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## Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner

### **Keynote Address – Clean Energy Council Australian Wind Energy Forum**

#### **Tuesday 6 May 2025 – Melbourne**

Good morning, everyone. It's great to be here in Melbourne.

I begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the land we meet on today. I pay my respects to their Elders past and present, and to any First Nations people joining us.

Thank you to the Clean Energy Council for the invitation to speak today and for providing this important platform to share reflections and – more importantly – to issue a few challenges.

A quick snapshot: I began my role as Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner in December 2024. Before that, I spent a decade as CEO of the National Farmers' Federation and have worked in agribusiness for most of my career.

I have a few passions – my family, the Collingwood Football Club, vanilla slices to name a few – and a deep, enduring commitment to agriculture, vibrant rural and regional communities, and economic opportunity.

I'm an economic rationalist at heart, but time and experience have rounded out my thinking on that a little.

Now, let's turn to why I'm here today – to reflect on the challenges and opportunities around energy infrastructure, particularly in the wind sector ... and to offer up a couple of challenges.

#### **Learning and Listening**

In my first months as Commissioner, I've had to explain to friends and family what my new job is... and the way I've described it is:

- My team and I *help make the energy shift smoother and fairer*

So as part of that process I've prioritised listening.

I don't need to tell anyone in this room that the energy transition is complex, and so I've made it my business to test assumptions, learn deeply, and understand the views of those most affected.

I'd like to take the opportunity to thank the numerous CEOs, Government Ministers and community members who have helped me gather my initial thoughts and insights.

I've travelled to towns like Dubbo and Gunning in NSW, Stanthorpe and Warwick in Queensland, Ballarat, Lethbridge and Charlton in Victoria. My team has been on the ground



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in WA and we will soon visit SA, Tasmania, and the Northern Territory. Within six months, we'll have visited every state and territory – not to tick boxes, but to build understanding and relationships.

I place a great deal of importance on relationships.

My experience has been that relationships are how you get things done. You might not always agree but if you have a respectful and trusting relationship you can at least identify what is possible in a constructive and empathetic way.

From the conversations I have held with people, I can see that there are some constructive and positive developments and outcomes being achieved in some areas.

I want to be really clear - there is some good work going on in the space and for this I congratulate and acknowledge those in the industry leading this work.

But that being said - there are significant concerns still being raised in many communities and I fear these concerns are growing.

There are clearly more lessons that need to be learned and ongoing community challenges that must be addressed.

#### **Where We Stand**

Wind energy has a long history – centuries, in fact. In Australia, the first modern wind installation appeared in Esperance in 1993. Today, four decades later, there are nearly 110 operating wind farms, and a further 200 or so – at least – on the radar.

There's no doubt we've seen remarkable progress.

Over the last decade, Australia has witnessed an unprecedented growth in both the number and capacity of wind farms.

This rapid expansion is a clear indicator of the sector's maturity and the increasing confidence of investors and policymakers in wind energy as a sustainable energy source and a key contributor to economic growth.

But with growth has come tension. And clearly not everything has gone well.

What have we observed?

Well to begin with what is obvious is that this is a change and a transition that has been happening for decades and will continue to play out for decades.

Change is rarely easy, so we need to continue to accept that we have not got it right.

We have learnt through former Commissioner Andrew Dyer's review into community engagement practices in the renewable energy transition that things are not good.



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The key findings included these startling statistics – I know some of you will be very familiar with these findings – but I think worthwhile to note again:

- 92% of people were dissatisfied with community engagement
- 85% of people were dissatisfied with responses to questions
- 89% of people said the information they received was not relevant to their concerns
- 85% of people thought their concerns were not responded to in a timely manner.

For the renewable energy infrastructure sector – these are not good results.

The review was published in February 2024 and the 9 recommendations were accepted in whole or in principle by the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments through the Environment and Climate Change Ministerial Council, the ECMC.

So, it has a strong level of support and backing.

A big part of my motivation in taking on this role is wanting to see meaningful progress on the sensible recommendations in that review.

And one of my priorities since starting has been to talk to a wide range of community, industry and government stakeholders about how they think the implementation of the review's nine recommendations is going.

I fully understand and accept that – just like the energy transition itself – these recommendations reach across different complex challenges and that major improvements won't happen overnight.

Some of the recommendations are primarily directed to the Commonwealth, some to the States and Territories, and some to both – and even those involving a single level of government can raise cross-departmental lines of responsibility and require ongoing and genuine collaboration with industry and communities.

But let's cut to the chase – when I meet with Energy Ministers individually, or when they next meet collectively to discuss progress on the review, what would I say to them about where implementation is up to?

Or when I meet with concerned citizens who took part in the review – one year down the track – what will I say to them?

My honest answer is ... there is not enough attention or resources being devoted to this and there is not enough collective effort being poured into this.

We cannot let this report gather dust on the shelf.



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It is my intention to be a champion of this report and help drive accountability to improve those numbers. This report is an opportunity to bring people together – it's a cause we should all get behind. It will definitely take a collective effort.

Some early efforts – like the Developer Rating Scheme – are starting to gain traction.

But overall? Progress is patchy. Momentum is lacking. And coordination is often missing.

This is not moving fast enough and not being prioritised enough.

We risk leaving communities behind and letting frustration fester – not just with individual projects, but with the energy transition as a whole.

We cannot allow these recommendations to be someone else's job. Accountability is our collective responsibility, and it is our best friend.

To the industry, I say – this is not about government fixing a problem on your behalf. It's about shared effort.

I'm putting up my hand to champion the work of my predecessor and to support you.

I'm open to your ideas, and I invite your collaboration.

