

Power prices top of voter concerns on energy policy, says Newspoll.

David Crowe, The Australian, 12:00AM June 20, 2017

More than two-thirds of voters want politicians to fix power prices and energy security before meeting targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, in a warning to federal parliament over sweeping reforms that are splitting the Coalition.

Voters have backed an international deal to cut emissions but have named electricity prices as the top priority for Malcolm Turnbull and his government, as the Coalition partyroom meets today with MPs at odds over calls for a clean energy target.

A special Newspoll, conducted exclusively for The Australian, reveals that 60 per cent of voters want action to keep energy prices down while another 10 per cent want the prevention of blackouts to be the top priority.

Another 24 per cent want emissions cuts to be the primary objective in a result that highlights stark differences by party support, with Greens voters the only group putting climate change targets ahead of price cuts. Small businesses are urging the Prime Minister to haul his backbench into line and bring forward a decision on energy policy, warning that a failure to act will “destroy” mum-and-dad operators and increase unemployment. Council of Small Business of Australia chief executive Peter Strong will today release an energy statement calling on the government to provide investment certainty by acting on the blueprint issued by Chief Scientist Alan Finkel.

FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S PRIORITY

	Political support				
	Total	Coalition	Labor	Green	One Nation
TO KEEP ENERGY PRICES DOWN	60	63	57	39	73
MEET TARGETS TO CUT GREENHOUSE EMISSIONS	24	17	29	50	13
PREVENT BLACKOUTS	10	13	8	10	8
UNCOMMITTED	6	7	6	1	6

Question: Thinking now about the supply of electricity. In your opinion, what should be the federal government's priority?

RESPONSE TO TRUMP PULLING OUT OF PARIS AGREEMENT

	Political support				
	Total	Coalition	Labor	Green	One Nation
MAINTAIN OUR COMMITMENT	48	55	52	45	38
REDUCE OUR COMMITMENT	22	23	16	12	42
INCREASE OUR COMMITMENT	13	7	17	39	6
UNCOMMITTED	17	15	15	4	14

Question: What should the federal government do in response to Donald Trump's vow to pull out of the Paris climate change agreement?

TARGET FOR RENEWABLES

	Political support				
	Total	Coalition	Labor	Green	One Nation
23.5% IS A SUITABLE TARGET	27	37	25	19	18
GOVERNMENT SHOULD SET A HIGHER TARGET	38	25	48	71	26
GOVERNMENT SHOULD SET A LOWER TARGET	9	11	9	3	12
THE IDEA OF A TARGET SHOULD BE SCRAPPED	15	20	7	4	30
UNCOMMITTED	11	7	11	3	14

Question: Current government policy is to encourage renewable energy so that it accounts for 23.5% of electricity generation by 2020. In your opinion, is this a suitable target, or should there be a higher target for renewables, or a lower target for renewables or should the government scrap the idea of a target for renewables altogether?

This survey was conducted among 1,786 voters in all states of Australia and in both city and country areas between 15-18 June 2017. The data has been weighted to reflect the population distribution. The maximum sampling error is plus or minus 2.3 percentage points. Copyright at all times remains with Newspoll.

Former prime minister Tony Abbott, one of the chief critics of the Finkel report, has suggested Australia scale back its “aspiration” to cut greenhouse gas emissions in order to ease pressure on prices. Mr Abbott’s stance drew a rebuke from the International - Development Minister, Concetta Fierravanti-Wells, last night when she noted Mr Abbott called his government’s pledge to reduce carbon emissions a “definite commitment” just two years ago. “To say it is aspirational and non-binding now is in direct contradiction to what then prime minister Abbott said,” she told ABC radio. “Now I respect Tony’s views as a former prime minister and now a backbencher ... but this is a total about-face.”

Mr Turnbull vowed in parliament yesterday to act on power prices by using new gas-export controls to prevent shortages, while blaming Labor for a 2012 energy policy that did nothing to prevent the shortages.

“They were warned in their own energy white paper,” Mr Turnbull said. “They knew. It was a risk they took. “My government has had to take the strong and unprecedented step of putting restrictions on exports to protect tens of thousands of Australian jobs. “Labor’s track record on energy is consistent. The one thing you know about the Labor Party is that energy and electricity will always be more expensive.”

Bill Shorten accused the government of a “policy paralysis” on energy policy and blamed it for price hikes, including a 20 per cent increase announced by Energy Australia last week. The government’s briefing documents show retail electricity prices have doubled over the past 10 years and are climbing again after a short-term drop in the wake of the Abbott government scrapping the carbon tax three years ago.

The wholesale electricity spot prices was about \$35 a megawatt hour during 2011, rose to \$58 after the carbon tax was introduced and is now about \$130 as gas prices push up energy generator costs.

The special Newspoll, conducted from Thursday to Sunday, revealed strong support for action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions amid a global debate on US President Donald Trump’s pledge to pull out of the Paris climate change accord.

Mr Abbott committed Australia to reduce emissions by 26 to 28 per cent by 2030 under the precursor to the Paris Agreement but he hedged on that decision last week, suggesting “aspirational” targets might not have to be met. A majority of voters want to stick to Australia’s position on climate change, with 48 per cent in favour of maintaining the commitment to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and 13 per cent in favour of increasing the commitment.

Another 22 per cent favoured reducing the commitment while 17 per cent were uncommitted.

While supporters of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation were the strongest opponents of the global commitment, with 42 per cent wanting smaller targets to cut emissions, even this group had more voters in favour of action than against it, with 38 per cent wanting to maintain the commitment and 6 per cent in favour of increasing it.

Only 23 per cent of Coalition voters supported the idea of reducing the Australian commitment on carbon reductions.

Support for a bigger commitment is strongest among the Greens, with 39 per cent in favour, while 52 per cent of Labor voters and 55 per cent of Coalition voters want to maintain existing targets.

Government MPs meet in Parliament House today for a weekly partyroom meeting at a time of strong divisions over energy policy, with some Liberals and Nationals warning against a clean energy target at a special meeting last week on the Finkel reform proposal. The blueprint for a new target comes amid continuing divisions over the existing renewable energy target, which Mr Abbott set at 23.5 per cent two years ago in a hard-fought compromise in the Senate. The Abbott government argued at the time for a 20 per cent target. Voters back the scheme in its current or expanded form, with 27 per cent agreeing the existing target is “suitable” while another 38 per cent favour a higher target.

Only 15 per cent of voters prefer Mr Abbott’s position of scrapping the target; another 9 per cent favour setting a lower target. Among Coalition voters, 20 per cent favour scrapping the target, 11 per cent back a lower target, and a clear majority supports the RET with its existing or a higher target.