

Coal, Climate Change & Conservatives

Malcolm Turnbull

Former Prime Minister of Australia

Ebony Bennett

Deputy Director at the Australia Institute

Ebony Bennett 0:00

Good day everyone. I'm Ebony Bennett and I'm the Deputy Director at the Australia Institute and welcome to our 2021 webinar series. I'm not coming to you from Canberra from Ngunnawal country today, I'm actually dog sitting from my dad on the south coast. So I'm in un country, and I want to pay my respects to elder's past and present and acknowledge that sovereignty was never seated, and that this always was and always will be Aboriginal land. The same as last year. We're aiming to do these webinars at least weekly, but the days and times do vary, so please head on over to our website at [Australia institute.org.au](https://australiainstitute.org.au). And you can find all our latest webinar details there to RSVP. Just a few tips before we begin today to make sure that things run smoothly. If you hover over the bottom of your zoom screen, you should be able to see a q&a function where you can ask questions of our panellists. And you should also be able to upvote other people's questions and comment on them as well. Please keep things civil in the chat or will beat you out. We don't often have to do it, but we will if we have to. So please keep things on topic in the chat. And lastly, a reminder that this discussion is being recorded and it will be posted on Australia Institute TV afterwards, and you'll be able to find it on our website as well. If you've registered, he should get an email link to the webinar recording as well. So Australia is the number one exporter of coal in the world and the third largest fossil fuel exporter overall behind only Russia and Saudi Arabia. Yep, it's not a jobs intensive industry in this country. Though the Australia Institute's climate of the nation. National Poll every year shows that the Australian public regularly overestimates the size and contribution of coal mining, to the Australian economy and to jobs.

It was only last week that 101 Nobel laureates from pace literature, medicine, physics, chemistry and Economic Sciences. Like so many people around the globe. Were talking about this moral issue of our time climate, the climate crisis, and asking world leaders to take really commensurate action to the size of the crisis. And they urged all world leaders to stop the expansion of fossil fuels ahead of the Biden Climate Summit. So today, we're going to be talking about coal about fossil fuels, about climate change and about conservatives and the politics of it with Australia's 29th Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, Mr. turmel has recently been very vocal about the role of the Murdoch media in Australia's climate wars, as well as supporting the Australia Institute's research calling for a moratorium on new coal mine approvals in New South Wales. Thanks so much for joining us today, Malcolm Turnbull, great to be with you, evany. And Richard, and congratulations to the Australia Institute for the great work it does in this in so many other areas. Yeah, thank you so much. I wanted to start out by asking you about that research that you talked about with friend Kelly, not so long ago, we looked at the number of coal mine approvals in New South Wales and raised the idea of a moratorium. I know, particularly, you've been concerned about coal mine approvals in the EPA Hunter. Why is it that you supported that Australia Institute call for the pause on coal mine

approvals? And what kind of impact does coal mining have in the upper handout? What's it doing up there?

Malcolm Turnbull 3:23

Well, Ebony either, I supported it for the same reason that very substantial majority of people support it in the upper hand, as evidenced by the polling that was published recently. And that is because it's simply common sense. I mean, we we have already about 100 million, there's 100 million tonnes of my of coal that is being licenced to be mined in the hunter that is not being mined and exported, because demand is not there, right. So there are mines that are either not operating or operating below capacity. And so any new mine that is going to be open will by definition, cannibalise the demand of another mind. And so the, you know, it's not as though that this is some great burgeoning industry with increasing demand, we know that coal exports are going to decline, they are declining already. So how we can get into a bunch of reasons for that, but they need to decline, right. I mean, if we keep on exporting and burning people burning coal, we're not going to achieve our objectives of avoiding dangerous levels of war, even more dangerous levels of global heating. So

in those circumstances, it makes sense to pause to have a careful analysis of the situation and in so doing protect existing data. But above all, plan the transition to the clean energy future so that people will have good jobs in the years to come now, as to the impact of coal mining on other industries? Well, it's devastating, obviously. I mean, you've got air pollution, the worst air quality in New South Wales is in mussel Brook. Right there in the heart of the coal country, that town is basically surrounded by open cut coal mines. It's devastating for agriculture, for horse breeding for viticulture, for tourism, I mean, it's leaving a lunar devastated landscape. And there isn't even add, there aren't the there isn't even adequate funding made available by the mining companies to rehabilitate the land that they have so terribly devastated. I mean, it's difficult to imagine an industry that does more damage to the environment than open cut. Coal mining literally digs the whole environment up. And you know, to anyone who hasn't seen it, you can obviously see it if you visit the hander, but just just have a look at it on on a map on, you know, Google Earth or, you know, the map in, in on your iPhone, and you'll see it is just it's staggering what has been done. And the attitude of the state government, per medium of the deputy Premier, john barilaro, is that anybody who does not not support the unconstrained, unrestricted, continuous expansion of open cut coal mining in the Hunter Valley is a heretic. I mean, it is literally this crazy, it's an utter abdication of responsibility and leadership.

