

Submission
No 4

INQUIRY INTO LEASING OF ELECTRICITY INFRASTRUCTURE

Name: Ms Marion Rae
Date received: 11/05/2015

Partially Confidential

To Reverend The Honourable Fred Nile, ED LTh MLC,

Dear Reverend Nile,

I am writing to you with my concerns about the current situation with electricity, which may become more serious if the poles and wires are leased.

I have an electricity account with Energy Australia. I am a pensioner and receive the discounts applicable from the state government for age and electricity for life support equipment.

In the last few years of course there have been large price increases. My experience has been that there has also been a very laissez faire attitude to the responsibility to provide an accurate and fair reading of electricity meters and I have been fighting now for several years to simply have my meter read, so I can get an accurate bill and therefore budget to pay my bill.

The legal requirement is only for one meter reading a year...the other quarterly bills may be estimated. Ausgrid, my meter "owner" claims every three months that they do not have access to the meter room. This is false, there is always clear access. I was informed by Energy Australia that if it is raining, it may not be possible for the meter reader to leave their car to read the meter, resulting in an estimated bill.

This situation is leading to people thinking they have their bills under control, however, once a year they get a very high bill which for pensioners, is very difficult to pay. This results from underestimating, which stops customers from migrating to a different company for better pricing.

Legally, in NSW, there is no requirement for the meter to be actually eyes on read more than once a year. Ausgrid provides an estimated reading for 3 out of the 4 reads a year, thus saving on costs of workers actually reading a meter.

This situation is compounded in government housing, typically tenanted by the elderly and the ill, where tenants do not have any right of access to their own meters (meter rooms are locked and tenants do not have keys...Ausgrid has a key) and cannot check that the estimate is even in a ball park. The meters in these properties are typically very old and have not been upgraded.

On one occasion (I have been pursuing this for years now) I was told that the meter could not be read that quarter because there was no functioning light bulb in the meter room.

I have a recent letter from the General Manager, Customer Service of Energy Australia apologizing for my underestimated bills. In order to force a genuine meter read I have contacted the Ombudsman 3 times. Most recently in January. On that occasion my reading was **underestimated** by \$192.79. That was in summer. When this is happening in winter, it is a lot more serious, with people thinking their electricity usage is manageable when it may in fact be very expensive.

Not getting genuine meter reads as opposed to estimated reads is a compounding problem...because (say) 2014 November, the next year the estimated read is based on the previous years estimated read at the same time of year...so November 2015 is based on November 2014...and so on. So the problem compounds over years and it is quite impossible for customers to know what
To Reverend Fred Nile from Marion Rae

is happening in fact. The bills are unclear, the difference from the estimate and the genuine read if you demand one, is an add on number...so you never get a clear reality based statement of your true energy usage and cost.

I have been trying to get genuine meter readings for ten years now. It has become increasingly important as the cost of electricity has gone up and up. I am no closer now than I was ten years ago...but now I understand the source of the problem very well, having made hundreds of phone calls and numerous complaints.

Recently Energy Australia was sold and moved to Victoria...they are no longer based in NSW. The owner is in Hong Kong.

I was previously on an Energy Assist program whereby I paid \$40 fortnightly and after six payments, the company made one equivalent payment.

Based on an estimated read, which showed in November my bill was up to date, it was decided by the company that I was doing fine paying \$40 a fortnight, I was terminated from the energy assist program, when the company moved to Victoria and retrenched its NSW workers and have not been permitted to re-enter it unless I pay \$53 a fortnight, which I cannot afford to do.

Living in NSW Government Housing due to disability, I have no control over the water heater...I have an instant, old, most expensive type water heater which I am obliged to use to bathe. I have **no access to cheaper off peak electricity**...the meter I have apparently (I have not been permitted to see it) only reads one rate.

In other words, if there was a newer meter, I could access off peak electricity and save money. I have no capacity to negotiate my program or charges...because I do not have a modern meter.

In NSW it is the poorest people and pensioners who are paying premium rates for their electricity and **there is no legal requirement that meters be upgraded in government housing, nor water heaters**. Obviously I cannot instal solar panels...I am on the ground floor of a building and my flat has no insulation under the floorboards. It is freezing in winter. I would be most happy to show it to you if you would like to come and visit to see. I could guarantee to make you a good cup of coffee.

I was very hopeful to learn that you will be heading a Senate enquiry into the leasing of the poles and wires. If you could possibly require legally that there are genuine meter reads quarterly instead of just once annually...that would be a huge improvement, we would have a chance of keeping current with our bills when we are old and disabled and past our use-by date.

Thank you kindly for your attention to this problem and may God bless you for your honest and dedicated service to the people of NSW.

Yours Sincerely, Marion Rae,

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