

COMMENTARY

DAILY CARTOON | JOHN SPOONER



NICK CATER

Energy policy runs short of knowledge, good sense



Keelan has been running an electricity grid, albeit small, for 2½ years. His YouTube videos offering practical advice to the camping and off-road community would be helpful viewing for Energy Minister Chris Bowen.

Keelan is a qualified electrician who has tested the limitations of batteries and solar power during 2½ years on the road with his partner, Sarah. He has a healthy disdain for the wisdom of experts and the nonsense for which they're responsible.

Keelan is the Mick Dundee of the 12-volt world. Paul Hogan's character made a name for himself wrestling crocs: Keelan wrestles with the challenges of keeping the lithium-ion batteries charged while his Toyota Prado sits idle.

Dundee busted his way through bullshit: Keelan busts myths about low-voltage DC grids.

"The expert will always turn

around and tell you that you need another battery," says Keelan. "That is because they're going to make more money out of you from buying a battery than a solar panel."

Keelan's first insight is that expert advice is seldom pure and frequently misleading, contaminated by rent-seeking and other sources of bias. The test of an expert's trustworthiness is not the esteem in which they are held by their peers but whether their advice works.

"They tell you that batteries are the key to your 12-volt system," says Keelan. "It's total BS. The batteries mean nothing if you can't capture the electricity."

Keelan's second insight is that it is generation, not storage, that matters. What the Australian Energy Market Operator calls "firming capacity", utility-scale batteries and hydro storage, doesn't add a kilowatt of energy to

the grid but wastes more than a few of them through inefficiency.

"We're not making any money off this advice," says Keelan. "We're all about keeping it cheap, simple, easy and effective."

Lesson three is that the most reliable advice comes from people with skin in the game, as Keelan most definitely has. No one at Snowy Hydro loses their job when their flagship project blows out from \$2bn to \$12bn and the tunnel-boring machine grinds to a halt. If Keelan shells out a few hundred dollars on a useless bit of kit, on the other hand, it bores a mighty great hole in his budget, and he has to answer to Sarah.

Travelling off-road and off-grid without sacrificing creature comforts has been made possible by solar technology. Keelan and Sarah's demands are relatively modest: water pumps, a fridge and lights in the caravan plus air fryer, coffee machine and broadband satellite dish.

Yet, as Keelan has learned through bitter experience, the benefits of solar are oversold.

"If we've got 400 amps of out-goings per day, you're probably thinking: 'Okay, we need 400 amps to come in solar,'" he says.

On paper, a 200kW solar panel can generate 10 to 12 amps an hour. "With 12 hours of daylight, you should expect to see 120 amps per solar panel per day," says Keelan. "So we'd need around four panels, and we're in the green."

Since taking to the road, however, Keelan has learned that solar panels are horribly inefficient, particularly those glued to his roof.

"At 8 o'clock in the morning,

yes, it's light outside. But the sun's not even in line with the top of the van yet," he says.

"Once they heat up in the middle of the day, when the sun's on

them, your solar panels are de-rating. As the sun's moving, going behind trees and stuff, they're as good as boobs on a bull."

Panels also suffer from an allergy to dust, fine particles of solid matter that will likely become more common when aridity increases, as the expertocracy tells us it will.

Keelan's gem of wisdom number four is that grids that rely on renewable energy must be massively overbuilt. The installed capacity must be many times greater than the actual demand to make up for everything from variations in the weather to our feathered friends' poor sanitation practices.

"A rogue pigeon that's just had a big night out on the Indian curries and lays a fat shit across the roof" is no laughing matter, says Keelan. "You're gonna get like two amps less off every panel."

Keelan's back-of-the-envelope calculation is that you need between 2½ and three times more panels than the specs on the box would suggest, which means his system requires 1200 kilowatts of nameplate solar capacity.

It was here that Keelan encountered the limitations of his roof real estate. His caravan would only accommodate 1050kW of solar panels, so he has to supplement rooftop power with a 300kW portable solar blanket.

Lesson five is that the availability of land restricts the capacity of solar generation.

The upper limit is reached quickly by a couple in a caravan. It takes longer if you're the federal Energy Minister in league with state governments, which draw circles on the map and call them renewable energy zones. Yet the limitations are no less real and are manifest in the growing community opposition to renewable en-

ergy plants and transmission lines.

Lesson six is that renewable energy is restricted by the pile of available capital, which, in Keelan's case, is smaller than that of the government. Either way, it is money that could be spent on other things and makes nonsense of Bowen's claim that wind and solar are free.

But what would Keelan know? What can the experts at AEMO learn from a random bloke with a Grade 3 certificate who opens his videos with the friendly greeting, "G'day turkeys"?