Ebony Bennett 6:44

And I wanted to ask, as well, you've talked about, obviously, the impact that it has on other industries? And you've talked a little bit about how, because all these approvals are going head, it's kind of stopping other investment. Can you just talk us through some of those impacts? Yeah.

Malcolm Turnbull 7:04

Lucy and I own, you know, an egg farm in the up Hunter, quite close to, you know, near Aberdeen, so we obviously have a good understanding of the local impact.

from, you know, it's, but it is it's, it's hugely damaging, and it's now got us in the position, of course, where we are absolutely out of step with the rest of the world other than places like Russia and Saudi Arabia, and thoroughly out of step with the administration in Washington.

Ebony Bennett 10:56

Oh, absolutely. Um, Richard, before we move on to, perhaps some of those bigger issues, I noted, there was another coal miner approval. Just in the last few days. Is that right?

Richard Denniss 11:07

Yeah, look, I'm actually up in the upper Hunter. At the moment. We've got the magic have a screensaver behind me. But yeah, look, I was in muscle book yesterday. And I echo what Malcolm just said, and thanks so much for coming on. Malcolm, it's great. Have a look, I encourage people go to Google Maps and look for muscle book, and then just kind of zoom out a little bit and have a look how the whole the whole town is surrounded literally by coal mines. And, you know, there's a beautiful, named mine up there, Mount Pleasant.

And I assure you that on a windy day, living anywhere near Mount Pleasant is anything other than pleasant. But yeah, up in that bow hunter, where, where they get the vast majority of the air pollution, they get the vast devastation of their agriculture from other industries. As you said at the beginning, nobody there's there's not actually a lot of jobs in in the in the mines themselves. But worse when you when you see an approval, like we saw yesterday at mango or another enormous coal mine. And, you know, to be fair, the Planning Commission effectively accepted all of the Australia Institute's evidence, it accepted that the claims made by the proponent had exaggerated employment effects, exaggerated royalty effects, you know, to be fair, they kind of agreed with all of our economic analysis of how exaggerated the benefits would be. And then in a classic case of the operation went well, and the patient unfortunately died. They recommended the mind get built anyway. So yeah, you know, here we are kind of stuck in this bizarre situation where we've got the equivalent of 23, new Adani six worth of new coal miner locations, heading to the New South Wales Government. And the so called planning process doesn't actually have a plan. Each of these mines, every single one is evaluated separately is evaluated individually. And the question is never asked, What would happen if all of them were built? Who would buy the coal? What would happen to air quality in the upper Hunter, which is already the worst in New South Wales? What would would all of that coal fit on the railway lines, but all of that coal fit out of the port? Because each mine in the so called planning process it because each mine is actually evaluated separately? on its own exaggerated merits? It's actually beyond the current planning process to say what is in the best interest of the hunter. And again, as Malcolm said before right now? Absolutely. Right now, there's 100 million tonnes of spare capacity in the New South Wales coal mines. That is the approved capacity. The amount of coal they said they they're approved to mine is 100 million tonnes bigger than what they're currently extracting. So when you approve a new mind, like mangler into that, it's not going to lead to more exports, it's not going to lead to more jobs. If that mind actually goes ahead. If that expansion in production goes ahead. It's just going to cannibalise output from somewhere else. This is literally economics 101. But in the culture war, that is Australian climate policy. You have to bury for call in the same way that you barrack for Ford versus Holden, or you barrack for New South Wales over Queensland. It's not economics, certainly not in the interest of

the people on the other hand, but if politics is a tribal Bloodsport, then yeah, as we've seen over a decade in Australia, barking for coal is a powerful thing to do in Australia.

Malcolm Turnbull 15:00

Ebony can I just reinforce what Richard said? I mean, this piecemeal approval process is right at the heart of the problem. The fact is, there isn't any planning that that that's the bottom line.

It was just literally approval, approval, everything done in isolation. And this is our environment. This is the world's future, in terms of the emissions, but it's also the amenity and health of people who live in the area. So, you know, it's it, essentially what what the Australia Institute has recommended, and what I've called for is by is really no more than common sense is just asking government to do its job. But that's that those people in the Upper 100 have been abandoned, believe me. And, you know, if you've listened to barrel aro, and the Daily Telegraph, they'll tell you that the only thing that matters is more coal mining. So the more of the valley, they can rip up the bearer. And then at the end of it, what's going to be left? Will there be? Is there the money to rehabilitate it? No. What's the landscape? The miners want to leave these enormous voids and avoid meaning a huge hole in the ground? What's that going to be filled up with? What's you know, what's that? What's that going to do to the water table to the environment? I mean, the whole idea of leaving the landscape, more or less as it was, when you found it when you started, that seems to have been abandoned? So who's who pays for that cost? I'll tell you the only people that pay are the people have that area, you know, in particular. So to look at it, I guess all that, you know, we've been asking for and, you know, the the independent candidate Kirsty McConnell is asking for is just a bit of responsibility to protect jobs and protect the environment and build a prosperous future.

