

Explaining hostility to renewables

May 29 2017, by Marc Hudson



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Studying the catastrophe that has been Australian climate and energy policy these past 30 years is a thoroughly depressing business. When you read great work by [Guy Pearse](#), [Clive Hamilton](#), [Maria Taylor](#) and [Phillip Chubb](#), among others, you find yourself asking "why"?

Why were we so stupid, so unrelentingly shortsighted? Why did [the revelation in 2004](#) that John Howard had called a meeting of big business to help him slow the growth of renewables elicit no more than a shrug? Why did policy-makers attack renewable energy so unrelentingly?

About now, readers will be rolling their eyes and saying either "follow the money, stupid!" or "they are blinded by their marketophilia". Fair enough, and they have a point.

My recently published paper, titled "[Wind beneath their contempt: why Australian policymakers oppose solar and wind energy](#)" outlines the hostility to renewables from people like former treasurer Joe Hockey, who found the wind turbines around Canberra's Lake George "[utterly offensive](#)", and former prime minister Tony Abbott, who [funded studies](#) into the "potential health impacts" of wind farms.

It also deals with the policy-go-round that led to a [drop in investment in renewables](#).

In a search for explanations for this, my paper looks at what we academics call "material factors", such as party donations, post-career jobs, blame avoidance, diminished government capacity to act, and active disinformation by incumbents.

I then turn to ideological factors such as neoliberalism, the "growth at all costs" mindset, and of course climate denial.

Where it gets fun – and possibly controversial – is when I turn to psychological explanations such as what the sociologist [Karl Mannheim](#) called "the problem of generations". This is best explained by a Douglas Adams quote:

"Anything that is in the world when you're born is normal and ordinary

and is just a natural part of the way the world works. Anything that's invented between when you're fifteen and thirty-five is new and exciting and revolutionary and you can probably get a career in it. Anything invented after you're thirty-five is against the natural order of things."

Over the past 50 years, white heterosexual middle-class males with engineering backgrounds have felt this pattern particularly keenly, as their world has shifted and changed around them. To quote my own [research paper](#):

"This loss of the promise of control over nature occurred – by coincidence – at the same time that the British empire disintegrated, and the US empire met its match in the jungles of Vietnam, and while feminism, civil rights and gay rights all sprang up. What scholars of the Anthropocene have come to call the "Great Acceleration" from the 1950s, was followed by the great (and still incomplete) democratisation of the 1960s and 1970s."

The rising popularity of solar panels represents a similar pattern of democratisation, and associated loss of control for those with a vested interest in conventional power generation, which would presumably be particularly threatening to those attracted to status, power and hierarchy.

Consider the cringe

Here are a couple more ideas and explanations that didn't make the cut when I wrote the research paper. First up is the "biological cringe" – analogous to the "cultural cringe", the self-loathing Australian assumption that all things British were better.

In [Ecology and Empire: Environmental History of Settler Societies](#), the historian [Tom Griffiths](#) notes that:

"Acclimatization societies systematically imported species that were regarded as useful, aesthetic or respectably wild to fill the perceived gaps in primitive Australian nature. This "biological cringe" was remarkably persistent and even informed twentieth-century preservation movements, when people came to feel that the remnants of the relic fauna, flora and peoples, genetically unable to fend for themselves, should be "saved".

Second, and related, is the contempt and hatred that settler colonialists can feel towards wilderness, which in turn morphs into the ideology that there should be no limits on expansion and growth.

This means that people who speak of limits are inevitably attacked. One good example is Thomas Griffith Taylor (1880-1963), an Australian scientist who fell foul of the boosters who believed the country could and should support up to 500 million people.

Having seen his textbook banned in Western Australia for using the words "arid" and "desert", Taylor set sail for the United States. [At his farewell banquet at University of Sydney, he reinterpreted its motto *Sidere mens eadem mutata* \("The same spirit under a different sky"\), as "Though the heavens fall I am of the same mind as my great-great-grandfather!"](#)

I am anticipating that at least four groups will object to my speculations: [\(vulgar\) Marxists](#), for whom everything is about profits; positivists and [Popperians](#), who will mutter about a lack of disprovability; deniers of climate science, who often don't like being described as such; and finally, those who argue that renewables cannot possibly provide the energy return on investment required to run a modern industrial economy (who may or may not be right – we are about to find out).

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