EMISSIONS — GAS

Statement

HON DR BRAD PETTITT (South Metropolitan) [6.31 pm]: I will start by talking about the very topical issue of gas. There has been a fair bit of hot air about gas in recent weeks. I want to put some much-needed facts on the record. The arguments that we are hearing now made a lot of sense a decade ago, but in 2023 they no longer do. A decade ago, gas made sense as a transition fuel, but today it is largely corporate spin. There are two reasons for this. A decade ago, we honestly thought that gas was 50 per cent less polluting than coal, but we now know that gas can be as bad as coal for global warming. That has played out through methane leaching a whole bunch of other things. It has been quite clear. A decade ago, we also thought that gas was the cheapest way to make electricity, but we have seen extraordinary drops in the cost of renewable energy over the last decade to become the cheapest form of energy.

This idea that gas is a transition fuel no longer makes sense. In fact, it needs to be transitioned out, and there are a couple of reasons for this. The first is a really big one; that is, it is a fundamental fact of physics that we cannot burn all the gas that fossil fuel companies want us to extract and burn, and also have a safe climate. Those two things are simply not possible; it has to be one or the other. Interestingly again, a decade ago we thought that a two-degree rise in global temperature would give us a safe climate, but the more recent climate change science that we, as a nation, have signed up to with the Paris Agreement, has acknowledged that 1.5 degrees of warming is the maximum allowable to provide a safe future for humanity. The temperature has already risen by one degree, and if we are going to keep it to under a 1.5-degree rise, we need to seriously reduce the amount of fossil fuels that we burn.

Despite this, and unfortunately, we have seen continuing claims over recent weeks by fossil fuel executives, the Western Australia Premier and government ministers that a major expansion of gas will be an essential part of the clean energy transition. Yes, some fossil fuel gas will be required, but it will be in declining amounts if we are to get the clean energy transition right. This is actually a good thing, because the cheapest form of new energy is now renewable energy. Solar photovoltaic technology is 90 per cent cheaper than it was a decade ago, when Colin Barnett first talked up gas as a transition fuel, and onshore wind is 70 per cent cheaper than it was a decade ago. When we promote gas as a transition fuel, what are we transitioning to? Why would we not just go to the cheapest fuel? Why would we transition to something that is more expensive? It is certainly not going to be necessary if we invest sufficiently in renewable energy. In WA, vanishingly small amounts of gas will be required as backup for cloudy and windless days, but if we invest in more renewable energies and more batteries, we will need less gas.

The government's modelling shows that our south west interconnected system can reach 84 per cent renewable energy by 2030. The response to a question without notice I asked today states that in 2030, gas will make up eight per cent of the power consumed in the south west interconnected system. That is hardly growth. It is about 50 per cent today, so it will be going from 50 per cent to eight per cent. It is not expanding. By 2042, that will drop to only three per cent of the make-up of energy on the SWIS. We do not need to expand gas consumption or extraction for our own energy system.

Just as it is not required for WA, it is also not required for most of the rest of the world. A lot of the rhetoric over the last month, which needs to be questioned strongly, is that it will help our Asian partners that need it for their clean energy transition. Let us look at the evidence—which, interestingly enough, was commissioned by Woodside. It got the CSIRO to write a report around the influence of gas in terms of the transition in Asia. Unfortunately, Woodside did not like the outcome of that report, so it never published it. It is weirdly available on Woodside's website where it states that it is commercial-in-confidence, but if you google it, it comes up. It states quite clearly that increasing gas supply to Asia could delay Asia's shift to cleaner, renewable energy and lead to higher emissions.

Our gas is not helping Asia to lower its emissions; it is actually keeping it hooked on fossil fuels. The CSIRO said that. I have not seen any independent, credible evidence to the contrary. Sure, some gas will be needed but this idea that we are going to have to shift Asia from coal to gas and not let it largely leapfrog to renewables is actually a huge problem. The provision of our gas to Asia is in danger of slowing down that transition.

The head of the International Energy Agency stated this month that the world is at the beginning of the end of the fossil fuel era. If we are going to achieve the goal of global warming to 1.5 degrees, then fossil fuel demand needs to be driven down by 25 per cent by 2030, lowering emissions by 35 per cent. We need fossil fuel emissions to be going down this decade. Expanding gas production and pushing it as a transition fuel is simply a line that fossil fuel companies are using, especially those with no plan B. As I said, that might have made sense a decade ago. Today, frankly, its disingenuous, it is not backed by evidence and it is embarrassing when our political leaders parrot it. We need leadership that enables a leapfrog of fossilised gas and speeds up the transition to zero emissions renewable energy, for us and for our Asian neighbours. That will not only be cheaper for them and for us, but it will also give us the best chance of having a safe climate.