

Waterfront warrior John Coombs sails against wind

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Former maritime union secretary John Coombs on his property at Crookwell on the NSW southern tablelands. Picture: Vanessa Hunter *Source: The Australian*

JOHN Coombs, the former maritime union heavyweight who refused to let radioactive waste cross the nation's docks, has experienced a change of heart.

He reckons it's time Australia went nuclear. And that's the message he wants to send to the man who stood beside him during the waterfront dispute - former ACTU secretary, now Climate Change Minister, Greg Combet.

His conversion is part of a new world of climate change politics, in which unlikely alliances are being formed and long-held positions being revised.

Mr Coombs, long retired as national secretary of the Maritime Union of Australia, now finds himself in the same camp as ABC chairman and former Australian Securities Exchange chair Maurice Newman.

Both own property at Crookwell on the NSW southern tablelands, a couple of hours southwest of Sydney. And both have serious doubts about the wisdom of a planned explosion of wind-power developments in the area. "There is a view that wind power will turn out to be

for electricity generation what the Zeppelin was for air transportation," Mr Newman said. "It looked promising but was not the answer."

The concerns expressed by Mr Coombs and Mr Newman mirror doubts being expressed in South Australia and southwest Victoria about the cost, efficiency, social impacts and health effects of the new-generation wind turbines that cost more than \$2 million each and are as tall as a 45-storey building with blades that take up more than 1ha of sky and create enough turbulence to tear apart any bird that strays too close. Since Australia's first large-scale wind turbine was installed at Breamlea, near Geelong in Victoria, in 1987, more than 1000 have sprung up in wind farms built in every state, with almost half in South Australia. Together they generate about 1.5 per cent of the nation's electricity needs - enough to power 770,000 homes. But there are plans for a multi-billion-dollar, 10-fold increase in the amount of power generated from wind as the federal government pursues a target of generating 20 per cent of our power needs from renewable resources by 2020 as part of its carbon reduction plans. It is estimated that about 40 per cent of the renewable energy target will come from wind.

Yet there is a growing tide of concern that Australia is tying too much of its energy future on a technology that is less efficient, less carbon-friendly and ultimately more expensive for consumers than alternative electricity sources, such as natural gas, coal-fired power with carbon capture and storage technology and nuclear.

Then there are the side-effects of wind turbines - their visual impact, the way they divide rural neighbours when a farm springs up on one property, their effect on wildlife and, potentially, on the health of nearby communities.

Family First senator Steve Fielding has established a Senate inquiry to investigate the health impacts of living near windmills, including concerns over noise and vibrations and the effect of rural wind farms on property values.

Submissions are rolling in and calls are growing for a re-evaluation of nuclear energy.

In Canberra this week, International Energy Agency executive director Nobuo Tanaka said it would be "very difficult" for Australia to meet its target of a 60 per cent cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2050 if its gamble on carbon capture and storage - the burial of carbon emissions in deep underground reservoirs - failed and it did not have nuclear power as a back-up. His comments came as a review of international studies, published by Australian researchers in the journal *Energy*, identified nuclear energy as the cheapest technology to help tackle global warming.

With the billions of dollars earmarked for wind power, which costs more than twice as much as electricity from coal or gas, Mr Coombs said the sensible thing was to consider nuclear energy.

"Of course if you were to mention me (politicians) could say, 'That bloke fought against nuclear waste going out of this country for 20 years', and I did.

"For 20 years I . . . stopped any ship coming in to pick (nuclear waste) up because we refused to let it go to Third World countries.

"Politically, a lot of members were opposed to nuclear energy but it was a long time ago and I gave up the fight . . . to try to stop the use of nuclear power in this country. Of course nuclear power is a reasonable thing to consider."