The mundane information Keelan imparts is valuable to some, but is it knowledge? The expertocracy imagines that knowledge falls in a hierarchical order, with the fruits of their own higher learning somewhere near the top.

Yet as Thomas Sowell unpacks in his recent book, Social Justice Fallacies, the hierarchical theory of knowledge is a self-serving fallacy promoted by the expertocracy to make themselves important.

The critical distinction is between higher knowledge and consequential knowledge, knowledge affecting decisions with meaningful consequences in people's lives. Good public policy requires both.

When energy policy is set without an engineer in the room, you end up where we are now: at the mercy of experts unable to distinguish between the theoretically possible (green hydrogen, for example) and the technically infeasible (green hydrogen).

If the minister can find 10 minutes, entering "Sarah and Keelan Travels" and "YouTube" into his search engine will give him a taste of the advice he seems not to be receiving.

Nick Cater is a senior fellow at the Menzies Research Centre.

PETER WERTHEIM

Politicians fail to grasp 'new reality' of anti-Semitism

There is something in Australia's down-to-earth culture that looks with suspicion, even derision, upon fanaticism of any kind.

Anti-Semitism, although not a new phenomenon in Australia, is rightly seen as a pathological obsession of ideologies of the extreme political right and left, and of religious extremists reflecting the worst of their faith traditions.

Since the 1960s racism generally, and anti-Semitism in particular, have been seen as shameful and socially unacceptable. Yet anti-Semitism is a light sleeper. It remains as deeply entrenched in Middle Eastern cultures as it once was in Western culture, and is infinitely adaptable.

A shared hatred of the values of Western liberal-democratic society has brought together an unlikely alliance of Western "progressives" and Islamist extremists. The first group is, for the most part, anti-religious and supportive of gender and sexual diversity. It would most likely not survive if the second group achieved its avowed aim of establishing a theocratic dictatorship. The two groups have fictionalised history into a Manichean struggle between oppressors and the oppressed, colonialists and anti-colonialists, white Europeans and people of colour.

Israel does not fit this picture. Jewish people, once vilified as Middle Eastern "Semites" who were seen as alien and a threat to European societies, have now been recast as white European colonial oppressors. Never mind that the Jews have an unbroken 3500-year history in the land they have supposedly "colonised", or that most Jewish Israelis are of non-European background.

On the basis of this fiction, a new social licence has been manufactured for anti-Semitism. On social media, in the arts and culture

sector, and in academia, Jews are now routinely vilified.

In their maniacal determination to maintain the idea that the babies, children, the elderly and other victims of Hamas's murders, rapes, mutilation and torture on October 7 were "oppressors", anti-Israel groups and individuals began to mobilise politically within hours of the atrocities, targeting Jews around the world, even before Israel began to respond.

As early as October 8, a Muslim cleric in Lakemba, Sydney told a crowd celebrating the Hamas atrocities, "I'm smiling and I'm happy. I'm elated".

The Jewish community itself has been left with no alternative but to take legal action – and we will

On October 9, at a rally held by anti-Israel Muslims and left-wingers at the Sydney Opera House, numerous witnesses have attested that they heard protesters chant "F.k the Jews" and "Gas the Jews" as they burnt an Israeli flag.

Anti-Israel protesters even confronted and verbally abused family members of Israeli hostages in their hotel in Melbourne while they were on a tour in Australia.

As the Executive Council of Australian Jewry subsequently reported, the Australian Jewish community faced a massive 738 per cent increase in the number of anti-Semitic incidents in October and November 2023 compared to the same two months in 2022.

One can discern a direct correlation between the peddling of in-

flammatory falsehoods about Israel and the Jewish people to large, gullible audiences, and the number and severity of attacks on Jewish Australians and Jewish institutions.

Most recently, at mosques and prayer rooms in Sydney, self-described Islamic preachers have been recorded whipping up their followers with descriptions of Jews as "monsters" and "descendants of pigs and monkeys", "vengeful people" who "loved to shed blood".

The hate preaching stokes division, animosity and ultimately violence between different parts of society. It needs to be confronted and stopped now before the damage it has done to social cohesion becomes irreparable. There are multiple ethnic and faith communities in Australia and the last thing we need is for our peaceful and tolerant society to be ruined by the importation into Australia of the hatreds and violence of overseas conflicts.

However, federal, state and territory governments have struggled to adapt to the new reality. Laws that were assumed to protect us from incitement to violence or vilification on the basis of race and religion have been shown to be unfit for purpose or, alternatively, no attempt has been made to enforce them due to a weakness of will by the authorities.

So the Jewish community itself has been left with no alternative but to take legal action – and we will. Somebody has to stand up to the hatemongers.

Yet it is troubling that in a country such as Australia any citizen should need to expend vast quantities of money, time and effort to take private legal action to remedy a public wrong.

