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Media release

2 November 2006

Climate Change

The following is a speech given by Tony Windsor MP Member for New England during the 'Matter of Public Importance' debate on October 31 in the Federal Parliament on the issue of Climate Change.

Mr WINDSOR (New England) (4.10 p.m.)—I would like to make a contribution to this matter of public importance. Mr Deputy Speaker Causley, there is a lot of debate on climate change; you participated in a debate last week on rural policy which touched on the drought and water policy and also supposed linkages to climate change. Irrespective of who is right in this debate—and the judgement as to who got it right in terms of the way to manage the debate will probably be cast in some decades time—most people would now agree that what we are doing in relation to greenhouse emissions is not the right thing to do for the longevity of the earth on which we live and the health of those people who live upon it.

There has been a lot of talk about coal, carbon credits, greenhouse gas emissions et cetera, but I would like to bring the House back to the renewable energy debate that was going on quite strongly while oil prices were rising some months ago—debate has calmed down in this country; it has not in others—particularly in relation to renewable fuels such as ethanol and biodiesel. I draw to the House's attention that in the United States and Europe and other parts of the developed world where there is a high usage of petrol engines and diesel engines there has been a concerted move to clean the fuels up. I know we are doing it with sulfur and diesel and we have done it with lead in petrol et cetera, so certain mandates have been issued by this government as to what we can and cannot have within our various fuels. In other parts of the world, particularly in the United States, the debate has been driven by concern about the health of people in communities.

In Minnesota, for instance, they were very concerned about the fine-particle emissions from unleaded petrol and very concerned about the emissions from diesel motors. They actually mandated a 10 per cent level, not to help the farming community—obviously it did do that—but mainly to assist with health issues. I heard the Minister for Trade, Warren Truss, saying a couple of weeks ago that if we mandated 10 per cent we could not bring it in anyway, because we could not deliver; we would have to import the fuel. That sort of argument is a nonsense. I think that is where the government is struggling a bit in this debate. It is really not leading the debate; it is responding, mostly in negatives. It is not like the Prime Minister to be responding in that sense. Normally he has a logical argument that people can understand. In a number of these arguments the issues fall apart. In the United States this health issue was the main driver behind introducing a mandate for ethanol and biodiesel. It was introduced over a period of years. It was phased in in major cities first, because they were the great concern with fine-particle emissions, then in the outer suburbs of the major cities and then, over a couple of years, in country towns as well. That seems to be a reasonable way of doing it. That has happened in a number of other countries in the world.

The Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources has been fairly prominent in this debate. He has shifted his position quite considerably, from being very negative about Al Gore's visit—portraying it

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as being some sort of sideshow at the zoo—to having some degree of concern about what we are doing to the globe, within a few weeks. And I think that highlights the lack of leadership that is being displayed at a government level. But the Minister for Industry, Tourism and Resources keeps making these comments that Labor's agenda—of having carbon taxes, and other taxes and treaties and Kyoto accords et cetera—is not the way to go. I think there is a glaring anomaly in terms of the policy base that the government has adopted.

If the industry minister actually believes that, why are the government going to impose a tax on renewable fuels in 2011? Why do they have a policy mix which, when it is delivered, is anti the introduction of renewable energy, renewable fuels—ethanol, biodiesels and a number of others? Why are they imposing a tax on something that they say that the government is working towards in a practical way? And I think that is something that the government really does need to look at. It is hypocritical to blame the opposition: on one hand, to say, 'Ah well, it is all about carbon taxes and you can't do that without the Chinese and the Indians and others coming on board', and then on the other hand to have a system where they say, 'We're encouraging the fuel companies, through the Prime Minister having a cup of coffee with the fuel companies last year, to try and achieve targets.'

That is the other thing the industry minister says: 'Targets and taxes? No, you can't go there! Targets, taxes and treaties—that is the Labor way. You can't go there.' Why have they put in place a mandatory renewable energy target of 350 megalitres of biofuels by 2010? Why has that been put in place? It is actually running at 28 megalitres at the moment, so it has a long way to go, and it is obvious, in the first year of that cup-of-coffee treaty that was put in place between the Prime Minister and the fuel companies, that it is not working very successfully.

Looking at the logic in this debate, why are they saying that a target is acceptable if they put it in place, but is not acceptable if other global communities put it in place—that it is some sort of retrograde step and a form of compulsion and that there are other ways of achieving the outcome? Yes, there are other ways of achieving the outcome, but why have they got MRETs (Mandatory Renewable Energy Target) in place in a number of areas? Why are they debating that they should be so low for wind and solar et cetera?

The industry minister particularly keeps saying that taxing is not the way to drive the renewable energy debate. Well, I would agree with that. But he is going to impose a tax—on a system where they are encouraging at the moment, through cup-of-coffee diplomacy, an MRET of 350 megalitres of biofuels; a tax on those people who move towards the production of those biofuels. That does not sound a very practical policy initiative to me, and I think it encapsulates the dilemma the government is in in relation to this.

There is nothing wrong with being behind on an issue. And normally the Prime Minister is very smart in addressing an issue, realising that the government is in the wrong part of the paddock and should move to a more acceptable place, recognising new information et cetera, et cetera. But on this issue he seems to be staggering, and his minister, who is in charge of this debate, seems to be quite at sea in terms of the policy messages that we are being sent.

I think it is very important that the government actually makes up its mind. Are we going to use renewable energy as a tax cow? Is that going to go on into the future forever? Are we going to encourage people to move towards these things? Or, when we get there, when they start to do it, do we see it as a source of income—like we did with superannuation?

I think the Labor Party really has to make up its mind on some of these issues as well. It is tending to play the climate change game at the moment, and I think it is probably scoring some points there. But where is its policy on taxation in terms of renewable fuels for our motorcars from 2011? It is sort of in this 'me too' range at the moment. I think there is degree of hypocrisy in its long-term approach to renewable fuels that its policymakers need to address as well.

So I make those suggestions in the hope that the government and the opposition can actually work through this, because I think the climate in which we live is a very precious thing and should be addressed in a united fashion, not in one of conflict. *(Time expired)*