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Energy efficiency matters: an interview with Alan Pears

Mary-Lou Considine

Alan Pears is a pioneer of energy-efficiency policy in Australia, having worked in the area since the late 1970s.



Credit: Alan Pears

In the 1980s, while working for the Victorian Government, Alan helped develop and implement the Home Energy Advisory Service, energy star-rating labels for appliances and mandatory building insulation regulations. Since 1991, he has worked as an environmental consultant, involved in building energy and environmental rating and regulation, green building projects and green appliance development. He is an Adjunct Professor at RMIT, teaches part-time in Global Studies, Social Science & Planning, and writes a regular column for [ReNew](#). Alan was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in 2009.

How did you first become involved in energy efficiency?

In the 1970s, I studied engineering, and then did a diploma of education. This was just after the [1973] global oil crisis, so I was interested in teaching my students a bit about solar energy and became involved in the alternative education/community development area.

In 1976–77, I was approached by some people who wanted me to write about how activities like community gardens and co-ops were already helping to reduce transport energy use and other forms of energy use. That book became *Seeds for Change*, which was published in 1978.

My involvement in the book helped me recognise that minimising the amount of energy you needed to use was the starting point with energy, and that holistic, community-based approaches were really important.

There was quite a lot of interest in the late '70s–early '80s, but since then, energy efficiency has gone in and out of

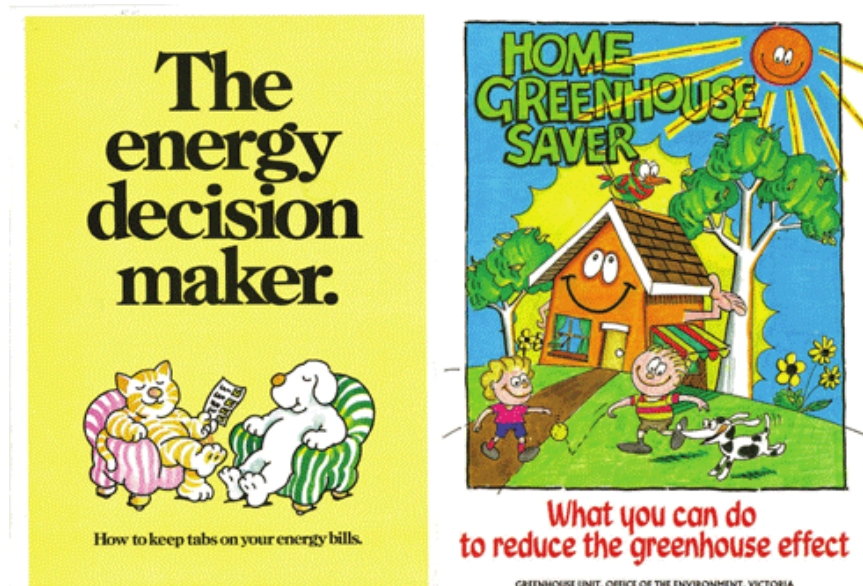
fashion. It's been a difficult space to work in over the long term.

Can you talk about the early days of energy efficiency policy in Australia?

In the early '80s, it was really booming. After working on the book, my first job in the area was running Melbourne's Energy Information Centre. This was initially run by the Victorian Gas and Fuel Corporation, but shifted across to the State Energy Department under the Cain Labor Government.

Through the information centre, we organised low-energy display homes, annual energy festivals at Moomba, and an energy caravan that used to travel around Victoria. The level of interest from the community was phenomenal.

The Energy Information Centre was an example of the Gas and Fuel Corporation's broad focus on energy efficiency. The corporation was selling home insulation that you could pay off on your gas bill from 1976. It had an industrial energy-efficiency centre that was pretty effective and also ran things like low-energy house design competitions. They were way ahead of everyone else at the time.



Credit: Alan Pears

Another thing that happened in the early '80s was a shortage of electricity in New South Wales. Helen Wellings, now the senior consumer affairs reporter from *Today Tonight*, was the face of a successful New South Wales government energy-efficiency campaign in the early '80s that cut electricity consumption by about seven per cent. No-one remembers any of these things, because no-one has written a history about it.

By the mid '80s, energy efficiency was swamped by the desire to use output from the power stations that state governments were building in response to power shortages, declining energy prices, the resources boom and the focus on energy-intensive industry, such as aluminium smelters.

The nail was really put into the coffin in the late '80s–early '90s with energy market reform, where the energy supply sector totally controlled the agenda and energy efficiency was pushed to one side.