Governments have the primary responsibility of maintaining peace and security in the community by taking decisive action to stop anyone seeking to set Australian against Australian. It should not be left to vulnerable individuals and groups to have to fend for themselves.

This is not just a concern for the Jewish community. We are society's litmus test. If Jews are not free to go about their daily lives with a sense of safety and security, then ultimately no citizen is safe.

Peter Wertheim is co-chief executive of the Executive Council of Australian Jewry.

DIMITRI BURSHTEN

Canberra drives us on long, slow road to economic ruin

The arc of Australia's economic ruin is long, but bends towards Canberra. Absent a major shock, destroying an otherwise vibrant economy is a slow process.

Like boiling a frog, the cumulative effects of ever-increasing taxes, government spending and regulations will eventually lead to economic atrophy. Shortly after the turn of the millennium, Australian governments commenced steering the national economy away from prosperity and towards penury through ever-increasing planning and control.

In the 20 years to 2002, a period that included two significant recessions, commonwealth government spending as a proportion of GDP averaged 24.2 per cent. A fiscal highlight of this period was the 22.9 per cent of GDP recorded in 1989 following the actions of then treasurer Paul Keating and finance minister Peter Walsh.

Over the following 20 years to 2022, commonwealth government spending averaged 25.2 per cent of GDP (24.8 per cent excluding the two Covid years). However, to underline Australia's declining fiscal trajectory, in the five budget years to 2027, commonwealth government spending is forecast to average a whopping 26.2 per cent of GDP. This is for a period with expected near full employment, and before any yet to be announced election or other spending boondoggles. The difference between 22.9 per cent of GDP and 26.2 per cent equates to an additional \$66bn of annual government spending.

Every additional basis point of government spending is another brick in Australia's road to economic ruin. Government continues to expand but results continue to stagnate and regress. Lest there be doubt, in the 20 years to 2022, real per capita government spending increased by more than 50 per cent but there is no sign that education, health or national security outcomes are any better.

Australia's economic problems are not just the consequence of

ever-increasing government spending and taxing. According to the Australian Law Reform Commission, the Commonwealth Statute Book, the record of all commonwealth legislation, is longer than 280,000 pages. This includes some 50,000 pages of corporations and financial services laws, regulations and other legislative instruments enacted in the 10 years to 2021. Consider the challenges in establishing and operating a business under such an asphyxiating and ever-changing regulatory regime.

A large contributor to Australia's economic problems comes from the long-perpetuated myth that government is a benevolent actor pursuing the public good. In 1986, James Buchanan won the Nobel Prize in economics for his public choice theory. Buchanan's theory challenged the notion of governmental benevolence and emphasised that all individuals, whether in the public or private sector, act in their own self-interest and are driven by personal motives and incentives to maximise their own personal positions.

Politicians and government econocrats love to speak of the need for intervention when there is market failure but never seem to propose retreat when there is government failure.

Government and the groups that feed off it have an interest in maximising the size and scope of activities, and in creating and not solving social problems. Solving problems means fewer jobs and resources within the bureaucratic and political industrial complex. The paradox is that, in government, failure rather than success is rewarded. With increased budgets, headcounts and powers.

The treasure and power that continues to accrete in Canberra has come at the expense of the rest of the nation.

The disconnect between Canberra and the rest of Australia was recently highlighted through the voice referendum, where the only jurisdiction voting majority in sup-

port was the Australian Capital Territory, where well over 50 per cent of the working population are direct employees of government.

While it may be easy, it is not entirely fair to blame our elected and bureaucratic class for this accelerating malaise. On this, Australians are volunteers and not victims, continually electing and rewarding public policy irresponsibility and economic vandalism.

Modern economic history has repeatedly shown that competitive tax rates, limited regulation, and restrained government spending are preconditions for prosperity. Yet, based on the flawed logic that any problem can be resolved through a tax, subsidy, law, or regulation, governments have continued to throw sand into Australia's economic engine. And when the engine starts to sputter, delivering inflation and a slowing economy, the electoral incentive is for even more sand to be thrown.

In response to inflation caused in large part by government handouts, the Albanese government has proposed to offer cost-of-living government handouts.

Karl Marx once described religion as the "opium of the masses". Unfortunately, in modern Australia, government spending and regulation is the opiate, offering nirvana but delivering addiction and indolence.

Argentina offers a sobering lesson for Australia. In the early 20th century, Argentina was one of the wealthiest nations in the world; its economy buoyed by strong commodity exports. Nevertheless, Argentina experienced multiple periods of economic mismanagement involving fiscal irresponsibility, excessive government interventions, and ultimately inflation. When the Argentine government was about to default on its sovereign debt in 2008, its government confiscated the private retirement (superannuation) savings of Argentines.

