

A response to Fiona Martin on energy

Liberal MP for Reid, Fiona Martin claims she's concerned about climate change, and thinks renewable energy is an opportunity for Australia in a post-carbon world.

So why is she supporting the government's plans to use public money to boost fossil fuel production? Here's a response to claims she's made in her letters to local residents.

Fiona says:

The Federal Government are looking at ways to make energy reliable, affordable and clean, and they are considering and implementing a range of technologies to deliver that outcome.

They have acknowledged that Australia is in a transition period as we move towards a low emissions economy, and this will require a diversification of the energy sector in order to move energy reliability away from older, carbon-heavy technologies.

"Acknowledging" Australia is in a transition period is not the same as having a plan to transition! The Federal government has NO strategy, targets or timeframes for making this transition happen. In fact, they're getting in the way.

"Looking at ways" to make energy clean is what scientists and industry have been doing for decades. We have the technology. Our energy market operator (AEMO) foresees the transition to 100% renewable energy, and with 63% of the nations coal-fired power plants due to retire in the next 20 years,¹ AEMO says we need to more than triple the amount of renewable energy coming into the grid in that time. To do so "significant market and regulatory reforms will be needed to bring the right resources into the system in a timely fashion."²

Every state and territory has a renewable energy target for 2030, and plans for zero emissions by 2050. But they can't do it alone. We need timetabled Federal government plans and investment to make this happen.

Fiona says:

The Government's plan aims to carefully incorporate new technologies into our energy systems whilst maintaining a balance with those older technologies as we diversify the energy sector.

This is why the Government has invested in large scale renewable energy projects such as Snowy 2.0, Tasmania's Battery and the Marinus Link, and is underwriting six renewable pumped hydro projects. Fiona is encouraging for more to be done in this space.

Fiona makes it sound like there is no consequence to using "those older technologies".

Nature doesn't want us "maintaining a balance" with fossil fuels. Every ton of CO₂ or methane we emit will make the climate crisis worse. There is nothing "careful" about continuing to promote fossil fuel projects.

Already, global temperature rise is causing devastating droughts, bushfires, coastal erosion, intensified cyclones and floods in Australia. Climate change is killing our people and animals, destroying homes, businesses and infrastructure, impacting food production, hammering tourism and will increasingly render parts of our nation uninhabitable.³

This is the crucial decade in which we, and the rest of the world, must drastically change course and stop fossil fuel use. Australia made a commitment under the Paris Agreement to reduce our emissions, yet we're NOT on track to do so.

As for the projects Fiona mentions, the Federal government has so far only committed \$56 million to 'assessing' the Marinus link (to transmit energy from Tasmania to the mainland).⁴ It's a \$3.5 Billion project, but they have NOT committed to funding it. If they want it built, why not? And while some pumped hydro storage projects have been short-listed for support, not one of those have projects has progressed.

If the government is serious about renewable energy, why won't they commit further funds to our renewable energy agency ARENA when current funding runs out? Already staff are being cut. There are more valuable projects needing investment than ARENA can currently fund.⁵

Fiona says:

In terms of LNG, the Prime Minister has noted that gas will need to be a transition fuel as Australia builds its renewable energy base. This is based on expert findings from CSIRO studies that gas is a reliable electricity generation source to support the transition from coal-fired generation to renewable energy sources.

Fiona says she agrees that gas will need to be a part of the plan, as the evidence indicates that it is required to reduce greenhouse gas emissions while building capacity in Australia's carbon-neutral energy network.

Fiona seems to be confusing expert opinion on using existing gas in place of coal in Queensland, with the Prime Minister's desire to develop new gas projects.

The CSIRO study Fiona mentions refers to "the potential climate benefits of using gas in place of coal to generate electricity particularly when using high efficiency closed cycle gas turbines." It also says "Replacement of coal-fired power by gas-fired generation, renewables and other low-carbon technologies is part of CSIRO's vision for Australia's energy transition."⁶

Chief Scientist, Alan Finkel has also discussed a role he sees for existing gas in the "near to medium term" to assist the transition to 100% renewable energy. Dr Finkel has not commented on an expanded role for gas.⁷

Let's be clear: burning natural gas is now the fastest growing source of CO2 emissions. Extracting and processing gas also creates methane - a more potent greenhouse gas than CO2.⁸

Expert Australian scientists, are urging "the time has passed for any new fossil fuel infrastructure" and "all types of fossil fuels, including gas, contribute to climate change and all must be phased out as quickly as possible"⁹

AEMO says gas is not essential for a grid increasingly based on renewable energy, and indeed, demand for gas will fall as "by 2035 there may be periods in which nearly 90% of demand is met by renewable generation".¹⁰

AEMO's July 2020 roadmap shows the best scenario for consumers would be a secure, reliable, and lowest cost electricity market with a diverse mix of large and small-scale renewables. However, we need major investment in transmission lines to achieve this.

