

Tony Abbott has called for Australia to pull out of the Paris climate agreement, in a swingeing attack on Malcolm Turnbull's National Energy Guarantee.

Abbott said the NEG was not about reducing prices but about cutting emissions. "The only certainty that the National Energy Guarantee as it stands would provide is the certainty of emissions reduction."

Delivering the Bob Carter Commemorative Lecture in Melbourne, Abbott said: "Withdrawing from the Paris agreement that is driving the National Energy Guarantee would be the best way to keep prices down and employment up – and to save our party from a political legacy that could haunt us for the next decade at least".

"As long as we remain in the Paris agreement – which is about reducing emissions, not building prosperity – all policy touching on emissions will be about their reduction, not our well-being. It's the emissions obsession that's at the heart of our power crisis and it's this that has to end for our problems to ease."

Abbott played down the importance of the government's much-vaunted tax cuts in comparison with the implications of energy policy.

"These are strange times in Canberra when there's a hullabaloo over modest tax cuts that only take effect fully in six or seven years' time, while mandatory emissions cuts that start sooner, that mean more for the economy, and whose ramifications will be virtually impossible to reverse are expected more or less to be waved through".

In the party room last week Abbott had little support for his attack on the NEG. But his constant agitation is unhelpful for the government as it tries to win backing from the states and territories for the scheme. It also reinforces the impression of division in government ranks, even though the majority of the backbenchers now just want the energy policy settled.

Abbott said that his government in 2015 had set a 2030 emissions reduction target “on the basis that this was more or less what could be achieved without new government programs and without new costs on the economy.

“There was no advice then to the effect that it would take a Clean Energy Target or a National Energy Guarantee to get there,” he said.

“My government never put emissions reduction ahead of the wellbeing of families and the prosperity of industries”.

When the world’s leading country exited the Paris agreement “it can hardly be business as usual,” he said. “Absent America, my government would not have signed up to the Paris treaty, certainly not with the current target”.

Abbott said he could understand “the government would like to crack the so-called trilemma of keeping the lights on, getting power prices down and reducing emissions in line with our Paris targets - it’s just that there’s no plausible evidence all three can be done at the same time”.

“If you read the National Energy Guarantee documentation, there’s a few lines about lower prices, a few pages about maintaining supply, and page after impenetrable page about reducing emissions.

“The government is kidding us when it says it’s all about reducing prices when there ’s an emissions reduction target plus a reliability target but no price target”.

The government said it wanted to give certainty but the only certainty was that any NEG approved by state ALP governments at COAG would be “massively ramped up to deliver even more emissions reduction under the next Labor government”.

Abbott repeated his call for the government to subsidise the boosting of baseload power. He

Exit Paris climate agreement: Tony Abbott

Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

again suggested threatening to compulsorily acquire Liddell coal-fired power station, which AGL is refusing either to keep going or to sell.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

Authors: Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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