

Is politicians deliberately ruining the power system a ‘crime’?

By Robert Gottliebsen, The Australian, 30 March 2017

The federal government may need to declare a state of emergency and restore the Hazelwood power station.

Former trade minister Andrew Robb has taken an unprecedented and important step towards bringing the politicians who vandalised our power and gas systems before the courts.

I emphasise that Robb did not describe as “criminals” the politicians who put NSW, Victoria and South Australia at risk of blackouts and forced hundreds of thousands of Australians to consider installing their own generators or batteries.

But [at this week’s Food Forum Robb did describe what happened as a “crime”](#). I believe it is the first time a former Coalition minister has used the word “crime” to describe the destruction of low-cost energy.

He did not discuss blackout danger but, if anything, that is a greater “crime”.

I emphasise that Robb did not say politicians should be prosecuted, but now the “crime” word has been used, if we have power blackouts in NSW, Victoria, or South Australia over the next two summers an enraged community is going to demand that the perpetrators of the “crime” — the politicians — be hauled before the courts.

As I have described previously there is a 75 per cent risk of blackouts in NSW and Victoria. But it might not happen. The politicians could be lucky.

We are fortunate in Australia to have a section of the criminal code that covers politicians and public servants who make false statements or mislead the public. It sets out that [if they are guilty of an offence they can be punished with 12 months jail](#). Every word uttered by ministers as they vandalised the network and created higher prices needs to be examined to determine whether an offence has been committed. It’s not my job to say they have committed an offence and, as is their right, the politicians will fight any prosecutions with great vigour.

The question for the courts to decide will be whether the community was told by the politicians that, to guarantee supply security, solar and wind installations required backup facilities and a reconfiguration of the power network, which the politicians did not undertake.

In addition, was the community told that blocking gas developments in NSW and Victoria would create supply dangers given Gladstone required southern gas. Prices of energy would have to rise.

Quite rightly, Senate crossbencher Nick Xenophon is refusing to allow tax cuts until the power and gas mess is sorted out. And he is right. Few local or overseas groups are going to make substantial new investments in Australia while power and gas prices are out of control, plus substantial gas shortages and blackouts are on the menu.

The federal government may need to declare a state of emergency and restore Hazelwood, given that a “crime” has been committed, as well as accelerating the Snowy plan and quickly taking other emergency measures.

Like Andrew Robb and my readers, I can't help thinking about why our politicians made such fundamental and catastrophic errors. I have written about the need for advice outside the public service and the "yes" people among the ministerial advisers. But watch question time in state and federal parliaments and you will see politicians using too much of their time thinking up ways to abuse each other.

That time could be used to make sure we avoid blackouts.

Vast amounts of state and federal government resources are used to duplicate what the other is doing, and usually one bags the other so no decisions can be made. We need to synchronise power structures so states control some areas and Canberra others. When duplication is ended, not only do we save countless billions but real policy can be determined, rather than developing new weapons for the state/Commonwealth fights.

Paradoxically, it was Andrew Robb who in the lead-up to the 2013 Abbott election victory was shadow finance minister and set out detailed plans to save those billions by ending state-federal duplication.

But Tony Abbott made him trade minister, and since then the Coalition in government has set about increasing duplication and infighting, which takes state and federal politicians' eyes off the ball and leads them to poor decision-making.

Maybe long blackouts and gas shortages are what the community needs to rewrite federation and change the way we make decisions. It is the most important issue in the nation.