

Clean coal remains a faraway dream

- **Marian Wilkinson**
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When the Academy Award-winning filmmakers Joel and Ethan Coen used their talents a few weeks ago to make an anti-ad ridiculing clean coal, industry lobbyists were not happy. When Robert Kennedy Jnr. branded clean coal in America "a dirty lie", and suggested some coal executives should face criminal charges, they got really upset. This state's most passionate coal advocate, the head of the NSW Minerals Council, Nikki Williams, reacts to Kennedy's name with a mix of outrage and sorrow.

But the coal industry and, more importantly, Australia's politicians, should come to grips with the reality that it is beginning to lose its social licence to operate in Western democracies. And the strategy of holding up clean coal as the Holy Grail for the industry's greenhouse problem is not working.

Australia is increasingly seen as the Saudi Arabia of coal - a leading exporter of a major greenhouse gas pollutant. Despite the present economic downturn, industry and government forecasts say our coal exports will keep rising in the next decades. The NSW Government is issuing new exploration licences like they were confetti, and the expansion of the Newcastle coal loader is a national and state priority.

All this flies in the face of the scientific forecasts delivered in Copenhagen last month. Unless there are rapid and sustained cuts in greenhouse emissions, the world will not avoid dangerous climate change.

High-profile figures such as the former US vice-president Al Gore, and a NASA climate scientist, James Hansen, advocate a moratorium on new coal plants in the US and Britain unless and until clean coal comes good. Similar public pressure is likely to come in Japan, our largest coal customer.

The irreconcilable gulf between our rising coal exports and the urgent need to cut emissions is answered too glibly with the assurance that clean coal will be up and running some time around 2020. From Barack Obama to Kevin Rudd, clean coal is pushed with unswerving conviction. The big Group of Eight leaders say they want 20 clean coal plants operating by 2020.

Yet at a NSW Minerals Council forum last week, CSIRO's chief of energy technology, David Brockway, explained bluntly that we are unlikely to see a commercial-scale clean coal plant operating within 15 years - or at least 2024.

Dr Brockway, like those close to this vexed problem in the industry, avoids the words "clean coal". The complex array of technologies to reduce carbon dioxide from coal generation plants, capture it, transport it and store it underground is known as "carbon capture and storage". Building a "demonstration" or "pilot" to capture and store a few thousand tonnes of carbon dioxide is being done. But getting rid of a million tonnes of carbon dioxide from electricity generators around the country every year, at an affordable cost, will be extremely difficult for us, let alone our export customers.

This month, the Rudd Government will, once again, ramp up its clean coal campaign when it announces the new head of the global carbon initiative in Canberra. But forgive a journalist a little cynicism. Last year, the media were lobbied heavily to promote a carbon storage project run by the gas company Santos that promised to bury 20 million tonnes of carbon dioxide a year from gas and coal operations around the country. Last month, without a whimper, Santos suspended the project, apparently because it wasn't considered economically viable.

A joint Rio Tinto-BP carbon capture project in Western Australia, also lauded in the media, fell over last year. Around the same time, the world's leading clean coal experiment, FutureGen in America, collapsed after the Bush administration slashed its commitment to the billion-dollar project. FutureGen was a favourite of the Howard government, which pledged \$15 million from Australian taxpayers along with a slice of industry funds.

A damning report on FutureGen prepared for a US congressional committee surfaced a few weeks ago. Based on scores of internal government emails and documents, it reveals that the Bush administration was never really committed to the project. FutureGen, the report says, was largely a public relations ploy for George Bush to make it appear that the US was "doing something" about global warming while refusing to ratify the Kyoto climate agreement.

There is no easy solution to the coal problem. Almost every energy minister around the world insists coal will remain a significant source of new electricity generation because of its low cost and plentiful supply. But at the very least, federal and state politicians should have the courage to prepare a plan B, in the event the alluring promise of clean coal does not eventuate.

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