

Submission to the Select Committee on Information Integrity on Climate Change and Energy

Submitted by: Coronium Pty Ltd

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Location: NSW, Australia

Professional Background: Coronium is a 13-year-old renewable energy advisory firm whose two principals are industry experts with 60 years of combined experience and formerly with BP Solar (a former subsidiary of BP plc). Coronium is an independent consultancy to banks, insurers, legal firms, and developers on solar farm investment, risk, and project due diligence.

1. Introduction

We welcome this inquiry as an important step toward restoring evidence-based energy policy in Australia.

During our time as industry advisors, we have seen first-hand how climate disinformation has grown and intensified as a tool used to skew regulatory decision-making and erode investor confidence to stop or delay critical infrastructure development.

This submission focuses on the first four Terms of Reference, (a) to (d) as these items are the most directly related to our professional experience.

We believe it is also important to note the connection between climate disinformation networks and the networks that influenced the "No" campaign in the 2023 Voice referendum, as these demonstrate the shared infrastructure of misinformation that undermines both the energy transition and the integrity of democratic process.

2. Submission in Response to Selected Terms of Reference

a) Prevalence, Motivations, and Impacts of Disinformation

Disinformation is not just a side-effect of public debate - it is now a strategic tool used to shape, delay, or derail energy policy. We have directly encountered its effects across many of our professional engagements.

Some real-world examples of this disinformation are:

- In recent years, many regional solar projects have faced public opposition fuelled by misleading claims that solar panels "leak toxins into the soil"¹, "have zero benefit to Aussie consumers"², and that wind farms "kill whales"³ - regularly circulated via local Facebook groups and WhatsApp threads. These claims have no scientific basis, but can contribute to waves of objection letters that delay planning approval by months or even stop developments completely.
- Financial clients have expressed concern about political risk due to "renewables being unreliable"⁴. This is a narrative traceable to repeated media disinformation, not engineering assessments.
- Claims that the capacity investment scheme is costing the taxpayer "even if the company doesn't produce power"⁵.

These examples, and many more like them, have had the following determinantal impacts:

- **Policy inertia:** State and federal governments often hesitate to act due to perceived public backlash - even when technical, economic, and environmental cases are strong.
- **Investment delays:** Misunderstandings increase project risk profiles and can even lead to higher insurance and financing costs.
- **Community division:** False claims fracture community trust and pit neighbours against each other.

We are conscious that some people may claim that as renewable energy advisors, we support renewables because that is our business - we strongly refute any such claim.

Coronium provides independent advisory services across the energy spectrum, and our role is to help clients make informed decisions based on risk, science, and financial viability - not ideology or selling a solution. If a project does not make sense, we will tell our clients so. Our concern is that disinformation artificially inflates risk and prevents good projects from proceeding, hurting both industry and the public.

b) Financing, Dissemination, and Impact on Public Policy

The climate disinformation ecosystem is not spontaneous - it is funded, produced, and strategically disseminated by known actors. These include think tanks, lobby groups, media outlets, and digital influencers, many of whom share links with international denial networks.

Some Real-World Examples of this are:

- The **Institute of Public Affairs (IPA)** has published materials undermining the science of climate change and attacking renewables, often with funding sources that remain opaque⁶

¹ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41567-023-02230-0> ("Unfounded concerns about photovoltaic module toxicity and waste are slowing decarbonization")

² <https://prod-ss.aap.com.au/factcheck/facts-outshine-baseless-nt-solar-farm-claim/>

³ <https://environmentalprogress.org/big-news/2024/1/18/wind-industry-activity-strongly-correlated-with-whale-deaths-new-study-finds> ; <https://wwwf.org.au/blogs/fact-check-the-truth-about-whales-and-wind-farms/>

⁴ <https://theconversation.com/why-has-investment-in-renewable-energy-projects-stalled-34197>

⁵ <https://www.aap.com.au/factcheck/experts-pull-plug-on-barnaby-joyces-renewables-scheme-claim/>

⁶ <https://ipa.org.au/ipa-review-articles/unrealistic-unreliable-unaffordable>

- Sky News segments regularly feature guests from foreign organisations such as the **Heartland Institute**, which has a long track record of climate denial and fossil fuel funding⁷
- The "Net Zero Watch" campaign in the UK, whose narratives frequently appear in Australian opinion pieces, has been tied to the **Global Warming Policy Foundation** - a group exposed for fossil fuel funding and lobbying against renewables⁸
- The **Atlas Network**⁹, a decentralised global influence network that connects and trains think tanks, PR professionals, and political operatives on how to influence public opinion and policy by emphasising emotional messaging, anti-government rhetoric, and economic fear, all the while giving the appearance of grassroots or independent analysis¹⁰.