Ebony Bennett 18:03

I want to come back now, because I think that touches on a point that you made earlier about that this is driven by ideology, and some of the problems within politics. You have spoken in the past, or quite recently, I guess, about the role of the Murdoch media, in driving a lot of that, I guess,

division? Can you just talk to me a little bit about the impact that you think that the media has had on our discourse and how in particular, it's affected the conservative side of politics?

Unknown Speaker 18:35

Well, first, before I do that, can we just we just got to put a footnote to the use of the term conservative.

Malcolm Turnbull 18:44

I mean, I do not the the sort of trumpian right wing populist agenda is not conservative. I mean, Donald Trump was not a conservative, you know, Barnaby Joyce is not a conservative. You know, the the conservatives,

respect institutions, they seek to affect change gradually. They respect the environment. I mean, Margaret Thatcher was a you know, great advocate of taking action on a mission on climate global warming. Many years ago, she was after all, a chemist originally, you know, in a professional training. So, so conservative, you know, what you're seeing in this sort of pop what you're best described as populist authoritarianism is not conservative is not conservatism. As I often say, most of the people who call themselves conservatives nowadays wouldn't know the difference between Tony Burke and Edmund Burke, you know, it's, it is so I just, let's just use that term with care. Okay. The role of the Murdoch press Well, it's massive. I mean, they It is, it is basically operates as a force of propaganda. It's no longer a conventional or traditional news organised I mean, of course, they do report news stories, but they are

Unknown Speaker 20:04

utterly

Malcolm Turnbull 20:06

inhibited in misrepresenting the facts and pushing a particular agenda. So they run vendettas against people, I've often run them against me. I'm not. That's not the reason I object to Murdoch. I think Murdoch has done enormous damage to Western democracy, and indeed to the world, but because he is the single largest amplifier of, if you like climate inaction in the English speaking world. And of course, if you look at the United States, Fox News has been the single largest promoter of the lies and the divisive rhetoric that had its culmination in the January the sixth attack on the US Capitol. So, you know, you can say without any fear of contradiction, and, you know, at least from objective people, and James Clapper, the former director of national intelligence endorsed me when I made this point the other day, on CNN, the Murdoch, he has been doing the work of Vladimir Putin. I mean, Putin's disinformation campaigns are designed to divide Western democracies, particularly the United States, exacerbate existing divisions and create new ones, and to undermine trust in the, you know, institutions of government. That's exactly what Murdoch is doing now. And we saw the upshot, on the sixth of January, if you go around until people again and again that Joe Biden didn't win the election, right? Even though it's that's absolutely untrue. And you will get enough people to believe that and then you get the attack on the US Capitol now. You know, ultimately, we've got to call this out. And it's done. It is it's a, it's had a terrible impact on the United States, really, it's really done this division of the vegan American society and the hatred that's been spawned. Bard, has done so much damage to the US. And we've seen echoes of that, not to this extent, in Australia. So you know, you you've The problem is they're in great denial. I mean, you saw, and even the people that they bully are forced to deny, you know, I thought one of the most poignant moments recently when the Telegraph and news were, you know, campaigning furiously objecting. To my being chairman of a Advisory Committee on net, the net zero transition, apparently, apparently, the qualification for that is to be a supporter of unconstrained expansion of coal mine, which is rather odd, you would agree, but anyway, so that, you know, ferocious pressure was put on the government, and they, they buckled and, you know, my appointment was withdrawn. I mean, I wasn't, you know, wasn't heartbroken, I might say, but I was only agreed to do it as a favour for Matt keen, but, but poor ol math, having been beaten up by news then had to go on Sky News and say, Oh, no, the pressure from News Corp, and the telegraph had nothing to do with it really was like, somebody that is, you know, beaten up by a crooked cop. And until they sign a fake confession, and the last line of witches I confirm I have done so of my own free will. And

it's, it's, it's really, it's it, but it is it? You know, I, I mean, I know, and I might just make this observation that the news in there, you know, counter attacks against me say, This is all because I resent, you know, I blame my removal as prime minister on newscorp. They played a big role in it, there's no doubt about that. But that's not the point. My my criticism is not what happened in August 2018. My criticism is about much bigger issues that go to our, you know, our safe, continued habitation of this planet, global warming and our response to it, and the way in which they are undermining the, you know, Western liberal democracy. And there's, and, you know, if you think the man again, the United States is a is just such a good example, bad example of what I'm talking about. So we, you know, we can't be blind to this. We can't allow ourselves to be bullied out of this by people that are literally undermining our environment, and our democracy. For reasons. Let's assume they're just commercial reasons. let's get let's just make that concession. That's no good.

