

“*Speaking truth to power*” is a phrase we all know but rarely see. Sure there are plenty of people, students and others, who think they are doing it as part of anonymous mobs. But that misses the essential point – being outspoken where it requires real courage because of personal risks to those who speak the truth.

The debate about the application of wind power and its injurious effects is marked by asymmetry. On one side, espousing industrial wind complexes and dishonestly claiming safety, are governments (both politicians and officials), developers, manufacturers and consultants, and their media and other enablers. Most of these people have well paid jobs dependent on using the coercive power of government to extract money from electricity consumers. Some are getting genuinely rich in the process. Because they hunt in a pack that unites the power of government with the power of big, self-interested money, and powerful media friends, their actions require no courage.

On the other side we see individuals, without those resources, willing to speak out against the harm they see inflicted on fellow Australians. These exponents of the truth are few in number. They have little financial resource. They are usually unpaid for their efforts and they know they will be personally attacked and vilified by entrenched interests for bringing the truth to light. It takes courage to do this.

Why is government, and often professional bodies, allied with those doing harm for financial gain? As Australians we want to believe in government as a force for good, not evil. When we see the latter it is natural to think of corruption because sadly our country, like most, has seen plenty of examples.

But there are other reasons, often shallower and still disreputable. One of the doyens of economics, John Maynard Keynes wrote “A sound banker, alas, is not one who foresees danger and avoids it, but one who, when he is ruined, is ruined in a conventional way along with his fellows, so that no one can really blame him.” This can just as easily be applied to politicians and public servants who have collectively accepted some dogma – not because it is right but because it has somehow become the conventional wisdom among their colleagues and therefore they can’t personally be blamed for the outcome.

Then, as Upton Sinclair wrote “It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding”. There are a great many government officials, managers in wind power enterprises and media specialists whose salary depends on not understanding the harm being done by industrial wind power complexes. And they do a very good job of being blind to the obvious.

These effects are amplified in the advice given to US Senator Elizabeth Warren by Larry Summers, then top economic adviser to President Obama and former US Secretary of the Treasury and President of Harvard University: “Outsiders can say whatever they want. But people on the inside don’t listen to them. Insiders, however, get lots of access and a chance to push their ideas. People — powerful people — listen to what they have to say. ***But insiders also understand one unbreakable rule: They don’t criticize other insiders.***”

How many of our insiders in bodies like the NHMRC, AMA and various government departments are following the Summers’ rule?

Central to all of these is the lack of courage to seek what is right and do what is right, subjugating that to self-interest. The kiss of death from Humphrey Appleby to any unwanted proposal from his Minister was always “That’s a very courageous decision, Minister.”

Our country celebrates courage when it recognises it. In 1996, most Australians watched a truly heroic swim by Kieren Perkins to win gold in the 1500 metres at the Atlanta Olympics. Perkins had been the slowest qualifier for the finals. He had been beset by illness and self-doubt heading into that race. Fast paced, long distance swimming involves extreme pain as lactic acid builds up in the muscles. Perkins had the courage to fight against those odds and prevail – and we recognised him for it.

But it is not the winning that determines heroism. As Gordon Lightfoot poignantly sang, “heroes often fail”. Heroism includes the courage to choose a path that has great personal risk or pain, knowing failure is a real possibility, and pursue it nonetheless.

Courage is not confined to sports or the battlefield or fighting for justice. Over the years I have occasionally seen it in business. For instance managers persisting in changing an industry to do right by customers despite death threats. Or a CEO making decisions he believes right but contrary to market and other influential opinion and where the large and uncertain outcome, if bad, definitely would be career destroying.

There are courageous acts – and there are lives lived courageously, which is often harder. One of Australia’s greatest heroes is John Simpson who, with his donkey, ferried to safety soldiers wounded at Gallipoli. He did that, unprotected, knowing any moment might be his last – until ultimately it was. His was not a brief period of courage propelled by adrenaline. For more than three weeks he lived with the greatest courage to help others.

In Australia today we have people living courageous lives, as did many of our forbears. Sometimes they are living courageously and without complaint with great pain and with illness that will bring their lives to an early end. Sometimes they are carers who have committed to years in debilitating circumstances to provide comfort and help to the afflicted.

And sometimes individuals step forward to fight, on behalf of other people and the community, evil being done by powerful interests throughout our country. They don’t have government on their side. Often it is arrayed against them, having sided with monied interests.

The Waubra Foundation and, in particular, Sarah Laurie and Peter Mitchell, are clear examples of living courageous lives *speaking truth to power*. They have been personally vilified for their stand, subject to harassment including the use of government agencies, their lives battered. Still they fight on.

So why did I join the Waubra Foundation?

*When you are asked for help by people who are acting heroically,
how can you turn away and then live with yourself?*

Dr Michael Crawford