These narratives enter Australian media and political debate, often uncorrected and unattributed, influencing both public opinion and policymaking.

The same networked actors and platforms that spread climate disinformation were instrumental in the "No" campaign during the Voice referendum¹¹:

- The Misinformation tactics were identical: deliberate misrepresentation of facts, emotional manipulation, reframing of expert consensus as "elite propaganda."
- Many of the same media channels, pundits, and digital platforms - including Sky News, Facebook pages with unclear origin, and anonymous Telegram groups - were used in both campaigns.
- This suggests that Australia is now facing a coordinated influence network, not isolated episodes of online noise.

People using these tactics often then claim their right to free speech and that people should be allowed to have different opinions to justify their false statements.

We absolutely agree with free speech - dissent and debate are essential. But there is a crucial difference between good-faith disagreement and systematic disinformation that is designed to deceive, not inform. Just as there are laws against financial fraud, there must be protections against deliberate misinformation that manipulates democratic processes.

c) Astroturfing and Its Impact on Public Debate

Astroturfing - fake grassroots opposition - has become a powerful tool to stall energy projects and distort public consultation. In our advisory work, we have observed alarming patterns that indicate manufactured resistance is being used to influence planning decisions, including:

⁷ <https://www.isdglobal.org/isd-in-the-news/sky-news-australia-hub-for-climate-misinformation-and-delayism/>

⁸ <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/dark-money-investigations/global-warming-policy-foundation-net-zero-watch-koch-brothers/>

⁹ <https://www.atlasnetwork.org/academy>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/29/rightwing-thinktank-conservative-boris-johnson-brex-it-atlas-network>

¹¹ <https://michaelwest.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Jeremy-Walker-CCS-27-Sept-2023.pdf>

- A NSW renewable energy project that received a significant number of very similar objections from across Australia, but the only submissions from locals (within 20km of the project) were all in support¹².
- Similarly, Queensland wind projects are being shut down due to “community” opposition however many of the objections come from far afield¹³.

Astroturfing undermines trust in democratic consultation. Legitimate local concerns or consent get drowned out by orchestrated misinformation, reducing transparency and skewing decision-making.

Opposition to renewables from local communities that are standing up for themselves is welcomed - valid concerns must be addressed. But we must distinguish between authentic community engagement and synthetic, coordinated campaigns that hijack the process. When bad-faith actors pretend to speak for communities, they silence the very voices they claim to represent.

d) Connections Between Australian Organisations and International Disinformation Networks

One of the most troubling developments in recent years has been the growing alignment between Australian organisations and international networks known for the strategic dissemination of climate disinformation.

From our position within the clean energy sector, we have seen how talking points, campaign materials, and narrative strategies used in Australia mirror those used in the US and UK - often within days of one another. These connections are no longer speculative; they are increasingly visible and traceable. For example:

- **The Institute of Public Affairs (IPA)** - an Australian think tank with a long record of opposing climate action - has consistently drawn upon the work of foreign organisations such as:
 - The **Heartland Institute** (USA)¹⁴, which has been exposed for accepting funding from fossil fuel interests to downplay climate science.
 - The **Global Warming Policy Foundation** (UK)¹⁵, known for promoting misleading statistics and false comparisons about renewable energy.

