

Why Barnaby's war on net zero's already sunk

By [Nick O'Malley](#)

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The abiding image of the first day of the new parliament will not be the horde of new Labor MPs spilling into the depleted opposition benches, nor of Sussan Ley asking her first question as the first female Liberal leader.

It will be of a Barnaby Joyce sideshow in a parliamentary corridor in which he [announced](#) he would introduce a private member's bill to dump Australia's goal to reach net zero by 2050. Joyce and his former political foe Michael McCormack had apparently arrived in Canberra having cooked up a plan to carve up the spoils of the Coalition's comprehensive election loss.

"This is a hell of a crowd," Joyce chirped as he lobbed up to the press pack he had gathered. He gave three main reasons for dumping the target, all of which are wrong.

First, he said, net zero and the deployment of renewable energy infrastructure are to blame for the rise in Australia's electricity prices over recent years. Nonsense, says [Tony Wood](#), energy and climate change senior fellow at the Grattan Institute.

Energy prices surged in the first years of the 2020s because Australia's clapped-out fleet of coal-fired power stations kept on failing, Wood explains. In central Queensland, a unit of the Callide power station [blew up](#) in May 2021, causing an immediate loss of power to half a million people and prolonged shortages across the east coast. In June, [flooding in the Latrobe Valley](#) saw power production cut at the Yallourn power station, causing more long-term east coast shortages. The nearby Hazelwood plant had closed a few years earlier after a fire.

Across the grid, the operators of coal power stations stepped up their maintenance schedules, decreasing supply and increasing cost. With coal-generated electricity scarce, gas was tapped as a replacement at prices driven up by a global shortage caused by Putin's invasion of Ukraine, in turn inflating household electricity bills. Australia is in the process of replacing these coal plants with renewables – backed by gas, hydro and batteries – not just to reach net zero, but because wind and solar power are now far cheaper than coal power.

Second, Joyce says most of the world has abandoned the effort to reach net zero under the Paris Agreement, citing as examples countries including China, Brazil, Indonesia and the United States. Nonsense, says [Tim Buckley](#), director of Climate Energy Finance.

China's staggering deployment of renewable energy continues to shock analysts around the world, Buckley says.

Renewables in China are not only meeting the soaring demand for new power, but displacing fossil fuels and cutting China's emissions. According to an analysis by Lauri Myllyvirta from the Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air and senior fellow at Asia Society Policy Institute, [published in May in Carbon Brief](#), emissions in China were down 1.6 per cent year-on-year in the first quarter of 2025, due to a 5.8 per cent drop in the power sector.

"While power demand grew by 2.5 per cent overall, there was a 4.7 per cent drop in thermal power generation – mainly coal and gas."

In fact, China's renewables surge is so rapid and vast that it is not only cutting its own emissions, it is exporting emission cuts. In 2024, Chinese factories emitted 110 million tonnes of greenhouse gases in the manufacture of solar panels, batteries, EVs and wind turbines for export.

But once installed around the world, that technology will see 220 million tonnes of emissions avoided per year over their lifetimes, another *Carbon Brief* analysis shows. "Such exports in 2024 alone are already shaving 1 per cent off global emissions outside of China and, in total, will avoid some 4 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide (GtCO₂) over the lifetimes of the products."

One of the importers of this clean technology is Indonesia, Buckley notes. Earlier this month a Chinese-Indonesian consortium announced the construction of a \$US6 billion battery factory to be built by the Chinese battery firm CATL in Indonesia to, in the words of a press release, "accelerate e-mobility and energy transition efforts in Indonesia and the world".

And far from abandoning the Paris Agreement efforts, Brazil is hosting this year's United Nations climate negotiations in November. Unlike Australia, Brazil has announced its 2035 emissions-reduction target under the Paris treaty, declaring it will pursue cuts of between 59 per cent and 67 per cent compared with 2005 levels.

Joyce's claim about the US holds more water. He is in lockstep with Donald Trump on net zero, and [America's withdrawal from the Paris Agreement is a catastrophe for the US and for the world](#).

But it is not the whole story.

States like California (which has the world's fourth-largest economy) and New York (the eighth-largest) will continue their efforts to cut emissions. Even Texas is surging in renewables deployment, with four times more wind power than California.

Late last year the Australian industry publication [Beef Central](#), which can surely count Joyce as a fan, reported that in the West Texas region, the wind industry is sustaining new engineering and services businesses.

"So how did West Texas landholders like John Davis, who have no particular 'green' agenda and love drilling for oil and gas, end up with a footprint in renewables?" asked Beef Central.

“Much like inland Australia, we have a lot of wind, sun and land,” was Davis’ response. “For us, it was about how we could utilise those three resources to derive an income. And remember – we’d been using renewables [in the form of windmills to pump stock water] for generations.”

Joyce’s final argument – that there is real opposition to the deployment of renewables in the communities the Nationals represent – is his fairest, but even here the numbers don’t stack up.

Research conducted last year by Rebecca Huntley of the consultancy 89 Degrees East for the advocacy group Farmers for Climate Action [found in a survey](#) of 1000 respondents that 70 per cent of residents of regional Renewable Energy Zones supported renewables, with 33 per cent saying they strongly supported them. Just 17 per cent were opposed, with 8 per cent saying they were strongly opposed.

Opposition to wind turbines and transmission lines might be fair, and it might even be passionate, but it is far from a majority-held view. In the face of an existential threat, it is hardly a reason to abandon climate action. Rather than opposing renewable infrastructure, Joyce would serve his community better by ensuring it is deployed well.

Asked for his views on Joyce’s ebullient intervention on Wednesday, Nationals leader David Littleproud said he would wait for the internal party review on the net zero policy that he had asked Senator Matt Canavan to conduct. Canavan is, of course, an old ally of Joyce’s, and his views on climate change are well known. Asking him to review net zero policy brings to mind that old line from Sheriff Cobb in the movie *Silverado*: “We’re gonna give you a fair trial, followed by a first-class hanging.”

While the world is not moving fast enough on climate change, which is hitting harder and sooner than expected, the US remains the only country to have abandoned the Paris Agreement.

<https://www.smh.com.au/environment/climate-change/why-barnaby-s-war-on-net-zero-s-already-sunk-20250725-p5mhts.html>