Right. If you are a drug company and you are selling drugs that hurt people, it isn't a defence to say I'm just I was just trying to make money. I mean, people have to be responsible for their actions, and we have to hold them to account.

Richard Denniss 25:13

Malcolm, I guess I want to follow up on that. I mean, there's still lots to talk about with All Things cold and climate. But you know, you raised such an issue. And I agree with your I agree with your premise about the role of Rupert Murdoch personally in the Murdoch media, internationally, there's no doubt about that. But I guess my question to you is, to what it like, what, what is the actual game here? I mean, powerful media proprietors on new powerful media proprietors have played a shaping role in Australia. You know, no one thought Kerry Packer was a shrinking violet, you know, but but rupert murdoch is clearly different. Is he just bigger? Or is he playing quite a different game? And if he is, what is that game? What is his objective? Well, I mean, he's essentially monetize the market for crazy. Okay. So the, you know, he's found a abandoning all responsibility, other than to himself, and to his, you know, his own profitability. He's leafy, like,

Malcolm Turnbull 26:45

Does he since I think he is essentially now a climate denier. But the, you know, I remember years ago, like 15 years ago, Rupert was taking a professing to take global warming seriously, but, but the but I think one of the things that people often misunderstand about power is that they assume that people seek power for a purpose. Now, now, as it happens, I did I mean, I've always felt I've been associated with powerful people, most of my life, and I've always felt power without purpose is pointless. But for many people in politics and in the media, power turns them on in for its own sake. Right. So asking somebody, why they want to be powerful, have a powerful job, is like asking somebody why they like sex. You know, it's it is it's literally a turnoff. And so that's why so why did Murdoch support Trump as relentlessly as he did, even though he knew Trump was not fit to be president. And I know that because he told me that, you know, before Trump was the Republican nominee, and I mean, everyone in New York, New Donald Trump knew that right? So but he saw this was a guy he could put into the White House, who would be deferential to him take his calls, that would be he would have power on access. And that was what it was about. Now. The problem is, you know, we ended up with four years of Trump and all of the damage that was done a court, you know, as a result, so it's it, look, you know, the, the, I'm not suggesting, I'm not advocating

ensorship, or anything like that, I hasten to add, the first thing we've got to do is make people take responsibility for this and call it out. And you know, when you get the sort of gaslighting that you get from people who say, oh, we're not climate denier lists. What? Give me a break. Yeah,

Richard Denniss 28:49

well, perfect, perfect segue to my next question. And I mean, sure, Rupert Murdoch might have figured out how to cash in on crazy, but he doesn't have a monopoly on it was just earlier this week, you were sitting on a on q&a with Andrew Liveris, who? Scott Morrison appointed to ladies COVID recovery Task Force, you know, sounds like a very important job to helping helping the Prime Minister grapple with the big issues of recovery. Of course, that task force has given us the so called gas led recovery at a time where the rest of the world's thinking about renewable energy, but sitting on stage with you. He made the assertion that the gas feedstock industry, the gas that goes into making plastic the gas that goes into making fertiliser created 850,000 jobs. Now, you know, I pride myself on my knowledge of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, labour force stats, and I instantly realised he was suggesting that that's about as many people as working the entire

manufacturing industry now you challenged him on that. And and he stuck to his crazy guns now, the Australia Institute, the biggest number we can come up with like being as generous as we can. The biggest number we can get to is maybe 16,000 people. 16,000 people might add a stretch, be employed by the fertiliser and plastics industry. But he doubled down when you challenged him on 850,000. Yeah, look, what's going on.

Malcolm Turnbull 30:33

Well, look, firstly, Andrew Liveris is not crazy. He's a really he's a very smart guy.

I'm sure they all do, but other than maybe somebody whose hand making, you know, furniture with a, you know, by hand, but but, but the fact is that gas is a feedstock is essentially us, but more bothered by the industries he nominated. But yeah, I do know 160,000 people and you, you say you think it's about 16,000, which sounds about right.

Richard Denniss 32:54

Yeah, but so I agreed. I'm not suggesting he's unintelligent, but that assertion that he made is demonstrably wrong. Because he's been, he's been appointed by the prime minister to lead our recovery. Now, he's either spent 12 months being completely confused about how many people are involved in the gas feedstock industry, or he went on a programme and misled a quarter of a million people.

