

A year since the SA blackout, who's winning the high-wattage power play?

Written by Marc Hudson, PhD Candidate, Sustainable Consumption Institute, University of Manchester

It's a year to the day since the entire state of South Australia was [plunged into darkness](#) . And what a year it's been, for energy policy geeks and political tragics alike.

Parked at the western end of the eastern states' electricity grid, South Australia has long been an outlier, in energy policy as well as geography. Over the past decade it has had a tempestuous relationship with the federal government, be it Labor or Coalition. As with [water policy](#) , the South Australians often suspect they are being left high and dry by their upstream neighbours.

Read more: [South Australia's energy plan gives national regulators another headache](#)

The policy chaos over the carbon price left the [Renewable Energy Target](#) as a far more prominent investment signal than it would otherwise have been. South Australia carried on attracting wind farms, which earned [more than their fair share of the blame](#) for high electricity prices.

On September 28, 2016, a “[once-in-50-year storm](#)” blew over a string of electricity pylons, tripping the whole state's power grid. While the blackout, which lasted 5 hours in Adelaide and longer elsewhere, was still unfolding, [critics of renewables took a leap into the dark](#) as part of a wider [blame game](#) .

Despite being described as a “[confected conflict](#)”, the skirmish was serious enough to prompt the federal government to commission Chief Scientist Alan Finkel's [landmark review of the entire National Electricity Market](#) , with a deadline of mid-2017.

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Meanwhile, in early December, federal environment minister Josh Frydenberg was [forced to backtrack](#) after saying the Coalition was prepared to consider an emissions intensity scheme. SA Premier Jay Weatherill was unamused by the flip-flop and [threatened to get together with other states to go it alone on carbon pricing](#).

February saw a [series of “load shedding” events](#) during a heatwave, which left some Adelaide homes once more without power and saw the grid wobble in NSW too. (It should be noted that the now infamous Liddell power station was unable to increase its output during the incident.)

Policy by tweet

It was then that Twitter entered the fray. The “accidental billionaire” [Mike Cannon-Brookes](#) was asking Solar City chief executive Lyndon Rive how quickly a battery storage system might be up and running. Rive’s cousin, a certain [Elon Musk](#), intervened with his famous offer:

Within days, both Weatherill and Turnbull had had conversations with Musk, and Turnbull announced [a “Snowy Hydro 2.0” storage proposal](#).

Meanwhile, Weatherill unveiled his SA Energy Plan, which the Guardian called a “[survivalist fix of last resort](#)”.

. We now know that the plan [cost A\\$1 million to produce](#).

Then, on March 16, at the launch of a [5-megawatt “virtual power plant”](#) in Adelaide, Weatherill had some choice words for Frydenberg who, entertainingly enough, was standing right next to him:

I've got to say, it is a little galling to be standing here, next to a man that's been standing up with his prime minister, bagging South Australia at every step of the way over the last six months... And for you to then turn around, in a few short months, when there's a blackout, and point the finger at SA for the fact that our leadership in renewable energy was the cause of that problem is an absolute disgrace."

Frydenberg kept a notably low profile for a while after this.

Finkel fires up

In June, Finkel [released his keenly awaited review](#) . A significant number of [Liberals](#) and [Nationals](#) didn't like his suggested Clean Energy Target, and immediately set about trying to insert coal into it.

Despite being conceived as an acceptable compromise, the Clean Energy Target was bashed from both sides. It was criticised as [too weak to reach Australia's emissions target](#) and [little more than "business as usual"](#); , but was also "[unconscionable](#)" to former Prime Minister Tony Abbott.

Weatherill's next major stand-alongside was an even bigger deal than the Frydenberg stoush. On July 7, he and Musk announced that part of his earlier energy SA plan would become reality: [a 129-megawatt-hour lithium-ion battery farm](#) , to be built alongside a wind farm in Jamestown.

Speaking at a book launch, Weatherill [used the f-word to describe specific media opponents of renewables](#) , earning himself opprobrium in the pages of The Australian, and admiration in more progressive areas of social media.

Federal treasurer Scott Morrison [returned fire](#) , deriding the battery farm as "a [Big Banana](#) ".

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However, there was another big announcement in Weatherill's locker: a [A\\$650-million concentrated solar thermal power plant](#) to be built near Port Augusta, with potential for more.

Quietly, the "energy security target" component of the SA plan, which had been [rubbished](#), was [def](#)
[erred](#)
, while a renewables-based "[minigrid](#)
" on the Yorke peninsula was announced.

Whatever next?

What will happen now? "Events, dear boy, events," as Harold MacMillan [didn't say](#). Musk is back in Adelaide [to talk about his Mars mission](#), with an appearance [scheduled for Jamestown](#). Would anyone bet against another SA government announcement? More batteries? Electric cars? Space planes...?

The Jamestown battery should come online in December (or it's free!). Weatherill will presumably be hoping that Turnbull's government staggers on, bleeding credibility and beefing up the anti-Liberal protest vote until the [March 2018 state election](#), and that they continue to make themselves look a like a rabble over Finkel's Clean Energy Target.

At the same time, he will also fervently hope there isn't another big power crisis, and that the [A \\$2.6 million of public money he spent making sure everyone knows about his energy plans](#) provides effective insulation from any shocks.

Read more: [Explainer: what can Tesla's giant South Australian battery achieve?](#)

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The whole saga shows how policy windows can open up in unexpected ways. An attempt to blast a new technology fails, and a politician at state level sees no option but to act because of federal inadequacy. It's happening in [California too](#).

Judging by his interviews with [me](#) and the Guardian's [Katharine Murphy](#), Weatherill has found his signature issue – making lemonade from the huge lemon he was served last September. As another [commentator wrote](#):

Far from being the last nail in the Weatherill government's electoral coffin, the power crisis has perversely breathed new life into Labor's re-election hopes... It is turning its own failures on energy security into a single-issue platform on which to campaign.

Weatherill is trying to build an [innovation ecosystem](#) for clean energy technology. Announcing a tender last month, [Weatherill said](#) his government is "looking for the next generation of renewable technologies and demand-management technologies to maintain our global leadership".

And when do applications for that tender close? Well, it may be a coincidence, but the [deadline is 5pm today](#) – exactly a year since his state's darkest hour.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/a-year-since-the-sa-blackout-whos-winning-the-high-wattage-power-play-84416>