In 2012, while channelling Michael Douglas, Anthony Albanese told a National Press Club audience: "In Australia we have serious challenges to solve and we need serious people to solve them." These serious challenges are even more evident today than they were in 2012. However, what is at question is not whether Australia has the serious people to solve problems but rather can serious people ever be elected to high office.

Dimitri Burshten is a principal at Eminence Advisory and a former government policy analyst.

MARK HARRISON

Historic Taiwanese vote to cast ripples across the globe

This weekend Taiwanese voters go to the polls to elect a new president and legislature.

President Tsai Ing-wen, of the Democratic Progressive Party, is stepping down after her constitutionally limited two terms, so voters will choose from incumbent Vice-President Lai Ching-te, Hou Yu-yih, from the KMT, or the third candidate, Ko Wen-je, of the Taiwan People's Party.

Much of the campaign has been fought over issues familiar in Australia, including housing affordability, low wage growth and gender politics. The candidates' property investments have been a notable negative campaign issue.

Relations with China have also been critical in the election, as always. There are important differences between the candidates in policy and rhetoric towards China. However, with a consensus in the electorate that rejects Beijing's non-negotiable position of unification under the One

Country Two Systems formula, they have limited room to manoeuvre if they want to get elected.

There are common political themes with Australia, but the intensity of Taiwanese democracy is on a different level. The parties hold huge rallies in the weeks before the vote that are choreographed like rock concerts, with tens of thousands of supporters.

Campaign trucks with loudspeakers drive around the cities and there is a relentless pace of local campaign events for the legislative candidates. The televised candidate debates run for over two hours, followed by hours of commentary.

This intensity comes partly from history. The long struggle for democracy through the 20th century, beginning during the Japanese colonial period in the 1920s and through the authoritarian era to the 1980s, means the Taiwanese see democracy as a trans-

formative modernising force. It also creates a deep well of symbolism and rhetorical styles that energise the democratic process. The DPP is fond of baseball references as an upbeat way to tell the story of modern Taiwan. The KMT sometimes uses the legacy of Chiang Wei-shui, the Japanese colonial-era democracy activist, to balance its historical legacy in China. All parties use food and temple culture in their campaigns.

Also, in a stark difference to China, Taiwanese politicians use the range of Taiwan's spoken languages and their full expressive potential to persuade and mobilise the electorate in stump speeches and interviews.

The KMT's Hou Yu-yih will slip, seemingly inadvertently, between Mandarin Chinese and Taiwanese, sometimes in the same sentence. China's leadership in contrast, uses language – only ever Mandarin Chinese – to assert unchallenged power.

The intensity of Taiwan's democracy is also at stake. Beijing threatens Taiwan militarily and constantly issues statements about the inevitability of what it calls "reunification". The Taiwanese understand this outcome means the destruction of the political, social and cultural institutions they have built over decades in the name of Taiwan.

It would not be right to say the complexity of Taiwanese politics and society is not understood in Australia. Australian media out-

lets relocating correspondents to Taipei instead of Beijing after 2020, including this masthead, has ushered in a golden era of outstanding reporting of Taiwan, as good as any in the world, by Australian journalists from across the media landscape.

Taiwan's style of democracy is well-established but Canberra still needs to build familiarity with Taiwan to understand a different tone to its politics under a new president

Australian policymakers, politicians and policy analysts, however, are generally behind the media. Although there are parts of the policy apparatus in defence and foreign affairs, and individuals in the major parties with deep Taiwan knowledge, there is a tendency in policymaking and public life to see Taiwan as a proxy for broad themes of great-power politics. Taiwan is treated as an "issue" in the US alliance and China trade, rather than a place with a uniquely complex history and a politics of its own.

There are loud voices in Aus-

tralia's public life who use Taiwan simply to litigate the US alliance. This matters because whatever the election result, it is likely that the notable domestic political quietude of the Tsai Ing-wen era will not continue.

A three-way race will produce a less unequivocal winner compared to 2020 and the new make-up of the legislature will mean critical decisions by the government around defence, energy and international relations might be shaped by domestic politics in ways that may be easy for external observers to misinterpret.

This means Canberra must be proactive in finding opportunities to let Taipei explain domestic political developments. So too must Canberra listen to diverse voices on Taiwan – the Taiwanese-Australian community, Tokyo as well as Washington and Beijing, and Taiwanese people outside Taipei. Taiwan's style of democracy is well-established but Canberra still needs to build familiarity with Taiwan to understand a different tone to its politics under a new president.

The regional security outlook is deteriorating, and so strengthening our own national capacity to respond with agility, nuance and assuredness to events in Taiwan and in the Taiwan Strait is more important than ever.

Mark Harrison is senior lecturer in Chinese studies at the University of Tasmania.