Malcolm Turnbull 33:21

I can only assume he was flustered and misspoke. I mean, listen, I'll cut him up. he's a he's a friend of cut him every bit of slack. I can, but I'm not going

Richard Denniss 33:33

all right. No, No, I wasn't.

Malcolm Turnbull 33:34

I will say that something that is untrue is true. And what he said was wrong.

Richard Denniss 33:38

Right. But I guess where I was hitting was, as ebony said at the beginning, every time we survey Australians, they massively overestimate the number of people who work in coal. They massively overestimate the number of people working guess the average Tasmanian. The average Tasmanian thinks one in five people in Tasmania work in forestry when the answer is closer to one in 100. So it's not an accident. The Australian public thinks so many people work in coal. I think so many people work in forestry. And it's not an accident. I would suggest that increasingly people think that without gas, you know, the sky will fall. So I guess my question to you is, how how do we kind of challenge DC? Is it the role of the media? The ABC button owned by Rupert Murdoch, correct that Yeah, no, no. Well, I mean, yet Friday, there wasn't a headline, you know, Liveris, misspeaks on gas or, you know, livers wrong on gas where you can imagine if I'd put out a number that was agreed riously wrong, they would have reported that with great prominence.

Malcolm Turnbull 34:48

Look, I think, I think you've got I think you just need you just have to call it out.

I think it's there's no substitute for that. But you know, One of the problems is that there isn't a look, let me let me step could go up a little bit in terms of generality. I think that one of the problems we've got is what has been described in the US as the truth deficit. And you might just say that's a fancy way for saying lies. Maybe it is, but essentially, what you've got is people in public life and in the media, no longer caring about the accuracy of what they say. So they are they they are prepared to lie. deliberate. So that's to say, state something, which is a fact say something as a fact, which they know is not so. But they're also reckless about whether what they say is correct. So it is, and increasingly, the media is just basically letting it go through to the keeper. And if anything, applauding law, the more plausible lies as good political tactics. Now, you know, I've no, I look, you know, again, I'm not trying to, I'll just give you just give you a very personal perspective on this. I all the time I was in politics, I was extremely anxious is that anyone who worked with me would will recall about getting my facts straight. You know, it's not I mean, I was, I was, as particular as prime minister, you're asked questions on everything, you know, and you can't have every fact and figure in your head. And so I was always anxious that I wouldn't, you know, simply, you know, perfectly innocently mistakenly get a number wrong. And when I did, I would correct it. Right. I don't think there is any longer, I don't see any side, that there is any care about that. And I mean, I have to be honest with you, you know, a lot of my colleagues and advisors thought I was somewhat too fastidious of two fasci about this. And they'd say, Oh, well, you know, that's just the old lawyer, and you're coming out, because obviously, if you start your professional career as a, as a, as an advocate, you know, getting facts wrong in court can have some pretty fatal and humiliating consequences,

particularly for your client. So, but I think this is I think, call getting the facts right, is absolutely critical. And this is what we've got to be prepared to call out, you know, so that's why, you know, this is what I mean, I, I didn't, I wasn't, I wasn't trying to be disagreeable with Andrew, but just that what he said was factually wrong. But,

Ebony Bennett 37:50

um,

we're going to go to questions from the audience very shortly. But I mentioned in my introduction that 101, Nobel laureate had called on world leaders to sign the fossil fuel non proliferation treaty, the founder of the Grameen Bank, Nobel Peace Prize winner, Muhammad Yunus tried to send this question into you on q&a, but didn't quite manage it. So if it's alright, I'm just gonna play this video question from him quickly. And see your response to that.

Guest Questioner 38:21

101 Nobel laureates have just addressed a letter to 14 global leaders, including Prime Minister, Scott Morrison,

regarding the expansion of fossil fuel, Australia still has some 23 applications for coal mines, waiting for approval. Will this panel support the approval of these 23 coal mines? If not, recommend any other alternative action? Thank you.

Ebony Bennett 39:06

So basically, that was Yeah. 101 Nobel laureates asking to stop the expansion of fossil fuels and two signed on to that non proliferation treaty. What would your response be?

Malcolm Turnbull 39:16

Well, I think that's I think, you know, obviously, you need to have an agreement, because you can understand if, you know, you were to let's say, you were to stop exporting coal from Australia tomorrow.