#### **What More Can We Do?**

Here's a couple of challenges I want to put to you:

What can we do better, when will we do it?

One of the things I have confirmed in the first four months is that this sector is complex: we have wind, solar, hydro and battery assets, we have generators, developers, transmission providers, plus retailers, wholesalers, sub-contractors, government-owned entities of multiple different configurations, and more.

But from the outside, most people don't see these distinctions – nor do they care.

The public sees one energy industry and very few people remotely understand the industry as a whole anyway.

We haven't done a good enough job of explaining why we are going through this transition – and we shouldn't give up on that task for a minute – it too important. *That's the first challenge!*

Right now, and too often, communities also tell us that they see an industry that largely doesn't appear to be listening.

In a worst-case scenario – if they are listening – that it feels like they are listening so they can tick a box.



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If we are going to address the concerns raised and take advantage of the opportunities, we need to be more collaborative, more consistent and more coordinated. *That's the second challenge.*

I say this coming from the agriculture sector where I think we had 300 different groups all hand on heart suggesting they were working for or representing the farming sector.

Too often we did our own little thing, using scarce resources we didn't have to do too little on our own little dung heaps. A lot of the time forgetting that we were part of one industry (or what the public saw as one industry).

The ag industry is one of the most trusted and well regarded in the community and it still struggled with social license on a number of issues such as animal welfare, environmental management or water use.

In a number of areas successive governments showed a high propensity to regulated to align with (real or perceived) community expectations with drastic and detrimental impacts on business.

I see similar risks here.

Take the dozens of voluntary codes, charters, and guidelines – I counted 37 in a recent desktop search. To be fair I acknowledge they cover different aspects of a complex system.

These tools are useful, but they must be more than feel-good commitments. If we're not careful, they become an echo chamber.

At worst, they risk being seen as a lovely sounding self-fulfilling symphony played out in corporate boardrooms but not heard by the community in the regions where this transition is actually happening.

So, I urge you – don't see minimum compliance as the goal. Ticking boxes on consultation doesn't cut it.

Accountability is your best friend.

Use these tools to genuinely build trust, improve accountability and to move the needle so people notice its being moved. *That's the third challenge.*

#### **The Power Imbalance**

We also need to talk honestly about power imbalance.

It's risky making assumptions – but let me assume most people in this room chose to be in this wind & energy sector.



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My guess would be that you're qualified, well resourced, and well informed. You have adequate designated time, good access and sound awareness of government processes, coordinated teams providing expert advice, and strategic support at your disposal.

In contrast, the communities and the people living in the communities hosting the wind infrastructure projects often have little of that.

They have jobs that aren't related to energy, they are likely not to be qualified in the sector, they are uninformed about government processes or submission processes, have little spare time to devote to writing submissions to EES/EIS, no teams of experts or strategic support.

Many have lived in their region for generations. Their farm is their workplace, their home, their legacy.

They have little influence over what's happening next door or in their town. And, as a result of what's going on, some can no longer speak to their neighbours. The Tuesday night tennis is gone. Tensions linger at the school bus stop and at the cafe.

This power/information/capacity imbalance is real – and it's on everyone to fix it. *That's the fourth challenge.*

We must invest in meaningful community benefits – not just financial ones. NSW's benefit-sharing guidelines are a good start, as are examples like early funding for independent legal advice, or the local leadership shown in places like Hay and the Mallee.

I want to note again that I've heard and seen some good stories – from companies, councils and individuals. There is a clear evidence base on which to build. But we need to go further. Co-design engagement and outcomes with communities – not for them.

Bridging the community acceptance gap is likely to go better when we talk about significant investment in health, housing, childcare, education – long-term building blocks of community wellbeing.

While I don't have time to go into detail here, I also have queries over the community grant funding that is being made available, current practices around individual neighbour payments and – while I'm at it – the issue of decommissioning.

I won't spend time on these issues now and won't drop them in as a challenge ... those are chats for another day.

#### **Before I conclude can I be so bold as to offer up a suggestion to leaders**

To senior executives and CEOs in the room: get out there in the community more.

Don't rely solely on reports or internal summaries. Speak directly to communities. Listen to hear, not to reply.



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Yes, your engagement teams are crucial – and often outstanding – but leadership presence makes a difference. People need to see that decision-makers are present, listening, and taking them seriously ... so *that's challenge number 5!*

#### **Final Thoughts**

To conclude – yes, the industry has recognised there are challenges and there are some bright spots. But we must do more to build on them. We need to coordinate, collaborate, and show consistency across the board.

I've seen and heard some genuine goodwill and well-intentioned people. I've actually seen behaviours change in response to concerns – so despite a possibly pessimistic sermon, I'm optimistic we can do this.

Communities still feel the energy transition is being done to them, not with them. That must change and that's something we - government, industry and the community - can do together.

We need to spend time and money building better relationships.

We need to demonstrate genuine community relationships that deliver realistic and tangible benefits – like improved neighbour benefits, reduced local energy costs or shared investment in roads, healthcare, and education. These are significant asks – but they are also meaningful and lasting.

We need to streamline and strengthen the work – not forgetting the basics of why the energy transition is critical.

We must have more collective action – more collaboration and more consistency on meaningful work like the community engagement review recommendations and collectively lift our efforts to make sure the numbers improve.

I'm positive it can be done and I'm putting my hand up to lead on helping to make the energy transition smoother and fairer and to be an independent trusted source of information and guidance to make it happen.

I welcome the chance to meet with any of you to discuss this further – especially where things are going well. Let's learn from what's working and commit to doing better, together.

Thank you for having me.

Tony Mahar

Australian Energy Infrastructure Commissioner

6 May 2025