regional and rural Australia. They're going through people's farms. Is it any wonder given these communities haven't been consulted, haven't been included in the way these decisions are made and haven't been included in the way these projects are decided upon? Sometimes the actual energy project can be literally hundreds of kilometres away from the transmission lines that are destroying people's farms.

Transmission lines going through people's property is of course not a new thing. This has been going on for generations, and they have always been problematic. But what we are seeing now—what has changed—is that this Labor renewables-at-any-cost approach to our energy grid has put those transmission lines on steroids. It is 10,000 to 20,000 kilometres of new transmission lines in this country. Is it little wonder that we saw the protests in regional Victoria that we've seen in the last week? Is it little wonder that we've heard of property owners who do not understand their obligations and the legal risks that they face for now maintaining their agricultural pursuits under those transmission lines? They never asked for them. They never wanted them. They were never consulted about them. Now you see draconian Labor laws in the state of Victoria to enable the people putting up those transmission lines—entry to property with no restriction. They can go on when they like. They can do whatever they like. This is not the Australia I know and love.

Senator DOLEGA (Tasmania) (18:39): I rise in reply to Senator Dean Smith's matter of public importance. Senator Smith cited some commentary about regional Australia being unfairly burdened by large-scale renewable energy projects, but I don't see it like that at all. What some may see as a challenge or a burden, I see as a once-in-a-generation opportunity, especially for communities in Tasmania and the state's mighty north-west. It's an opportunity for jobs, economic growth, diversification, community liveability and, most importantly, energy security.

Tasmania, and particularly its north-west region, is uniquely positioned to harness the benefits of the clean energy transition, but we also have the ability to power the Big Island with clean, renewable energy. The recently announced financial close of stage 1 of the Marinus Link project marks a historic milestone not just for Tasmania but for the entire nation. With \$3.8 billion secured from the Commonwealth's Clean Energy Finance Corporation, and equity commitments from the Commonwealth, Tasmania and Victoria, this project is no longer just a vision; it's becoming a reality.

Marinus Link will deliver 750 megawatts of capacity—enough to power approximately 750,000 homes. It will strengthen grid reliability in Victoria and other mainland states while providing long-term certainty to major industrial users in Tasmania. By leveraging cheap solar energy from the mainland during the day and Tasmanian hydropower at night, we're creating a more resilient and sustainable energy system.

But, beyond the technical benefits, the real story lies in what this means for our communities and in the opportunities that it unlocks. Stage 1 of Marinus Link is expected to support around 1,400 additional jobs per year at peak construction, increasing to 1,600 jobs with stage 2. That's hundreds of families in Tasmania who will benefit from employment, new career pathways and the revitalisation of local industries. The economic stimulus is equally impressive. Stage 1 alone will inject over \$1.4 billion into Tasmania's economy, rising to \$2.1 billion with stage 2. The investment will ensure that our communities are not unfairly burdened but are in fact beneficiaries at the forefront of Australia's clean energy future. The Marinus Link and Burnie City Council community partnership program is an example of this.

Two school based initiatives have been awarded funding to inspire and prepare the next generation of workers. Burnie High School's Burnie awards program will receive \$60,000 over three years to help students transition from school to local industry, showcasing the career opportunities available to them in the region. Similarly, the Greenpower Tasmania program by GreenSTEM Education will receive \$60,000 over three years to encourage students to explore STEM focused careers through teamwork and science. These programs are more than just grants; they are investments in our youth, our future workforce and our community resilience. Additionally, the Marinus Link community grants and sponsorship programs are supporting grassroots initiatives in areas along the project alignment, including Burnie City, Latrobe City, South Gippsland and the Central Coast. These programs ensure that local voices are heard, that local needs are met and that local pride is strengthened.

The Albanese government is delivering what the opposition couldn't: a collaborative, people focused energy policy that puts regional communities at the heart of the transition. Marinus Link is not just a power cable; it's an opportunity for economic renewal, educational opportunity and community empowerment. People across the country, especially in regional areas, are embracing renewable energy, particularly solar, in huge numbers. They are backing in Labor's Cheaper Home Batteries Program. The Minister for Climate Change and Energy has said that

over 40,000 Australians have taken up the opportunity to get a cheaper battery for their home or small business, which will quickly enable them to make additional savings on their energy expenses.

