

# Australians want focus on renewables not coal, Lowy poll finds

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Fossil fuels deserve less government support than renewables, a Lowy poll finds. Photo: AP

Australians overwhelmingly want governments to favour renewable energy over fossil fuels even if it costs more, and concerns about climate change are strengthening, a new Lowy Institute poll finds.

The survey of 1202 adults during the first three weeks of March found 81 per cent of respondents wanted policymakers to focus on clean energy sources such as wind and solar, even if it costs more to ensure grid reliability.

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Just 17 per cent backed a focus on "traditional energy sources such as coal and gas even if this means the environment may suffer to some extent".

The finding was one of Lowy's highest results for a two-option answer and "somewhat surprising" since the poll was conducted soon after blackouts in wind-power dominated South Australia and the heatwave that stretched power supplies in coal-dependent NSW, said Alex Oliver, Lowy's polling director.



"I wasn't expecting the response to renewables to be so positive in the context of that very heated debate," he said.

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The poll results come just days before Alan Finkel, Australia's chief scientist, is due to release his review of Australia's energy security on Friday.



No bull: Australians strongly support more renewable energy. Photo: AP

The report is widely tipped to offer a range of options to support the transition away from coal-fired power including a so-called low emissions target that would reward less polluting energy sources.

The Turnbull government has touted the need to provide energy that is reliable, affordable and sustainable, particularly the first two traits. Ms Oliver said this year's poll and those in recent years suggest the government would be at odds with public opinion if it downplayed environmental outcomes.





Solar panels: Demand is expected to continue to grow with 303 gigawatts installed globally at the end of 2016. Photo: Rob Homer

For instance, some 57 per cent of those polled this year listed climate change as "a critical threat", behind only international terrorism at 68 per cent and North Korea's nuclear program at 65 per cent.

"A majority think [climate change] is a critical threat to our national interest," Ms Oliver said. "It's a policy challenge that's not going to go away."

Climate's ranking as the third-most important threat is up from sixth spot in 2014. The 11 percentage-point jump since then has raised concerns about global warming above fears over cyber attacks, foreign investment in Australia and asylum seekers.

## **More bang, fewer bucks**

The world's nations added a record 161 gigawatts of renewable energy in 2016. But falling prices of wind turbines and solar panels meant total investment in the sector retreated 23 per cent from 2015 to \$US241.6 billion (\$321 billion), according to [the REN21 Global Status Report](#) released on Wednesday.

Australia added 900 megawatts of new solar photovoltaic panels last year, the eighth-most in the world, behind China's leading surge of 34.5 GW.

By accumulated capacity, Australia had 5.8 GW of solar, ranking it ninth behind such nations as Germany, Italy, Britain and France. China was easily the largest, with 77.4 GW installed in a global total of 303 GW.

About 30 per cent of dwellings in Queensland and South Australia had solar PV at the end of last year, the report noted.

A survey by Lowy in 2015 found 43 per cent of Australians expected solar to be "our primary source of electricity 10 years from now".

That compared with 17 per cent for coal, 13 per cent for nuclear, 10 per cent for gas and 7 per cent for wind. At the time of that 2015 survey, solar provided only about 2 per cent of Australia's electricity.



**Peter Hannam**    

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