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TITLE: Turn Green Switch Now for a Fresh Burst of Energy

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The dust is beginning to settle from the federal budget. A key plank of the budget was the amount of \$2.3billion over five years to tackle climate change by "reducing emissions, adapting to change and helping Australia play a leadership role".

Green groups generally regarded the budget as limp because it focused too much on fossil fuels and helping coal infrastructure and not enough on building a vibrant renewable energy sector.

The Rudd Government had the opportunity to deliver the world's first climate budget, but instead continued with business as usual. Worse than that, it may have damaged the solar photovoltaic industry, one of Australia's growing industries in clean technology, causing job losses and a "bust" in an industry that Australia needs as part of our response to climate change.

In light of the new science on Arctic melting that shows climate change is happening significantly faster than scientists had predicted, a business-as-usual stance on climate policy is extremely irresponsible.

Among many voters, especially young voters for whom climate change policy was their key interest at the last election, there is now a sense of disappointment. The Rudd Government moved quickly to sign the Kyoto agreement, which raised expectations that bold measures would be taken to reach the targets.

However, it must be acknowledged that if the Government had been bolder and kept up the momentum gained from the Kyoto signing, it would no doubt have been greeted by a cacophony of outrage from industry bosses over job losses that would flow from supporting measures that affect polluting industries such as coal, aviation, aluminium and cement. Indeed, even the Productivity Commission has been making noises about jobs.

Arguably we should have limited sympathy for industry bosses who have failed to adapt to new business models despite many years of warnings that change was nigh. But that is not the issue. The "jobs versus climate" formula was always a false dichotomy, and has been proven so by the long-term experience of Germany and other developed nations comparable to Australia.

Transitioning from a carbon-intensive economy into a new, clean energy economy and society could be seen as an opportunity to create hundreds of thousands of new jobs in energy efficiency, renewable energy, and other green-collar and green-professional industries.

Australia should aim for a just transition to new jobs skilled jobs, good jobs, fair workplaces for the country's youth, with the added benefit of export value.

As an example of how this could be done, Germany under chancellor Helmut Kohl set up "feed-in" tariffs to support the fledgling renewable energy sector in 1991. Feed-in laws mean that homes and businesses which produce a green energy surplus can feed back energy into the grid and be paid for it. When Angela Merkel took power in Germany, she kept the scheme because of the remarkable levels of job creation. More than 250,000 Germans are now employed in the renewables sector, and a booming export market has been created. Fourteen per cent of all German energy is now green. The new scheme has proven especially successful for German farmers who can convert parts of their properties to earn money for clean energy as a sideline. Victoria, South Australia, Queensland (and soon the ACT) have introduced these laws but they are very weak and the incentives will need to be strengthened to make them effective.

There is a strong evidence-based argument for feed-in laws, but there are also other creative strategies could be pursued. So instead of the two coalpowered power stations being built in Western Australia, how about trying energy efficiency and a solar energy plant? Instead of a pulp mill in Tasmania, why not consider a silicon plant to produce silicon for solar panels?

Some economists might argue that it is best to let market forces create green-collar jobs, that government should shy away from regulation or incentives in this area. These arguments miss the point that the world in 2008 does not have the luxury of more decades of standing back and waiting for things to happen. We are running out of time.

Australia needs to step up and address climate change the same way it would any other national emergency: not sit back and wait for the market to fix things, but proactively respond and boost the things we know we need to solve this crisis. Australia has many assets we know we'll need to use: sun, wind, geothermal, oceans, forests but people, and especially our young people, are the most important of all the tools we have to solve climate change.

That's why Australia needs a national green job-creation scheme a nation-building project to to give the skills workers, refocus curriculum in schools, TAFEs and universities, and employ hundreds of thousands of people to start doing the work that needs to be done to save the climate. Swapping jobs in extractive industries for new jobs in manufacturing wind turbines and solar panels or retro-fitting homes must be worth considering. Emissions trading will also lead to significant new opportunities in the "green-professional" industries.

Not only can current jobs be adapted to green jobs, Australian engineers who now go to Europe, California or China might be lured home.

Eventually, every job needs to be a green job: every industry will need to readjust to the reality of climate change and play their part in cutting Australia's emissions.

At best, everyone wins. At the very least, the "job losses" chorus needs to be muted while data and new opportunities for green jobs are explored. The German renewable sector experience shows there are real possibilities for green-job creation in Australia over the next 10 years, but only if we grasp the mettle and think strategically now.

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