I want to make one last comment about the take note debate earlier this week. My colleague on the other side Senator Cadell referred to Tasmania as the Norway of Australia when it comes to renewable energy. It was a pretty good analogy because Tasmania is just about as regional as you can get and we are not burdened by renewables; we've been embracing them for many decades. *(Time expired)*

Senator WHISH-WILSON (Tasmania) (18:44): For anyone watching this debate here in Parliament House tonight, it's always instructive to look at a subject and break it up into two components: its policy and its politics. Of course, the two things are often interwoven.

The policy around the clean energy rollout around this nation, including critical transmission infrastructure, is an important one to get right, and there's no doubt at all that it's not perfect. There are a number of issues that need to be worked through on this policy, and the concerns of the community should be taken seriously. There needs to be consultation and an understanding that renewable energy projects can also have environmental impacts. So it's really important that we listen to regional Australia and that we get the policy right. We're not there yet, and the Greens will work with the government to make sure we do get there.

Let's look at the politics of this. Don't, anyone, for a second, think that this motion here tonight is not all about politics. Disappointingly from Senator Smith, who I consider to be an intelligent and caring person with the Liberal Party, as I do Senator Bragg and others who care about climate change, this is all about an attack on net zero. This is about the fact that, within the coalition, there are senators—especially in the National Party—who don't believe in climate change, who are flat-out climate deniers. Ever since I've been in this building, which is coming up to 14 years, I have witnessed the conservative side of politics not just undermine climate action but actively rip it up once we got it legislated in this building. And nothing has changed.

This motion here tonight is all about politics. We saw it start three or four weeks ago, when the Institute of Public Affairs—one of the many think tanks associated with the Atlas Network and other networks of international conservative think tanks—put out a report on net zero. Within days, Barnaby Joyce from the other place was out there campaigning against net zero, causing headaches for the coalition. And then we had the Bush Summit, sponsored, presumably, and paid for, by Gina Rinehart and the Murdoch press. Now, Gina Rinehart, a billionaire, who is on record as being a climate sceptic or climate denier, opens these summits with a video, and then the Murdoch press promotes them—they who have spent decades promoting climate disinformation. They are a cancer on climate action. And they've been going out to regional areas and whipping up regional communities into a frenzy.

The fact that our Prime Minister and ag minister supposedly got chased out of town by some tractors the other week is a really sad indictment on us—that we would be taking advantage of these regional communities so the LNP can campaign against climate action and against net zero. Let's help these people. Let's get it right, and cut out the politics. *(Time expired)*

Senator BRAGG (New South Wales) (18:47): I welcome the opportunity to make a contribution on this important topic, because the issue of net zero and emissions reduction generally are important ones for the Australian community. And it was the former coalition government that signed Australia up a few years ago when we were in government.

But, since the Labor Party won office in 2022, they have pursued a very aggressive approach to delivering this policy, which has not been technology-agnostic. They have prioritised the vast take-up of renewables at any cost. Now, renewable energy is very good and very desirable, and, in many cases, it can be very inexpensive. But, when you are managing a transition from a largely coal-fired-power based energy system to a fundamentally different system, and bearing in mind the impact that energy has on the overall economy, you must be very careful and very prudent. So our principal argument here is that the transition has been unreasonable. It has not been managed well. And it has been the regional communities that have largely had to pay the price.

I grew up in a regional community myself and have travelled widely across my state. If you look at the failure of this government to properly consult on the question of offshore wind and then the transmission infrastructure, these are material and serious issues for regional communities. For the government to pursue this policy at any cost, trample over regional communities and not give them a proper say—and I don't think that Minister Bowen has done his best work here, to be charitable. I think that then imperils the whole question of community support for getting to net zero, which is a very important objective for our economy.

Overall, the capital markets have made up their mind: this transition is on. And so Australia needs to be part of that important movement of capital. But it's got to be done in a way where the government isn't playing Frankenstein, and my judgement is that the government has tried to do that. Ultimately, the distortion of the market, through subsidies in particular, has been a problem. Renewable energy is the most competitive in many comparisons. I

would say to you that, for those that really value getting to net zero as part of our economic agenda, getting community consent and working with regional communities is actually one of the most important aspects of that agenda.

The world has moved on in terms of the capital markets, but, if you look around the G20, it's a very similar scenario. Every G20 country bar one is part of this accord. Sure, different countries have different ways of doing it. The way that Labor have done it through legislating their targets and the like is not essential. It is not an essential way of getting to net zero. And so I would say that, if you look at different countries in the G20—the major emitters—some countries will get there in 2047. Others propose that it will be in 2053. Others have 2060 or 2070. Of course, the United States has left, but the United States's economy is so different from Australia's. We are so much more trade exposed than the US, so I think the comparisons there which are often made are erroneous.