The people would say, Well, if you do that, I'll just export more from Indonesia and Colombia and South Africa and so forth. And that would probably be true. But the so you need to have a global agreement. There's no question about that. But we do need to, to, you know, sort of recognise and this is the point John Kerry's been making, that you can't keep on tippy toeing around this issue of coal and gas. I mean, the only way to cut greenhouse gas emissions, effectively, well, not, there are other things we've got to do as well. But the most important thing we've got to do is stop, you know, digging carbon out of the ground and putting it into the atmosphere. I mean, that's that. That's that. That is that's that's the objective. And as far as the new coal mines, you know, in Australia as well, my view is the same as Richards and yours that, you know, we shouldn't be expanding coal mining in

Australia. It certainly doesn't make any, it doesn't make any sense. At the moment, even if you thought climate change was a hoax, right? It doesn't make any sense to be expanding minds when existing minds are operating under capacity, because all you're gonna do is have new minds, putting, you know yet other other minds out of business. And I mean, I think an important thing to bear in mind is particularly all mining, particularly open cut mining. It's not like opening a milk bar, where you can say, okay, Fred wants to open a milk bar. I don't think it's a great idea. But anyway, he can open it and, you know, if it doesn't work out, well, we lose money. And you know, so what, you know, free enterprise. The problem with mining is that it has a huge impact on the environment. And so there is a social cost and an environmental cost that is borne regardless of whether the mine is successful or not. And in fact, if it is unsuccessful, and is quite mothballed, or put on care and maintenance, more often than not as a means of postponing the rehabilitation obligation, then you get the worst of all worlds, you get miners don't have jobs, you know, the environment is damaged. rehabilitation doesn't occur. I mean, it is. So it's very different. It's good. It needs much greater thoughtful planning than, you know, say other areas of the economy where you can say, you know, let people do their best and succeed or fail as they, as you know, events dictate.

Ebony Bennett 42:11

I'm going to go to questions from the audience. Now. The first one here is from Tom Swan, who says the government's plans to subsidise the expansion of the fossil gas industry, which have been criticised or rejected by economists, unions, industry groups, a gamer and even some major gas companies. So his question is in the face of such criticism, and including pressure from the button administration to end fossil fuel subsidies, what's your opinion on why the government is still pursuing these subsidies to the gas industry?

Malcolm Turnbull 42:43

Well, I think I look, I've got to assume it's largely political.

The be, you know, in order to be seen to be supporting fossil fossil fuels of one kind or another, I mean, really, there is a massive risk in subsidising gas infrastructure right now. Because it is likely to have a relatively short life, you know, and if you you just keep So, I mean, it Look, it's just, you're just going to end up with a bunch of stranded assets. In other words, it's just it is, it's very, very dangerous. It's a point I made on q&a. You know, you I mean, are we really going to be burning gas at higher levels than we are today in 10 years time? I don't think so. I can't imagine any scenario but, you know, a really good example of the politicisation of this is the Australian energy market operator, which has done some outstanding work on you know, in on it in its field, had a, a, you know, a report recently which forecast demand for gas, and they basically made the point that going out to 2030, unless you have gas available at \$4 A Giga Joule or less, which is not realistic. And you have the cost of the electricity to pump water uphill, you know, for pump storage being higher than \$30 a megawatt hour, and it's available regularly now on the East Coast market, already at considerably less than that. Unless you have that gas is not going to compete with pump storage or indeed with batteries because the same batteries like pump storage obviously have to draw electricity in to charge them so. So anyway, that's, that's, that's, I think that page 55 or so of the of the report. Now, as we know, Angus Taylor rang up the chief exec by email or disablement and pressured her to change that report. Now, that's terrible. You know, I must say, the I'm I would be stat I would have been staggered, if a minister in my government tried to lean on an independent agency like that, to change, you know, a factual conclusion, you know, of that card. I mean, it's just it

is it's, it's, it's, it's extraordinary and to order is great credit. She didn't battle to it. But you know, a lot of people would, either way,

Guest Questioner 45:37

and

Unknown Speaker 45:39

this is profoundly wrong.

Richard Denniss 45:43

Looking in New South Wales, you know, Malcolm was talking about the environment minister for Matt Kean, his his enormous investment in New South Wales and the so called renewable energy. So, and, you know, the Minister, the Environment Minister, the energy ministers, explanation for this renewable energy zone is we need to build all this renewable energy for the simple reason, it's the cheapest form of energy. And you know, I was on he was on four corners saying that two or three weeks ago, so here we have the New South Wales government saying, renewables are just cheaper than gas. That's why we're expanding them. But we've got the same state government and our federal government saying, we think gas is going to be cheap. Well, let's look at what they're doing. Let's look at what the markets doing. The reason that people are moving towards renewables and storage, is there cheap. And this idea from Scott Morrison, that technology will fix it? Well, you know, as Malcolm knows, snowy 2.0, and the technology of the dam was invented quite some time ago. Yeah, you know, it's really not a radical new thing, the dam, and you can store a lot of energy in there. So this idea that we kind of have to wait for new technology, the snowy hydro, building, the 50s is the biggest storage facility in Australia. And we don't need to invent concrete, or dams, or indeed pumps. We know how to do that. And we're doing right now.

