



REGULAR / THE ENVIRONMENT / THE FUTURE

On storm musings by candlelight

By Natalie Harkin
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'Some people without brains do an awful lot of talking, don't you think?'

– L Frank Baum, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*

It is spring. Thirteen-metre waves pummel our South Australian coastlines. Jetties collapse and oceans crash into beach-shack loungerooms. Riverbanks slide and dams burst towards unprecedented floods and emergency warnings. Gale-force winds rage over one hundred and forty kilometres an hour, and eighty thousand-plus lightning strikes fell transmission towers. Tornado-like conditions knock out the grid, triggering chaos and a statewide blackout.

I am usually calm in the storm's eye: that still place where winds drop and the atmosphere turns a soft filtered yellow; that place of eerie anticipation where forces gather to break the strange and electric silence. I usually find comfort in dramatic surround-sound rumblings. I love that I am small.

But on this brutal night, my storm-chasing instincts were tempered. The political aftermath was as terrifying as the trail of buckled transmission towers left in the storm's wake. While roofs were still being ripped from buildings and we were still literally and metaphorically in the dark, opportunistic point scoring had already begun. Under the guise of 'energy security', several politicians, including Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, were quick to drive an anti-renewables agenda. They slammed South Australia's investment in wind and solar, suggesting the natural disaster would have been alleviated by a higher reliance on coal. They did not wait for industry-expert evidence. Nor did they extend a hand to those still fighting for lives, livelihoods and homes.

As conservative politicians spruiked the evils of renewables, shock jocks called for heads to roll. The Climate Council was quick to respond and correct misinformation; still, the media-driven blame-game rants were insufferable and made for plenty of Dorothy-in-Oz moments. I imagined clicking my ruby-red slippers three times to be wilfully swept up and away from this Land of Oz; this famous fantasy land governed by Wizard-like ventriloquists posing as leaders, now puppets for climate-change sceptics and nuclear-energy advocates.

There are always heartening stories that emerge from post-storm debris, especially about heroic State Emergency Service volunteers or selfless acts of courage and generosity from ordinary people. In 2009, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) adopted a whole-of-nation approach to disaster management based on the concept of 'community resilience'. As a result, we have a 'framework for communities to better prepare for, withstand and recover from a recognised increase in natural disasters', including severe and damaging climate-change-made storms.

The stranglehold of climate sceptics over policies that affect global communities and environments is unconscionable. While the Australian government emphasises 'a shared sense of responsibility to improve disaster resilience', it simultaneously guts investment in climate research and renewables, thereby eroding social and environmental 'resilience'.

In the eye of this particular spring storm, the Australia Institute's call for resilient renewables was more apt: the Institute advocated for a decentralised renewable energy system with sufficient battery storage to withstand severe, increasingly frequent blackout storms.

As identified by the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on Climate Change, Indigenous peoples are among the first to face the direct consequences of climate change due to a widespread reliance on natural resources and ecosystems. As I contemplated climate change by candlelight, I considered the impact of higher frequency natural disasters on facilities like the proposed nuclear waste dump on Adnyamathanha lands in South Australia's Flinders Ranges – a dumping ground for all of the world's radioactive waste, shipped across oceans to dock in our Port River estuary. The risks are chilling.

Governments need to listen to grassroots leaders on the frontline – those most impacted, who are at the forefront of movements for social, cultural, environmental and climate-change justice. The message is consistent: 'No Dumps', no nuclear, a global moratorium on new coalmines, and caps on carbon emissions. For many, particularly in low-lying or scorched nations, this is not simply a question of economics, but a matter of life and death.

Pro-nuclear, fossil-loving leaders continue to walk the Yellowcake Road and place economic development above social and environmental justice. I imagine these politicians having to relocate to an offshore facility on a low-lying Pacific island still displaying the effects of British, American or French nuclear-bomb testing, where they would have no choice but to eat radioactive shellfish and crops from un-remediated soil; where they must navigate through cyclones on leaky boats, or learn to swim for their lives.

Even though wild weather can devastate, something remains in the debris. I imagine a land where political leaders do have 'brains', 'heart' and 'courage' to tackle these things with compassion, and responsibly welcome climate-induced refugees. In the spirit of such imaginings, I wrote a letter to our Premier Jay Weatherill requesting he take a journey on radiation trails and currents in order to listen to the stories of the people – 'community resilience' stories that are offered with open, wounded and generous hearts in the hope they might be heard and not have to be told again; for, *there is no place like home*.

our sun wind
 our rolling seas
 infinite strong energy
 renewable
 radiation-free
 zero-tolerance
 to this nuclear-power
 industry
 the poison
 leave it!



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