

Freedom of Information requests for advice about SA blackout

The Prime Minister and Energy Minister ignored advice from AEMO that renewables were not to blame for the SA blackout.

In the afternoon of 28 September 2016, a huge storm raged through South Australia, knocking over multiple power lines and triggering a state-wide blackout. Almost immediately, politicians blamed the blackout on the relatively high concentration of windfarms in South Australia, including the Deputy Prime Minister.¹

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Minister for Energy and Environment Josh Frydenberg soon joined in the blame game.

Documents now released under Freedom of Information, through requests by The Australia Institute, show AEMO told federal public servants and political advisors that renewable energy was not to blame for the blackout.

By exploiting the opportunity to criticise South Australia's transition to renewable power and renewable targets in other states, the government completely ignored the advice from their public servants and the Australian Energy Market Operator (AEMO).

Renewables not to blame

The documents show senior public servants grappling with the crisis and striving to work out exactly what has happened. At 8:31pm, four hours after the blackout, a senior bureaucrat at Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PMC) writes:

helpful if we can have some information on the cause and why the system responds as it did, I listened to the Premier who repeatedly indicated the outage is not generation related, but Some are suggesting related to renewables.

¹ <http://www.afr.com/news/sa-blackout-nick-xenophon-barnaby-joyce-blame-renewables-20160928-grqwpq>

I'm concerned that if the reason is because the system shut down to protect itself and it is not a supply issue we do not repeat misinformation

Then, the next day, an email sent at 7:20am outlines

a status report from an update from a teleconference at 5am involving PMO, Minister Frydenberg's Office and Environment and Energy officials.

It warns

not to speculate on how this happened. There are processes in place which support a proper investigation by the Australian Energy Market Operator.

It then outlines AEMO's summary of the events, as best understood at that point:

There has been unprecedented damage to the network (ie bigger than any other event in Australia), with 20+ steel transmission towers down in the north of the State due to wind damage (between Adelaide and Port Augusta).

The electricity network was unable to cope with such a sudden and large loss of generation at once.

Then comes the key statement. The summary of the AEMO call says that

AEMOs advice is that the generation mix (ie renewable or fossil fuel) was not to blame for yesterday's events – it was the loss of 1000 MW of power in such a short space of time as transmission lines fell over.

This is the advice from AEMO to the Office of the Prime Minister, the Energy Minister and their respective Departments. Both continued to exploit the situation, criticising state based renewable targets.

PMC receives backlash from the public

On 30 September, the PMC writes to the Department Liaison Officer (DLO) -- the public servant who acts as a conduit for routine interactions between PMC and the Prime Minister's Office.

The Department is receiving

a fair few emails re: the PMs comments on the renewable energy. Examples below.

The PMC then lists examples of the angry correspondence they are receiving.

- A number of the constituents say they are “disgusted”.
- One constituent says it is “despicable from someone who should know better... [your] performance could not be more disappointing”.
- One asks about a “decentralised renewable energy system with battery storage backed up by rapid start peaking generators” and asks “What happened to ‘innovation’?”
- Another constituent bemoans “dishonest politics”.
- Another says this is “Trump style”.

The email’s subject is “Handling advice required”. It’s not clear what advice the PMO provided.

From: "Sewell, Margaret" <Margaret.Sewell@environment.gov.au>

Date: 29 September 2016 at 7:20:03 AM AEST

To: "kelly.pearce@pmc.gov.au" <kelly.pearce@pmc.gov.au>,
Section 22

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"Cameron, Robert" <Robert.Cameron@ag.gov.au>, "Chard, Samantha"

<Samantha.Chard@ag.gov.au>, "Kiley, Andrew"

<Andrew.Kiley@ag.gov.au>,
Section 22

Section 22

Section 22

"kylie.bryant@pmc.gov.au"

<kylie.bryant@pmc.gov.au>

Cc: Section 22

"de Brouwer,

Gordon" <Gordon.deBrouwer@environment.gov.au>, "Heferen, Rob"

<Rob.Heferen@environment.gov.au>, "Bennett, Helen"

<Helen.Bennett@environment.gov.au>,
Section 22

, "O'Toole, James"

<James.O'Toole@environment.gov.au>

Subject: RE: South Australian Power Outage [SEC=UNCLASSIFIED]

Colleagues

Here is a status report from an update from a teleconference at 5am involving PMO, Minister Frydenberg's Office and Environment and Energy officials. A similar note (not as long) has gone to the PMO.

Regards

Margaret

Section 22

From: Pearce, Kelly [<mailto:Kelly.Pearce@pmc.gov.au>]

Sent: Wednesday, 28 September 2016 8:31 PM

To: Section 22

Cc: Section 22 Section 22

Section 22

de Brouwer, Gordon

<Gordon.deBrouwer@environment.gov.au>; Heferen, Rob

<Rob.Heferen@environment.gov.au>; Section 22

Bennett, Helen

<Helen.Bennett@environment.gov.au>; Cameron, Robert

<Robert.Cameron@ag.gov.au>; Chard, Samantha <Samantha.Chard@ag.gov.au>;

Kiley, Andrew <Andrew.Kiley@ag.gov.au>; Section 22

Subject: Re: South Australian Power Outage [SEC=UNCLASSIFIED]

Thanks Section 22 helpful if we can have some information on the cause and why the system responds as it did,

I listened to the Premier who repeatedly indicated the outage is not generation related, but Some are suggesting related to renewables.