Malcolm Turnbull 47:09

Well, the first interestingly, the first, I mean, pump storage is the way about 95% of all the stored electricity in the world is stored, by the way, but

that, you know, I'm hopefully other forms of long duration storage will become more and more available and competitive and so forth. We do need to build more pumped storage. Absolutely. But, you know, pumped hydro is over 100 years old, over the my recollection is the first pumped hydro scheme was in Europe started in 1907. Someone on the call might be able to correct me on that, but, but it's, you know, it's not rocket science, but you have to actually get on and do it. And so that, you know, the, the good thing about snowy too, is that it's actually being built. Now, there's just not enough additional storage being built. I'm glad that Gen X project in Queensland looks like it's going to get built. But there just isn't enough else happening, you know, the battery of the nation plan, which I was, again, an initiative of my government is, you know, there just hasn't been very little Donald that nothing's been built yet. You know, and you, you know, this, governments have got to plan ahead, as, as I did recognise, we were going to need more quite a lot more long duration storage, and then hook in and build it. And, you know, just going around and saying, well, we're

waiting on technology. We've got we've got the technology now to move to a zero emission. Energy. reality we have that I'm sure it will get better on the way but you know, it's we're not like, sort of, you know, Mr. macabre in a hopeless in a hopeless, helpless situation, saying something will turn up, we've got the tools we need to do the job are at hand.

Ebony Bennett 49:04

The next question that I've got is from Steph Ray, she says, How can future Prime Ministers make a change with fossil fuels, when factions within their parties enter any attempt for change with leadership spills? And I might add, there's just a couple more questions in there along the same lines about how to get that dominance of the fossil fuel industry kind of reduce its political power?

Malcolm Turnbull 49:29

Well, the answer is it's quite hard. It's very hard, in fact, I mean, I was hoping, you know, after Morrison was elected for exam, reelected in 2019. I was hoping that he would reinstate the National Energy guarantee. It certainly supported it while I was pm. And I thought, you know, now that I was off the scene, and he had more political capital than just about any liberal leader could imagine. But, you know, Scott didn't do it. And now You know, the reason is, he does not want that toxic coalition of the Murdoch media, you know, and their fellow travellers, you know, such as tgb, the fossil fuel lobby and the right wing of the party to do to him what they did to me, you know, this is I mean, I, for all the time I was in politics, my most ferocious opponents were not on the labour side. You know, they were occasionally critical, but my real opponents were internal, and this is the thing they, I think it's I think the coalition's got a profound structural problem, it's being held hostage by a group, or, you know, like a, sort of a, I call it a coalition government that the LNP, if you like, is being held hostage by coalition on the right, which is part of an ecosystem that is very, you know, well, you know, they're deadly, and they operate like terrorists in the sense that they, they don't care if they blow up, they're prepared to blow the dried up to get what they want. As they demonstrated, and I know, you know, it's easy for people, particularly on social media to say, Oh, you know, you should have more courage stand up to them? Well, you know, I've done that a few times. But ultimately, if you end up not being Prime Minister, you can't do anything, you know, so the, so it's easy, you know, politics is hard. And a lot of most people who comment on it, don't understand it. That's not a criticism, I don't understand. You know, you know, plumbing, I don't understand heart surgery, you know, politics is a is a craft. And the people that understand it best are the people that have been in it. Regrettably, it is very, very, it's very hard. And you've got to try to bring people with you. And they might be people who are completely unreasonable. But ultimately, you know, if they are prepared, if they're not prepared to compromise, and they're prepared to say, we will blow the trade up, unless you, you do what we want, then you get the sort of status that we have at the moment. You know, we're, we're just and how stupid does Australia look? Now, you know, I mean, we, you know, we're, I mean, how can we have the frustration with Australia and Washington is so intense right now. It is. I mean, the White House was briefing against the Morison government recently. I mean, that's I've never seen that happen before. That was, and that was a brief to every basically every media outlet here. I don't know who the spokesman was, or spokes woman who was who did it. But their frustration is they look at Australia, and they say craps, you've got fantastic solar resource you've got fantastic when you've got great scientists and technology. Why are you not getting on board? This whole clean energy agenda? I mean, the points that Ross garneau makes are absolutely well made. And people look at us from around the world. And they say you're caught hostage by this crazy politics. Why can't we break out of it? And I mean, that's the you know that that is that's the

that's the big question. Yeah, very Holly,

Ebony Bennett 53:29

we've probably only got time for a couple more questions here. So following on from that, there's another question here from Hannah shook. Yeah, I'm pronouncing that name incorrectly. I'm sorry, Hannah. Do you have any practical tips for advocating against new coal, oil and gas we've even a conservative government. And I guess I just wondered if you could reflect on the fact that perhaps the state governments and state Liberal government seem to be a lot more progressive than the federal coalition government at the moment? Is there any kind of hope there for some change?