Publicly available documents and event transcripts show personnel cross-promotion and shared narratives, particularly around “climate alarmism,” “energy poverty,” and “net zero as elitist ideology”, such as:

- **Content Recycling:** Misinformation campaigns cite international anti-renewable statements, such as the “wind turbines cause illness” narrative - a claim debunked

¹² <https://reneweconomy.com.au/long-distance-objectors-pile-in-against-small-solar-battery-project-in-regional-nsw/>

¹³ <https://www.news.com.au/national/queensland/news/deputy-premier-jarrod-bleijie-scraps-1bn-rockhampton-wind-farm/news-story/794337a57591500e0e5058b506bcb405?>

¹⁴ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-02-24/hamilton-the-shadowy-world-of-ipa-finance/3849006>

¹⁵ <https://www.thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2019/06/10/institute-of-public-affairs>

multiple times, but persistently recycled by international climate sceptics and regularly resurfacing in Australian context¹⁶.

- **International Media Amplification:** Foreign-owned media entities - including parts of News Corp - act as vector platforms, allowing these international talking points to be domesticated and mainstreamed through local opinion shows, YouTube clips, and commentary¹⁷.

For example, Sky News Australia often features commentators with direct or indirect affiliations with US libertarian and fossil-backed policy groups, creating a media environment where disinformation flows freely across borders^{18,19}.

As well as cross-border coordination, there is also cross-campaign coordination - international links are not limited to energy. The Voice referendum saw a strikingly similar use of:

- Foreign disinformation techniques, such as misrepresenting the scope of the constitutional change²⁰
- Talking points about “racial division” and “special rights,” language as well as tactics that are imported from, and have wide ranging impacts, overseas^{21,22}.

This suggests that these networks do not simply oppose climate action - they are engaged in a broader ideological project: to sow public distrust in science, equity, and progressive policy reform more generally.

This is not about conspiracy theories, but about documented international coordination, often made possible through shared funding streams, personnel overlap, and aligned political agendas. Many of these links are publicly acknowledged by the organisations themselves in reports, joint events, and online content.

It is vital that Australia understands how foreign-influenced messaging is shaping domestic debate - not only in the climate and energy space but across critical areas of public policy.

3. Recommendations

To protect Australia’s energy transition, political integrity, and community trust, we recommend the following actions:

1. Mandate Transparency of Funding and Influence

- All think tanks, political advocacy organisations, and media outlets engaged in public campaigns should be required to disclose major donors and financial interests.

¹⁶ <https://www.royalsoc.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/151-1-Chapman.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/16/australians-fed-up-with-news-corps-climate-scepticism>

¹⁸ <https://www.skynews.com.au/web-stories/free/sky-news/energy-crisis-caused-largely-by-global-warming-policies>

¹⁹ <https://www.hca.westernsydney.edu.au/gmjau/?p=3313>

²⁰ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-09-29/fact-check-voice-to-parliament-misinformation/102913680>

²¹ <https://theconversation.com/lies-fuel-racism-how-the-global-media-covered-australias-voice-to-parliament-referendum-215665>

²² <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/extremely-politicised-and-very-worrying-how-misinformation-about-the-voice-spread/w9sl4pzba>

- Platforms disseminating climate content should be required to tag content linked to foreign-funded disinformation networks.

2. Investigate and Penalise Astroturfing

- Establish an independent mechanism to audit public submissions in planning processes for evidence of coordinated, non-local interference.
- Penalise PR firms and lobby groups found to be masquerading as community stakeholders in regulatory processes.

3. Counter Disinformation Through Education and Policy

- Fund public-facing, independent science communication bodies to proactively debunk misinformation.
- Integrate disinformation awareness into school curricula - not as a climate issue, but as a democratic literacy issue.
- Ensure parliamentary inquiries and regulatory reviews are informed by disinformation risk assessments, particularly for controversial or nationally significant projects.

4. Conclusion

Disinformation is not a minor nuisance - it is a deliberate strategy, used by powerful networks to block climate progress, stall clean energy development, and distort democratic decisions. We have seen its impact at the project level, in investor behaviour, and in public discourse - not just on climate, but on issues like the Voice referendum, where the same tactics and actors were deployed with similar intent.

Australia has the technical capability, natural resources, and investment appetite to lead the world in clean energy - but only if our policymaking is anchored in truth, not manipulated by manufactured narratives.

The key point of our submission is that transparency of information sources and their funding be enforced so that informed decisions can be made based on fact rather than spin.

We commend the Committee for undertaking this inquiry and urge you to treat climate disinformation as both a policy threat and a democratic integrity issue.

Sincerely,

Coronium Pty Ltd