Yet, in August, the Prime Minister told parliament "we want to see more of it [gas] and get more out of the ground". This is not what experts are recommending and is not consistent with our commitments under the Paris Agreement!

The IPCC Special Report of 2018 shows to keep global warming to 1.5C, the world needs to reduce gas use by at least 25% of 2010 levels by 2030.

While experts make a case for using existing gas plants instead of coal plants in the next few years to ensure electricity supply where or when renewable energy is not yet available, there is NO case for developing new gas projects.

Building new gas plants now either means building stranded assets - plants which cannot operate the length of their intended life - or it means Australia wants to keep emitting greenhouse gases beyond 2050. The latter is completely against what we've agreed to in international forums, and what our planet can stand.

Businesses and state governments are making their own plans to move beyond fossil fuels. For example, the ACT government's new \$500 million hospital planned for south Canberra will be fully electric, powered by renewable energy with no need for gas heating or cooling.¹¹ This follows their plan to build the first zero emissions office tower.¹²

We need a timetable to end the use of all fossil fuels, including gas.

Fiona says:

In order to overcome the transitional challenges to grid security caused by record levels of renewable generation, the Morrison Government is also investing in research.

By supplying \$490,000 in funding, the Government is supporting Powerlink Queensland to explore a number of technical, commercial and regulatory solutions to address the challenges and opportunities presented by connecting large-scale renewable generators to the National Electricity Market.

While funding for a study into system strength is welcome, a lot more is needed to upgrade our transmission grid, deal with voltage issues and create new interconnectors. For example, AEMO and TransGrid are calling for \$87 million to increase capacity of existing transmission lines from Victoria to NSW. This "critical short-term investment" is expected to deliver a net economic benefit of approximately \$268 million.¹³

While the government delays investing in essential infrastructure to ensure our grid is ready for renewable energy, they are meantime wasting \$4 million on a private company "feasibility study" into whether or not to build a new coal-fired power plant in Queensland.¹⁴ New coal-fired power won't be built as it's no longer economic to do so.

Fiona says:

Australia is a world leader in per capita investment in renewable energy. In 2019, Australia's investment (per person) in renewable energy was greater than countries like the United States, Japan and the United Kingdom, and more than triple the per capita investment of countries like Germany, China, France & Denmark.

Almost 1 in 4 Australians now have solar panels on their roof – the highest rate of uptake of household solar in the world. These are achievements Australians can be proud of.

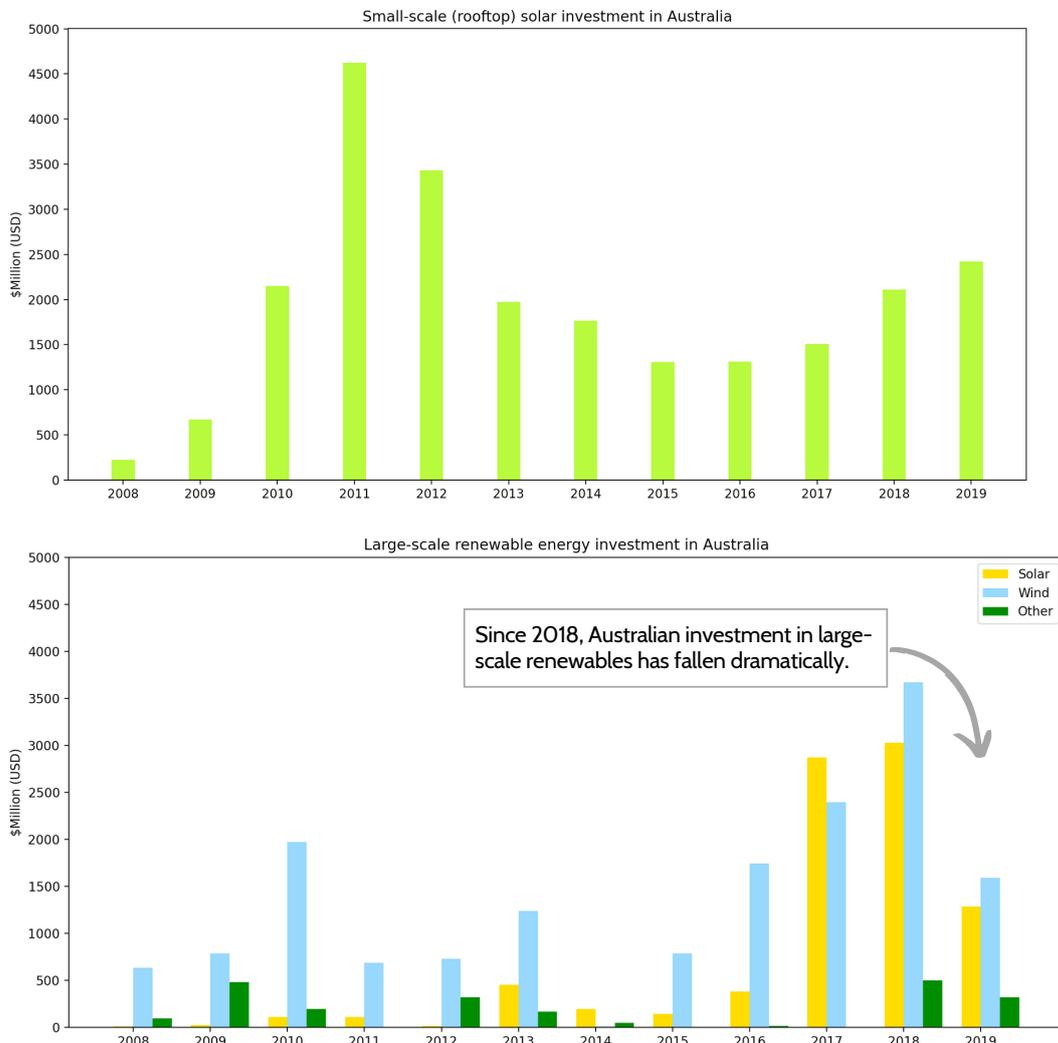
With prices continuing to tumble, it's no wonder so many Australians are installing solar panels on homes and businesses. But that's no thanks to the Federal government!