I'm concerned that if the reason is because the system shut down to protect itself and it is not a supply issue we do not repeat misinformation

Thanks
Kelly

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->Based on preliminary information the cause of yesterday's blackout was a cascading event. The initial event was the loss of four major transmission lines, caused by high wind conditions.

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->This was followed by the Torrens Island gas power station shutting down shortly afterwards – the biggest local power station on line at the time. This may have been caused by a lightning strike on the switchyard &/or an automatic shutdown to protect generation assets after the loss of 1000MW of generation on the Eyre peninsula.

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->The two interconnectors then shut down to protect the network.

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->There has been unprecedented damage to the network (ie bigger than any other event in Australia), with 20+ steel transmission towers down in the north of the State due to wind damage (between Adelaide and Port Augusta).

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->The electricity network was unable to cope with such a sudden and large loss of generation at once.

<!--[if !supportLists]-->• <!--[endif]-->AEMOs advice is that the generation mix (ie renewable or fossil fuel) was not to blame for yesterday's events – it was the loss of 1000 MW of power in such a short space of time as transmission lines fell over.

From: Section 22
To: DLO
Subject: Handling advice required [SEC=UNCLASSIFIED]
Date: Friday, 30 September 2016 10:11:28 AM
Importance: High

UNCLASSIFIED

Hi guys

We are receiving a fair few emails re: the PM's comments on the renewable energy. Examples below.

Normally, if corro is of a political nature we send to EO – we will continue to do this.

We will NFA ones that are derogatory to the PM (or would you like us to send these to the EO for their information)?

Sensible, non-political ones, would you like us to send to IIE or another department such as Environment or SA gov (if appropriate).

I've copied and pasted some examples below.

Section 22

Example 1

SA Storms

Dear Prime Minister,

I am totally disgusted that you are conflating the damage done by the storms in South Australia and renewable energy targets, despicable from someone who should know better. Your performance could not be more disappointing.

Example 2

SA Blackout

I was disgusted to hear you blame the SA blackout on policies to increase the use of renewable energy rather than the severe damage to the transmission infrastructure. This is dishonest politics.

We need to increase the renewable energy mix. A decentralised renewable energy system with battery storage backed up by rapid start peaking generators would have probably reduced the extent of the blackout.

What happened to 'innovation'?

Example 3

The power crisis in South Australia

Mr Turnbull - I am disgusted that you and your government have used a significant weather event to spruce the issue of Renewable energy - and your obvious opposition to it - This crisis occurred because of climate change - helped along SIGNIFICANTLY by our own continued arrogant use of fossil fuels such as coal. Events such as these will become more common as we continue to destroy our own atmosphere - for the sake of the stock market and profit and our governments ignorant insistence that coal fired power is not impacting on our atmosphere - Do you still believe in father Christmas and the tooth fairy Mr Turnbull - because clearly you and your government live in a fairy tale world the rest of us don't see.

Example 4

SA Power Loss

Honesty PM, are you stooping so low and so "Trump-style" as to run the Liberal Party's and your Government's historical and embedded disdain for renewable energy as a mask for what was obviously the result of a combination of extreme weather and structural engineering failure? You astound me, really. You came to the leadership giving me some optimism, that you were a reasoned, sound leader who could see all sides and act in our interests. You have been a disappointment. Lead us for God's sake, lead us. To say that renewables had something to do with steel transmission power poles bending over in a major storm is plain daft and shows the underlying motive for your comments. Your comments and those of Josh Frydenberg were such a disappointment. My 15 year old nephew even realised the cause of the power failure! Same goes for that hip-shooter Barnaby Joyce and his ridiculous comments about the cause of the SA power loss. What stupid comments! Please embed some maturity in your cabinet, get rid of the agendas and wake up man! You are our leader, not some patsy.

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Renewable energy

Dear Mr Turnbull

I am astounded to hear that you have attacked the renewable energy market and encouraged the country to slow down on developing this technology and infrastructure. I am not traditionally a liberal voter but did so at the last election as I felt your credentials and views supported the increase of renewable energy (amongst other policies).

Obviously I was wrong and as a result I am now reassessing my views on your strengths and abilities to not only shape and guide the country into the future but more importantly to influence the Liberal Party to adopt strategies and make changes that the rest of the country feel are necessary (same old same old is not a long term strategy).

The powerbrokers in your party are rich and influential and given your latest comments it appears that they don't give a stuff about the rest of us and have the perception that them and their big business buddies are more important.

I know its difficult to please all the masses but when something as important and critical as energy supply (and the environment) is used to fill the coffers of coal owners while denigrating renewable energy then I felt enough is enough and decided to convey my disappointment to you personally (if this message manages to get that far).

Please show some leadership and courage on this issue and steer the Liberals in the direction of sustainable and technological changes that will benefit our country and more critically our children into the future.

Yours disappointingly

Section 47F