

Point Counterpoint: Gas as a Transitional Fuel

The Editor

Abstract

A new section to air scientific disagreements. Here, seven pieces and one response on the use of natural gas as a transitional fuel on the road to a renewable future.

On 12 February, 2020, Alan Finkel, the then Chief Scientist of Australia, addressed the National Press Club in Canberra on the topic of “Planned obsolescence — managing the transition to the electric planet.”¹ Eventually, this talk resulted in the disagreements we print here.

On reading the *Sydney Morning Herald* of Tuesday 25 August, I found reference to a letter from 25 scientists to Alan Finkel, arguing against his argument for natural gas as a “transition” fuel on the de-carbonising path to a renewable future. Three of the signatories are FRSNs — Matthew England, Trevor McDougall, and Steven Sherwood. I wrote to them asking for a copy of their letter and permission to republish in the *Journal*: “It seems to me that documenting such debates and their eventual resolution is important, both historically and scientifically.”

They responded with their letter and permission. The next day Alan Finkel’s response appeared, and I received permission to republish that too. Then, on Thursday, Penny Sackett, a past Chief Scientist, published a piece in the *Herald*, not really in response to the previous two pieces (it had

apparently been written earlier), arguing a different case.

She gave permission (as did the *Herald*) for us to republish her piece. Finally, Richard Bolt, a member of Alan Finkel’s Stakeholder Advisory Group, published a piece in the *Herald* of 3 September refuting the 25 scientists. I sought and received his permission, and the *Herald*’s, to reprint the piece.

Andrew Blakers, an engineering professor at ANU, was interviewed on radio on 17 September. I sought a discussion paper from him, below.

Peter Rez, a physicist at Arizona State University, contributed a piece supporting the Chief Scientist, but Andrew Blakers disagrees with this analysis, as can be seen in the Debate between the two at the end.

Here, then are seven pieces arguing for and against the case for natural gas as a transition fuel on the path to renewables. There have been other pieces pro and con, not least when the Government, absent a proper energy or emissions policy,² announced their “gas-fired recovery plan” on 15 September.³

1 <https://www.chiefscientist.gov.au/news-and-media/national-press-club-address-orderly-transition-electric-planet>

2 For an historical perspective, see R. E. Marks, “Australian energy policy and conservation,” *IFAC Energy Systems. Management and Economics*. Tokyo 1989. <https://www.agsm.edu.au/bobm/papers/japan89paperwp.pdf>

3 <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/gas-fired-recovery>