As the sunniest continent on earth with tech smarts and ample space, Australia should be a world leader in renewable energy. But right now only 24% of Australia's electricity comes from renewables.¹⁵

That's not as low as the US, but compared to the other nations Fiona mentions: UK (28%) Germany (46%), China (38%), France (27%) and Denmark (32%) Australia is a laggard, not a leader.

Around a dozen countries, including Scotland, Norway, Uruguay, and Costa Rica are now powered by over 90% renewable energy. Nepal is about to start exporting surplus renewable energy.¹⁶ Yet Australia - with abundant sun and wind - has NO national plans or targets to increase its renewable energy uptake.

As these graphs show, ordinary Australians are moving much faster to renewable energy than the Federal government is:



Data: Bloomberg New Energy Finance, published in *reneweconomy* 17 Jan 2020

In July 2020, the amount of new large-scale solar added was 1/25th the amount Australians installed on their rooftops. Most of the recently added capacity has been due to the Queensland Labor government.

This is no surprise considering our federal Minister for Emissions Reductions, Angus Taylor, said in 2018 he thinks there is already too much solar and wind power in the grid.¹⁷

By scrapping the Renewable Energy Target, and creating policy uncertainty, the government is doing its best to delay or hamper investment in renewables, while it invests our money in more fossil fuel projects.

Fiona says:

she believes investing in renewable energy is a huge opportunity to grow industries and jobs in Australia, and position Australia competitively in a post-carbon world economy.

However, she is not in opposition to gas being used as a transition fuel as we build up our renewable energy sector.

If Fiona really wants to "position Australia competitively in a post-carbon world economy", she would be championing major government investment in new renewable energy generation NOW with targets for the amount of renewable energy in the national grid to increase to at least 50% by 2030, and 100% by 2050.

A recent expert report from Oxford University shows "clean energy infrastructure construction is particularly labour intensive, creating twice as many jobs per dollar as fossil fuel investments,"¹⁸

Fiona should be looking at Beyond Zero Emission's 'Million Jobs Plan' or the Climate Council's 'Clean Jobs Plan' which show how we can reduce both unemployment and ecological destruction at the same time.

Fiona would be pushing for investment in the green jobs of the future, including large-scale solar and wind projects, developing hydrogen fuel from renewable energy, major upgrades to our electricity grid, electric vehicle charging networks and up-skilling workers, especially those due to lose jobs in the fossil fuel sector.

She would NOT be supporting the government's plans for public funding of any new coal or gas projects.

Nor would she support changing the remit of the Clean Energy Finance Corporation (CEFC) or ARENA to fund new gas projects. Until now, the CEFC was barred from investing in coal or gas. In August 2020, Angus Taylor introduced a bill to overturn this, and to allow it to invest in loss-making projects.¹⁹ In whose interest is this?

If Fiona believes renewable energy is a "huge opportunity", she should be opposing any such changes to the CEFC, and any ongoing support for the fossil fuel industry.

NOTES and REFERENCES :

AEMO : Australian Energy Market Operator

ARENA : Australian Renewable Energy Agency

CEFC : Clean Energy Finance Corporation

CSIRO : Commonwealth Scientific & Industrial Research Organisation

IPCC : Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change

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