The point is: if you want to do net zero, do it properly. You should be technology agnostic and you should be very careful in getting the consent of regional communities, which are essential to Australia getting to this key environmental and economic goal. As I say, growing up in a regional community myself, I know some of the best conservationists are farmers and regional people. I would say that most people who live in the regions want to see a cleaner, greener environment going forward, but they also want to see their property rights respected and they want to have a say on major developments which are occurring in their own region. We're always happy to have this debate, but we make the point here that net zero is an important objective that must be done properly. There are many different ways to do it, and the way Labor has done it has been horrendous.

Senator O'NEILL (New South Wales) (18:52): Let me begin by saying say how much of a joke I think some of the language in this MPI is. Honestly—here we are in the Senate again with the LNP's opposition to sustainable renewable energy for the nation on show yet again, and there is division even with the contributions that we've seen here this evening. I'd say, despite the incoherence of what is put before us in this MPI, bring on the debate. Let's continue to undertake the proper education of the nation. Let's talk about it for as long as we need, because, as a Labor senator, I'm here in the chamber to talk about the policies that we're actually investing in to make a real and practical difference for Australians instead of the whinge-fest that's going on on the other side.

Those opposite seem determined to spend every moment in here trying to engage in yet another sideshow discussion. In the meantime, our government, the Labor Albanese government, is getting on with building the energy systems that Australians need. The opposition at this point of time, I'm sad to say, my fellow Australians, have not even figured out what they want from renewable energy, because clearly it's not lowering energy costs. We've had to do that in spite of them voting against every proposition to support Australians in the management of household finances with regard to energy. The LNP can't agree on more access to renewable forms of energy, so we had to go ahead and do that without them. One of those key policy items was Labor's Cheaper Home Batteries Program. They screamed black and blue they didn't want it to happen. Again, Labor has advanced in spite of the hysterical opposition and uncertainty into the energy market that is the consequence of the schizophrenic debate that we see in the LNP.

What's patently clear by the actions of the LNP, when it comes down to basic questions about the cheapest forms of energy available to us, is the divided and divisive LNP answers. The main one that they agree on is saying a resounding no. They scream, 'No, no, no,' and they join a 'no-alition' with whoever they can to prevent the progress of this nation with regard to energy. They spent their last term in opposition, instead of supporting renewable energy, proposing power plants and small modular reactors. There's not even one built in the world, yet that was their policy. No wonder they didn't want to speak about it on the booths on the Central Coast where I was handing out. It was an impossible end to the 22 failed propositions that they'd already considered.

We are facing energy challenges now, because, in their nine long, terrible years of government, the LNP dithered, debated, backstabbed and undermined, all while cycling through the 22 iterations of energy policy announcements. We won't call them energy policy enactments, because they were more hollow than that. They were full of sound and fury, barking at Australians with a new idea every few months and with no coherence or cohesion. After all of that chaos, the disingenuity and the failure—get your popcorn, people, because the signs are that the LNP are going to spend this term of parliament, again, relitigating their policy on net zero. They seem to have learned absolutely nothing, and I'd just say: 'Keep at it. That's fantastic, guys. Well done, Angus. Well done, Barnaby, and everyone else who's continuing the division in the Liberal and National parties. You can spend your weeknights on TV shows, talking to whoever you're talking to with regard to net zero, but, while you're doing that and continuing the chaos of your nine long years, this government is getting on with the job of doing the careful, considered nation-building work to secure our national energy needs, just like a real government should do.'

It's going to take years of continued effort to fix what the coalition broke when they were in government. And, even now, they can't come up with a stance that's united enough to argue anything of validity. We just had Senator Bragg talking about the capital markets—follow the money. 'They've made up their minds,' he said. 'They're

investing in renewables.' The market's moved on. The LNP are stuck in the mired mess of their own past. Sometimes it feels to me that the coalition members and senators are more concerned about being contrarian than Australian. They care more about arguing with one another than creating effective reality based lower energy costs for Australian householders. That is why we will continue to serve the Australian people in energy policy. (*Time expired*)

Senator HANSON (Queensland—Leader of Pauline Hanson's One Nation and Pauline Hanson's One Nation Whip) (18:57): Nothing illustrates the contempt Labor has for farmers and regional Australia better than its net zero obsession. I am appalled at laws pushed through by the arrogant Victorian Labor government last week. This legislation enables transmission-line builders to forcibly enter private property and allow for the arrest of any farmer who refuses access. Labor does not understand that we cannot eat turbines, high-voltage wires, solar panels or pylons. Labor does not care about our farmers, our regional communities or our capacity to feed people.

