

Mining stalwart sees no future in carbon plan

Paddy Manning, Sustainable Investing, Business Section, Sydney Morning Herald

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Kevin Rudd should meet Graham Brown before he decides to spend billions of dollars on carbon capture and storage. A coalminer for more than 20 years, Brown retired in 2007 and is happy to call a spade a bloody shovel.

Brown, 57, has his own theory on why good money is being wasted on a technology very few have faith in.

Brown, from the Hunter Valley, originally worked in the construction industry, in open-cut and underground coalmines, including for Rio Tinto and BHP Billiton.

He is a staunch unionist but does not toe the corporate line on CCS parroted by officials from the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union.

Brown's main motivation is to see his former colleagues retrained to be able to exit a fading coal industry. He joined the NSW Greens after meeting state MP Lee Rhiannon, who said the party's policy was to make the transition to a clean energy economy with no job losses.

Brown is not a politician and does not want to be one. But he is active locally and takes any opportunity to speak on the transition away from coal.

Last year he took part in a Greenpeace blockade of the Eraring power station, and attracted media attention as one of a handful of miners sympathetic to the action.

"I'm not the only one in the mining industry," Brown says. "There's quite a few and they're coming on board all the time. The blokes in the industry, they're fully aware that there's a problem with burning the coal. They're interested in where they fit into the situation."

Brown is not funded by anyone. He gets a kick out of putting some of the retirement savings he earned from mining back into the cause.

I saw Brown speak at a climate change rally in Sydney in November and was struck by his denunciation of CCS. He says most people working at the coalface know CCS is "just not do-able".

"In the beginning there wasn't a lot of view either way on it but now, because it's been going so long, a lot of the blokes are up to speed on it and they are fully aware that it's nonsense. It's never going to get off the ground. The technology's so expensive that it's not going to be economical."

The main problem is the sheer volume of carbon dioxide that needs to be captured and stored. It is hard to visualise. Brown explains it this way: for every tonne of coal burnt there is 2.5 to 2.7 tonnes of CO₂ to store. How big is a tonne of CO₂? About 500 cubic metres, as a gas at sea level at room temperature.

Now say coal-fired power stations in Australia emit 100 million tonnes of CO₂ each year. The Government hopes CCS will trap 20 per cent of those emissions. If the gas is compressed 500 times, that is about 20 million tonnes a year.

Transporting 20 million tonnes of highly compressed gas is no mean feat. "Look at the infrastructure that needs to be in place to get 80 million tonnes of coal to port," says Brown. "Moving gas is a different kettle of fish to moving coal, I can tell you, because it's got to be stored in an intrinsically safe way - either pipe or trucks or trains".

Where to put it all? Brown says there is really only one place where significant volumes of CO₂ can be stored - the Cooper Basin in South Australia, where Santos recently shelved a \$700 million CCS project. If that project were revived, Brown says it has been calculated that we would need a B-double lorry carrying six tonnes of CO₂ leaving NSW for the Cooper Basin every 20 seconds to store 20 per cent of emissions from the state's power industry.

Then there is the problem of getting the stored CO₂ into the ground or, even harder, beneath the sea floor. "You really need a mining industry to get it into the ground," says Brown. "And that's going to create more CO₂."

There is also the risk of leakage, made worse by the increase in underground temperatures. "You're talking about a lot of pressure, and there's heaps of cracks. It's only got to come out through a slow leak and it's all for nothing.

"The second you put it into the ground, the more it will expand. If you're going to put it a kilometre underground where the temperature might be 65 degrees Centigrade, it's going to expand a monstrous amount. And that in itself will be the big mechanism where the rocks will crack.

"They can put it in there but whether it will stay there is another thing. I've pointed that out - others have too - and it's not long before people start nodding their head and laughing because they understand that it's not possible."

Brown says CCS is a no-brainer. "It just doesn't cut the ice any more. Most people know that it's a furphy." Brown says the coal companies know it too and until late last year, put little of their money into CCS. "They're not wasting money on it. They're just taking what they can from the Federal Government, and saying 'thank you very much'."

Their main interest is in ramping up extraction of coal-seam gas, Brown says. "Any kind of drilling technology that will be used to try and get this gas down, is also going to be reversed, to be able to be used to mine the carbon qualities of the coal in situ.

"They're having the taxpayer supply a lot of money for that research. They should be doing it themselves. They're going to piggyback on all this carbon capture and storage stuff and they will use that technology for their own benefit.

"It's not a matter of being solely for that but the coal companies already know that research needs to be done to get the gas out, and they will certainly use it if it's available. They might be greedy and they might have deep pockets, but they're not stupid."

For Brown, it means more job losses down the track. "If they can get the methane out of the coal seams, or convert the gas to hydrogen, without having to mine the coal, they'll use that gas and will hardly have to employ anyone."

What really annoys Brown is the attitude of officials at the CFMEU, in particular general president of the mining and energy division, Tony Maher.

He has lined up with coal companies and is backing CCS rather than focusing on retraining workers to get jobs in the green-collar economy.

"Tony Maher made some statements in Newcastle two years ago. I've got them on tape. In a submission to Newcastle council, he called the transition away from the coal industry to anything else the 'geriatric solution'. He made a statement we are by and large too old, and our skill base from the start is too low, to be trained in anything else, insinuating that we should stay in the coal industry because that's all we're good for.

"I played that tape to some of the blokes at work and I can tell you they weren't real happy with Tony, basically calling them untrainable boneheads.

"They didn't like it at all .. We can be trained in anything. Who do you think maintains the equipment in the mining industry? Doesn't he know that a lot of the truck drivers and plant operators are actually some sort of a tradesman? We definitely have the skills base.

"And who does he think is going to do the work in the renewable energy industry, and other industries as well, because statistics in Europe - and a study by Greenpeace on the Central Coast of NSW - show that there's six times more jobs in the transition away from coal than there is in it.

"I think we should be gunning for it. We definitely have the skills and he didn't do a very good service to his members. I don't see why miners should be thrown on the scrap heap by a bloody coal company. There should be a mechanism to let them flow on to other jobs."

<http://business.smh.com.au/business/mining-stalwart-sees-no-future-in-carbon-plan-20090424-ai16.html>