

## Emissions policy is under attack from all sides. We've been here before, and it rarely ends well

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

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Federal energy minister Josh Frydenberg is battling to steer a course for his National Energy Guarantee (NEG) through choppy political waters, ahead of a crucial meeting this Friday on whether to adopt the policy.

Since 2014 and the [demise of Julia Gillard's carbon pricing scheme](#), Australia has been in a well-documented period of policy paralysis (although "mayhem" may be more accurate). Former prime minister Tony Abbott signed off on a 26-28% emissions reduction target to take to the 2015 Paris climate summit (despite [later claiming to have been misled by his advisors](#)), and his successor Malcolm Turnbull ratified it as part of the resulting global treaty.

In late 2016, Frydenberg's suggestion that an [emissions intensity scheme](#) could help meet the target survived for a mere 24 hours before [dying in a Sydney Fish Market](#). Next, the Clean Energy Target [proposed by chief scientist Alan Finkel](#) proved too hard for the Coalition to get behind.

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**Read more:** [\*\*\*Turnbull has politicked himself into irrelevance on energy and climate in 2018\*\*\*](#)

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Now we have the NEG, which is on the table at a crunch meeting of the COAG Energy Council on Friday. The table may yet become a chopping block. The policy will only get the nod if the federal government can get the states and territories on board, and then steer the resulting agreement through the Coalition party room. Frydenberg is caught between a rock and a hard-right place.

The ACT government is not a NEG fan, but doesn't have veto power. Victoria's Labor government [does](#), and what's more, it is facing a battle for survival at this year's state election. Backing the NEG and its modest emissions targets could mean surrendering seats to the

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Greens. Activist groups [adverts in Queensland](#) [Greenpeace and GetUp! are also running anti-NEG](#), and the latter would presumably welcome an opportunity to shake off its reputation as a Labor stooge. Victoria and Queensland have pledged [not to sign up to the policy](#) [n](#) until it gets a tick from the Coalition party room.

To do that, Frydenberg will have to fend off the hard right [Monash Forum](#) types who are threatening a backbench mutiny. One of the more jaw-dropping stunts was Nationals MP George Christensen's [visit to Japan](#) in search of new money for coal power.

To try and cut through the politics, energy policy analysts have [demanded](#) that the government release the modelling that underpins the NEG, while also [pointing to its shortcomings](#) as a tool to drive down both emissions and prices.

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***Read more: [The National Energy Guarantee is a flagship policy. So why hasn't the modelling been made public?](#)***

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It's easy to get caught up in the horse race. But as is so often the case with climate policy, we've been here before – specifically in 1994-95, under the Keating government. History doesn't repeat, but she rhymes.

In 1992 Australia had signed and ratified the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) – the treaty that underpins the UN climate negotiations. But it quickly became clear that Australia's [National Greenhouse Response Strategy](#), containing only voluntary measures, wouldn't drive emissions reductions. Indeed, emissions grew, and new coal-fired power stations were approved.

In early 1994, environment minister Ros Kelly resigned over the “[sports rorts](#)” scandal, and Graham Richardson briefly returned to the portfolio before then being replaced by John Faulkner from the New South Wales Labor left faction.

Faulkner started talking about a carbon tax, not so much to reduce emissions but to support research and development into renewable energy. This was something that the Australian Conservation Foundation, the Democrats and the newly formed Australian Greens had all been pressing for. It was also something tangible and credible for Australia to bring to the first UNFCCC conference, in [Berlin in March 1995](#).

Industry was not happy, and coordinated its response through a relatively new group called the [Industry Greenhouse Network](#). The main PR effort involved a flurry of well-timed economic modelling, given to carefully chosen journalists, purporting to show that the economic sky would fall if any carbon tax were introduced.

Faulkner eventually realised he just didn't have the numbers to get his tax through cabinet, and withdrew it. Instead, industry's preferred (and purely voluntary) scheme was launched shortly thereafter. Called the Greenhouse Challenge, it was widely derided, with one industry figure [describing it](#) as “a bit more paperwork but if it helps us avoid carbon taxes or more regulations, it's worthwhile”.

Nevertheless, the policy survived the transition to the Howard government, where for many years it served as a stab vest to deflect criticism over a lack of climate policy ambition.

## Policy lock-in?

Energy and climate researchers sometimes warn of “[carbon lock-in](#)” – the self-perpetuating inertia created by large fossil fuel-based energy systems that inhibits public and private efforts to introduce alternative energy technologies”.

One element of carbon lock-in – besides habit, inertia and [human nature](#) – is the capture of policy processes by incumbents, with a kind of low-ambition policy lock-in. This makes it much

harder to ramp up ambition when a new government arrives.

Some critics of the NEG have [suggested](#) that it could be improved by making its emissions target flexible and adaptable by future policy-makers. But the more ground Frydenberg gives on this, the more likely he is to be mauled by his party-room colleagues.

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**Read more:** [Could the NEG bring down power prices? It's hard to be confident that it will](#)

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Climate change has often been described as a “[wicked problem](#)” – one that is difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete, contradictory, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognise.

More recently, it has graduated to “[super-wicked](#)” status – an acknowledgement that time is running out, there is no central authority, those seeking to solve the problem are also causing it, and policies habitually discount the future in favour of preserving our economic present.

We didn't “solve” climate change 20 years ago, when it was merely wicked. We are less likely to solve it now that it has grown harder as well as more urgent. As the allegedly ancient [Chinese curse](#) goes, “may you live in interesting times”. Josh Frydenberg certainly will this week.

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

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