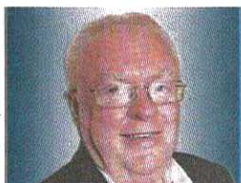


# LEADERS CLUELESS ON LINK BETWEEN ENERGY AND JOBS

*Coal and gas development is an economic winner and a boost for bush employment*

GRAHAM RICHARDSON



Having watched the premiers troop out of the Council of Australian Governments meeting in Canberra last week, I scanned the Saturday papers to find out what exciting decisions had been made. My search proved futile.

The Prime Minister, the Treasurer and all those premiers were unable to make any decisions at all. At a time when the rating agencies have announced their concerns about Australia's retention of its AAA rating and energy security worries us all, our political leaders don't have a clue — or don't have the courage to face up to their responsibilities.

When the lights went out in South Australia and the Hazelwood power station in Victoria was slated for closure, the need to act on energy security with real urgency was obvious.

Sadly, COAG came and went without a decision on what may well be the biggest problem facing our country. Debates on clean energy remain trapped in low-grade squabbling between the government and the opposition.

Neither side of politics has anything to be proud of in this debate. Labor has a clean energy policy it has no evidence to validate. Targets are set and we are told Labor will justify its stance once in government and with access to all the relevant data. Whatever happened to setting policy in the light of all the information having been assessed and studied?

The Coalition is in no better shape on this issue. Malcolm Turnbull is a believer in climate change and his Environment Minister, Greg Hunt, seems to lean in the same direction. The vast majority of the Liberals and the Nationals are scathing of climate change and believe it is a load of rubbish constantly reinforced by the industry of scientists created to service the problem.

To get the job and unseat Tony Abbott, Turnbull walked away from what he believed in and promised he would not go down the climate change path. The Nationals and the right wing of

the Liberal Party watch every move that Turnbull makes very closely.

This leaves us with confusion and inaction. Labor has an energy target it cannot justify and the Coalition limps along with an energy target that most of its MPs do not accept. When confusion reigns supreme, the easiest option is to do nothing.

Wind farms and solar power cannot at this point provide enough baseload power at a reasonable price. No doubt, technology will improve over time and these clean energy sources will become more important. The

**Pauline Hanson has a real talent for pointing out the problems people are undergoing**

problem is that no one knows how long that will take and how we provide for our power needs in the interim.

The US has become self-sufficient in energy largely on the back of coal-seam gas. Here in Australia, NSW and Victoria have banned the extraction of CSG. Unfortunately, the industry developed a terrible reputation by marching unheralded on to other people's property and proceeding to sink their wells.

The premiers of NSW and Victoria need to sit down with stakeholders and come up with a new set of rules. Australia needs the gas. In Queensland, the industry is thriving without the daily controversies that were happening in NSW and Victoria that led to the governments of those two states to shut down the industry.

Coal has become a dirty word here and around the world. Yet its price, particularly for good-quality coal, has remarkably risen again. Queensland Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk has just announced final approval for the Adani mine in central north Queensland.

All new projects of this kind make extravagant claims about the number of new jobs that are to be created. Given the size of this mine, though, it is safe to say that in economically depressed far

north Queensland, thousands of new jobs in towns between Townsville and Rockhampton will happen. Places such as Townsville and Mackay really need a boost. Mackay has been hit hard by the rapid decline in mining. That decline also has been felt in Townsville, which also was forced to confront the closure of Queensland Nickel. More than 1000 direct jobs were lost and probably as many again in indirect jobs.

Many countries still want Australian coal. The standard the world sets for quality is based on Hunter Valley coal. While our leaders dither, no major decisions on new energy sources will be made. Trying to keep Hazelwood going is doomed to failure. It powers big industrial users whose future is in considerable doubt and the brown coal it uses is about the dirtiest in the world.

There is, however, plenty of good-quality coal in NSW and Queensland to support the building of new coal-fired power stations. I realise I will be verbally assailed by the Greens and their allies, but the risk that pensioners will not be able to remain warm in winter and cool in summer means that I will wear the criticism as a badge of honour.

The government was elected using the mantra of "jobs and growth". After last week's revelation of the September quarter results showed a minus 0.5 per cent in the growth numbers, one half of the mantra is looking pretty shaky. While the job numbers remain stable, this comes along with 90,000 full-time jobs lost already this year. Part-time work continues to increase at the expense of those full-time jobs, which means underemployment.

Fortunately for the government, underemployment is difficult to quantify. The problem with this phenomenon is that it creates disgruntled voters who see their wages slashed as prices continue to rise.

At the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, there are real decisions to be made about whether to hang on to a low-paid casual job or head to Centrelink. These people are the target audience for Pauline Hanson, who has a real talent for pointing out the problems people are undergoing. She may not have the right answers but she asks the right questions.

Coal and gas can help with the creation of long-term full-time jobs, but our political leaders don't have the courage to put this on the table for discussion, let alone do something about it.