Labor has been fighting a war against farmers for years. The Albanese government has banned live sheep exports and has forced more water from irrigators, yet its agriculture minister actually claimed yesterday the government has backed them every step of the way. Why, then, did farmers roundly boo—yes, boo—the Prime Minister at the Bush Summit? And then he turns around and says, 'I won't tell you any BS.' Oh my God! That went down like a lead balloon too. What a load of BS that statement is.

Why are they protesting against Labor policy here in Canberra and in Melbourne, Western Australia, Queensland, New South Wales—actually, right across the whole country? Labor is lying. Labor doesn't care, because those transmission lines and wind towers will never appear in Labor electorates in the city. Can you imagine wind turbines towering over Sydney Harbour or on the banks of the Yarra or Brisbane rivers? Of course not. It is the regions which are being forced to bear the burden.

One Nation stands for property rights in Victoria and across the country. One Nation stands firmly against wind towers and transmission lines being forced onto productive farmland. One Nation stands against net zero and Labor's cult of climate change. One Nation stands for farmers and regional communities in Victoria and across Australia. (*Time expired*)

Senator McKENZIE (Victoria—Leader of the Nationals in the Senate) (19:00): Listening to the tone-deaf senators tonight highlights why regional Australians have had enough, why they feel hopeless and abandoned by a prime minister who said he would govern for all—but, as it turns out, not if you are in the regions. They're furious because their ability to produce food and their land values, social cohesion and private property rights are being trashed by the Labor Party's pursuit of net zero. Even the Paris Agreement states that rural and regional communities and food production should be protected in any future transition, and yet who is assessing that impact here in Australia? The social, economic and environmental damage to communities that is being done right now is real, and the government knows it.

What happened in Ballarat this week should give every member of parliament pause—real pause. Farmers and regional communities, people who feed and clothe our nation, have been told that transmission towers, wind factories and solar farms will carve their way across their land whether they like it or not. Their property values, their property rights, their prime farmland, their close-knit communities are all at risk. They're all under threat in a vain attempt to shrink the nation's carbon footprint by imposing industrial-scale grids of steel and concrete across some of the most productive farmland in our country. And, somehow, apparently, they are wrong to be angry about that. Somehow, polities in the Labor Party and the Greens think that they shouldn't be offended.

The Prime Minister rightfully got heckled in Ballarat. Of course he was embarrassed, but that tells you something about the mood in regional Australia. We're very polite people. The Prime Minister and his Labor MPs in this place have subsequently drawn quite extraordinary comparisons between that protest in Ballarat and extreme demonstrations in Melbourne invaded by Neo-Nazis. There's no equivalence—none. The Ballarat protest was spirited, passionate, at times angry, and rightfully so, but it was peaceful, and the Prime Minister knows it. It's okay to lock the gate against gas companies, but it's not okay to lock the gate against foreign owned industrial-scale renewables. Talk about hypocrisy.

Even the Minister for Climate Change and Energy, Chris Bowen, has grudgingly admitted that. He said::

The transmission rollout, the wind factories, the solar farms and the hundreds of kilometres of transmission lines are being opposed by communities.

No, Sherlock, Mr Bowen. They are vehemently opposed. Farmers, law-abiding citizens, are saying they will lock their gates. They're prepared to go to jail to protect their property rights and their children's future. And, your solution, Mr Bowen, to offer them cheaper power bills and compensation—well, I'm going to hold you to that. The National Party will hold you to that, because right now regional Australians see this for what it is: a top-down, big-end-of-town agenda imposed on people who feel they have no voice and no choice.

When the Prime Minister and his ministers start invoking Neo-Nazis, when they take one woman's rope prop at a town hall meeting and smear the entire farming community, they're not listening. It's the worst kind of deflection. It's also the worst kind of gaslighting. That rope was a warning, Prime Minister, of the despair that is real in regional communities that your policy is impacting. Just think about it for a moment. What if a government or a foreign owned company marched into your home, onto your property and started destroying it? The truth is, until farmers and communities are genuinely engaged with and their concerns addressed, these protests won't stop. Regional Australia will keep speaking out loudly and clearly, and those of us that have the great honour and privilege of representing them in this place will also continue to be their champions against a Labor Party supported by the Greens who want to see livestock production and food production in this country stopped and disappear under swathes of steel and concrete for an international obsession that has gone too far.

The ACTING DEPUTY PRESIDENT (Senator O'Sullivan): The time for the debate has expired.