Malcolm Turnbull 54:05

I think the the state liberal governments are more progressive, there's no doubt about that.

And therein lies the problem. That's that is the fundamental. That's the fundamental problem. It is they've it's been fetishized into a into something that is that should be objective and to religious thing. I mean, I'm not against call or for solar. I mean, I'm coal, gas, solar, wind batteries, pumped hydro, are all things are processes, they have certain physical characteristics. And so you've got to say, what do we want to achieve? Or presumably, lower emissions, cheaper energy, and reliable energy? We can do all of that with renewables plus storage?

Ebony Bennett 56:48

Yeah. Sorry. We've only got time for probably one question left, and it's from John Cook. And he says, How can the very high levels of subsidy to coal and gas production be limited? And, Richard, I wondered if I could bring you in on this one. I believe there's plans to expand that the knife and what it's able to subsidise? Can you just speak a little bit to that?

Richard Denniss 57:14

Yeah. And thank you. I mean, Malcolm, you were just saying that, you know, there's this sort of religious sort of zeal for some in the liberal National Coalition for coal. Historically, people accused the liberals of having a religious zeal for free markets. And from my point of view, as an economist, and someone very interested in politics, and wrote a quarterly essay about this, that fossil fuels creates this incredible collision between alleged free market zeal and religious zeal for coal. And where that manifests itself is this incredible support for subsidies, you know, for fossil fuels from a party that tends to say, in every other sphere, leave it to the market, leave it to the market. So with new proposals, like there's amendments for the knife, the Northern Australia infrastructure facility, you know, yet again, being touted as a way to get new gas and possibly coal projects up, how do you explain this religious zeal for coal? That's so great, that it makes otherwise free market liberals kind of abandon their, their their previous religion?

Malcolm Turnbull 58:28

Well, I think the sort of the populist politics of the right,

no longer take free market, you know, economics very seriously. I mean, the, the, you know, it's all about, you know, all too often big government and intervention. So, you know, heavy handed regulation. I mean, it's, that's the, that's the tendency there. This is one of the reasons why I say people on the right, who call themselves conservatives, genuinely aren't conservatives. But there's an old friend of mine, a politician in the region, who has a great saying about politics. He says, we all know what we need to do, we just don't know how to do it and get reelected. And I think that the reality is that much of what I've said, would be agreed to by many people in the coalition, I mean, very many, but they know if they were to repeat it or endorse it, they would get the sort of treatment Matt Kean, got remember from the Daily Telegraph a year or so ago when he gave a perfectly conventional speech about invar energy policy and the, you know, the impact of global warming on on bushfires. And, you know, remember there was like, it was like a really personal, nasty sort of attack on him. And that was basically a message to say if you step out of line, this is what you'll get. And so people Look at that. And they say, I don't want that. I can't live with that. And so that thuggery works. So that's the, that's the reality. That's why it's very important for people that are not in elected office like myself, or and yourselves to be prepared to speak up, because sadly, the the dynamic, particularly in the coalition, is one where rational policymaking has been basically bullied and terrorised into the pathetic state.

It is today where you even have, you know, a motto, who's every expert word we're meant to hang on and rely on as independent, being bullied by the energy minister to change its conclusions to. So it fits in with this predilection for gas. I mean, it's literally you know, I mean, I mean, a more responsible minister would have said, that's fine, you publish it, we will then publish our own analysis, which says while you're wrong, okay, fine. That's perfectly right. But to actually try to bully somebody into training is, is outrageous, but you know, in this world of unaccountability, in this sort of truth deficit environment we're in. People don't care. There's certainly no criticism in most of the media for that.

Ebony Bennett 1:01:29

Well, I'm afraid that we have to leave it there. Thank you so much, Malcolm Turnbull, and Richard Dennis, for joining us today. Thanks very much to everyone who joined us on this webinar. I believe there was about 1400 of us at a peak. We appreciate all your questions. And I'm really sorry, we can't always get to all of them. Don't forget, we've got one more webinar this week. That's on Thursday at 10am. That's about remaking the public square online with Eli parisa Cove, co founder of upworthy and avas. And that'll be in conjunction with launching the Australia Institute Centre for Responsible technology. New report on remaking the public square here in Australia. And of course next week on Wednesday, May the fifth, we'll be talking to Kristina Keneally about ensuring government accountability that will be at 11am. You can find the details for all those webinars on our website at Australia.institute.org.au Thank you so much for joining us today. Thanks again, Malcolm. Thanks, Richard. Thank you.

Unknown Speaker 1:02:29

Automated Webinar Transcript
Recorded live: 27 April 2021

Bye bye.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>