People don't realise this, but in 1992, the State Electricity Commission of Victoria (SECV) published a formal report that showed how they could cut Victoria's CO₂ emissions by 20 per cent from 1988 levels by 2005, and they could do it cost-effectively by a combination of energy efficiency and renewable energy. This initiative was shut down as part of the energy market reform and privatisation process.

So the reality is the resurgence in energy efficiency that we're seeing now is a recovery from where we got to by the early 1990s. Over the last 20 years, Australia moved from being a reasonably high-profile energy efficiency performer to losing the plot altogether.

It's fair to say that energy-efficiency policy in Australia and most climate change policy have been driven by the grass roots community – government has been a reluctant follower. That is slowly changing. But that is an embarrassing fact: it's tragic for Australia when you look at where we could have been by now.

Many economic policy makers are what I call energy ‘efficiency sceptics’, because they’ve been educated to believe that we are all always as efficient as it makes sense for us to be, and that business is remarkably efficient in the way it operates. Energy efficiency has been an ignored opportunity. The reality is that energy policy in Australia is so dominated by supply-side thinking that it’s a really big problem for us.

Nevertheless, it’s also an area where there’s a lot of room for creativity. It’s technically challenging and interesting. I’ve been lucky enough to work across the whole spectrum, from writing household booklets to developing websites and greenhouse calculators, giving public talks, and working on big industrial sites and urban planning and transport issues.

What are some of highlights of your career?

The energy star-rating label is the biggest highlight. In the early 1980s, there had been a national process to design an energy label, which some of us thought was pretty awful. We came up with an approach we called a promotional energy label, recognising that it had to work effectively in a showroom context. We borrowed an idea from the Victorian gas industry, which had introduced a gas efficiency tag as a way of promoting more efficient gas appliances.



Credit: Alan Pears

We prepared a proposal for the State Energy Department based on the gas efficiency tag. Within 24 hours, the head of the SECV called the Minister to express his support for electrical appliance labelling, on the condition it bore no resemblance to the gas appliance label.

This is where the energy star-rating label happened. I was going to Sydney and flipping through the list of hotels with their star ratings. So I thought, ‘let’s market energy efficiency as stars.’ It was a bit of an accident!

The success of two other initiatives I’ve been involved with – [NABERS \(the National Australian Built Environment Rating System\)](#) and the [Energy Efficiency Opportunities program for large industries](#) – have also been pleasing.

Are there any encouraging signs you’ve seen over past few years that energy efficiency is here to stay?

The basic infrastructure we have in place for appliance energy efficiency in Australia, with the combination of [appliance energy rating labels and mandatory minimum energy performance standards](#), would score reasonably well by world standards. Given the tiny budget and lack of political support, the people in government have been doing a terrific job.

But, I’m frustrated, because there are more products that should have labels and much faster-moving performance standards.

What challenges face energy-efficiency development and policy over the next few years, given that energy is now

very strongly tied to carbon emissions?

The immediate challenge is to increase allocation of funding and resources to energy-efficiency programs. Many policy people think a carbon price will overcome the need for those kinds of things to happen. The Canberra econocrats say that now we've got carbon pricing, we don't need what they claim are interventionist, complicated, market-distorting programs. That's the biggest threat to energy efficiency at the moment.



Credit: Alan Pears

On the other hand, one of the big improvements in the Australian government's [clean energy package](#) over the original Carbon Pollution Reduction Scheme is that the cross-benchers incorporated reasonable amounts of money to fund complementary programs around the carbon price. So that's the positive: there is some money starting to flow.

One of the other big challenges is to build the capacity of the energy-efficiency sector. That's where it's unfortunate that universities have not been very active in educating and skilling up people in energy efficiency. We're still in the fairly early days of skilling up tradespeople. Our architects are still well behind German architects in terms of understanding energy efficiency and incorporating it into building design. So, there's plenty to do!

Tradespeople, policy makers and program developers don't understand that there is work to do to package all these things so they are easier for people to adopt.

If you go back to the energy label, we could have made it really complicated; but, my point was that you had to be able to walk into a showroom, look at a row of white boxes and identify the best one from a distance, which is why the stars are prominent.

Most Australians have no idea what a kilowatt hour is, let alone a megajoule. So you have to recognise this and say 'we've got a communication opportunity here that is 4 cm x 6 cm on the front of an appliance'. These are the kinds of issues I've always found interesting and challenging.

More information

Climate Spectator, [Alan Pears column](#)

The Conversation, [Australia ignores energy efficiency, burns money](#)

Renew, [Energy efficiency on the agenda](#)

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