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# Are our leaders asking too much of Australia's democracy?

By Chris Hubbard  
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Leadership in any field or context is an amorphous and plastic concept at best, and an inherently dangerous one when used or abused by those with the fierce eyes and minds of the true believer. So it is with increasing numbers of individuals and groups in Australia who seek not to lead but to direct public debates and conversations in important, sometimes crucial areas of national life and policy.

As they do so, the scouring and debilitating effects of their efforts on the national marketplace for ideas are becoming increasingly clear, and a cause for significant concern among adherents and defenders of Australia's durable, stable, liberal and plural democracy.

As the need for increasingly complex, often science-based, explanations of (and thus solutions to) phenomena such as changing climate patterns and their effects presses in on the national psyche, busy or distracted Australians will often prefer to deal with that pressure by turning away. Rather than face discomfoting predictions of a life less and less worth the living, some inevitably react by brushing the future away.

Others are not so inclined - if not for their own sake then for that of their children and the broader community. Many of these engaged and concerned people will make at least some effort to find out just what it is that is causing so much angst, and consuming so much of the lives of so many scientists, politicians, media pundits and journalists, policy activists, attention-seekers and governments.

This outcome is nowhere more apparent than for those – both with and without relevant knowledge and skill but with abundant hunger for knowledge - who sincerely and urgently feel the need to understand how Australia must reset its energy policy patterns and vectors in order to establish a relatively seamless and environmentally sustainable pathway towards its future flourishing.

People of this stripe are likely to look for themselves in many public places – for example, in on-line journal databases, or the web sites of myriad organisations at home and beyond - for a wide range of complementary or alternative explanations or accounts of what seems to be happening in the world around them, and ultimately to themselves and their families.

They intend by this exercise to gather together sufficient information and analysis, with the qualities they value and deem necessary to allow them to make up their own minds. In essence, to think for themselves. Along the way, they will see no reason to ignore those sources of data and their interpretation, which occupy the extremities of opinion and advocacy on both ends of the policy continuum.

The unfortunate reality, however, is that many prospectors for information and understanding which is broad in scope, even handed and honest, clearly expressed and carefully balanced, will promptly discover that explanations and solutions which have a fighting chance of satisfying *that* kind of search are noticeably thin on the ground.

I am not talking here only about stories told of the future, which have been generated by specific individuals, groups, interests or points of view. I am pointing to accounts of Australia's fate with several quite distinct and necessary qualities or characteristics. Such people - and especially those with curiosity, vigour and persistence – who are determined to build for themselves a vision and view of the world as it truly is (at least for them) will seek out data and its analysis, interpretation and application to real world cases that, ideally, are scientifically-based, rigorous and reliable (being peer-reviewed) as well as intellectually independent, analytically balanced, apolitical, intellectually honest and, above all, usable.

One immediate reaction to such a startling lack of coherent public debate in vital areas of Australia's national life and future ought to be to ask: "Have our leaders failed us?" Why is debate and discussion about *what to do* in these crucial issues limited to the usual suspects – the government and its internal and external advisors, the Opposition parties, the senior departmental mandarins and policy experts, and those with a material or ideological investment in a particular outcome? In other words, to those who speak loudly and carry big sticks.

A first response in Australia to this kind of question might be: "Because most people are not interested in this kind of thing" or "why *not* just leave it to the government to sort this out? – That's their job." Another initial reaction will increasingly be along the lines: "I don't know enough about this issue to hold an opinion, and I don't know how to find out." This is the reality behind the corrosive effects of allowing national conversations about policy choices to fall silent by quarantining its life-blood. Understanding born of knowledge, leads to empowerment.

As a direct result, pent-up demand for reliable and usable analysis of the full extent of national choice is stymied and denied, while interested generalists with concerns for their country's future become increasingly and cynically disengaged from participation in important national policy debates.

In the field of environmentally sustainable energy policy, these trends and outcomes are present in the near-invisibility of nuclear energy within the field of policy choice in planning Australia's economic future. It is not an informed, majoritarian rejection or acceptance of the nuclear generation of electricity as a plausible element of the mix of energy sources available to power Australia's economic growth. Australians are effectively being required to eliminate this low carbon, base load source - not from its Australian application, but from the policy discussion itself. If Australian democracy is in fact sufficiently robust to withstand pressures of this stamp, it may still be dangerous to test its limits in this way.

Where to from here? Surely the only coherent response is to offer to those whose needs are not being met the kind of information, interpretation and understanding they are looking for.

In other words, for a policy position based on the qualities discussed earlier, and one whose value lies in its capacity to form a sounding board for their own, carefully thought through, opinions. This involves the need to convince those people who feel unable to take a position on the information available that alternatives clearly can, and do, exist. They no longer need to rely on unreliable evidence, which has been created by agents of all kinds in their own causes. No longer do they need to accept, in the absence of other possibilities, the worldviews and advocacy of those who *know*, brooking no argument or dissent, that their position is inarguably the correct and only one.

On the contrary, the alternative to the domination of extreme positions based on interests and ideologies is one based on evidence, which is itself founded on scientific method and rational argument. Only with the clarity of reason and the cogency of evidence, which clears away preference and partiality can independently peer-rated scholarship, replicable physical outcomes and the balanced application of findings to cases provide a true touchstone for national policy leadership in Australia.

To quote John Stuart Mill: "We can never be sure that the opinion we are endeavouring to stifle is a false opinion; and even if we were sure, stifling it would be an evil still."

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