

Victorious Tony Abbott shifts his sights to killing the RET, clean energy target



Tony Abbott listens to a speech by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull at the Party Futures Convention. Dan Himbrechts



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Fresh from his faction's weekend victory at the NSW Liberal Party rules summit, an emboldened Tony Abbott has switched his focus to torpedoing the Renewable Energy Target and the government's plans to introduce a Clean Energy Target.

Mr Abbott travelled to Gladstone, Queensland, on Monday to tour an alumina refinery, advocate the construction of a coal fired power station and rail against energy policy which seeks to reduce carbon emissions. In another signal he plans to blow up attempts by the government to adopt a clean energy target, as recommended by chief scientist Alan Finkel and supported by business and industry, Mr Abbott said policy must focus on providing power, not curbing emissions.

"We've been going in the wrong direction for far too long, for the best part of a decade," he said of the RET.

He said Australia needs "need a jobs first power policy, not a policy that obsesses about reducing emissions".

As prime minister, Mr Abbott fought conservative colleagues who wanted to abolish the RET and settled for an amended target in which 23 per cent of power must be generated from renewable sources by 2020. "That will put downward pressure on electricity prices while also providing certainty for the industry," Mr Abbott told Parliament in 2015 upon the passage of the legislation to amend the RET.

Now he believes the RET should be abolished. As well he opposes plans by the government to introduce a Clean Energy Target, or CET, which would mandate that from 2020 onwards, a certain percentage of energy would be generated from clean sources. Mr Abbott has previously derided the policy as a "magic pudding"

But one of Australia's top energy regulators said public figures and politicians who spruik or oppose particular energy technologies - as Mr Abbott has been doing - are "usually rent-seekers". John Pierce, chairman of the Australian Energy Markets Commission, which sets the rules for the National Electricity Market, said he had been asked by a doctor attending his injured son whether we should be building coal power, wind or solar.

Mr Pierce told an energy conference that this was the wrong question, and what was needed was clearly specified objectives and consensus across jurisdictions. "As soon as you hear public figures or politicians talking about backing - or the opposite - particular technologies, my rule of thumb is usually, 'watch out there's usually rent seekers about'," Mr Pierce said.

Labor is prepared to abandon its own plans for a more robust emissions intensity scheme and do a deal on a CET, if only to end the toxic politics which has hobbled energy policy, caused prices to skyrocket and left industry and business demanding bipartisan policy certainty. But in an appeal to fellow conservatives who are sceptical about climate change, Mr Abbott said the nation "doesn't need any more subsidised, intermittent power" and "we need a new coal-fired power station".

Mr Abbott is emboldened after the moderate faction, which controls the NSW Liberal party, was thumped over the weekend when conservative members voted overwhelmingly to give the rank-and-file the power to preselect candidates and party positions. The changes must still be ratified by the party's Constitutional Committee and its state council, which is moderate controlled. Mr Abbott warned these bodies to respect the will of the members.

He said if the state council did not approve the changes, it would be defying a former prime minister and Malcolm Turnbull, who also backed a call for greater democracy, while not backing a specific model. "If the state council starts to play silly buggers, if the state council tries to sabotage this (and) tries to play silly games with what was the overwhelming will of the party membership yesterday they will do our party and our governments, both in Macquarie Street and in Canberra, massive damage," he said.

"If the factional operatives try to get in the way they won't just be as it were defying the former prime minister they'll be defying the current one too."

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