

## NEWS

## Canberra electricity prices could rise by July

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"We understand passing through any increase is difficult for the ACT community, let alone one of this size," Mr Knox said.

The energy distributor said a key reason for the substantial increase was the 133 per cent rise in feed-in-tariff payments to large-scale wind and solar generators.

Those charges were expected to increase from \$42 million for the current financial year to \$127 million in 2021-22.

As part of the government's 100 per cent renewable target, solar and wind generators are paid for the energy they generate.

Payments are calculated by the difference between the feed-in tariff price and the wholesale electricity price.

Wholesale energy prices have fallen significantly in the past year, meaning the difference between the two prices has increased significantly.

ACT Energy Minister Shane Rattenbury said the drop in wholesale electricity prices was partly due to the impact of the pandemic.

"The average annual electricity bill for customers in the ACT will remain comparable with other jurisdictions, even once this anticipated cost increase is taken into account," he said.

ACT Council of Social Service chief executive Emma Campbell said low-income households will be most affected.

"The ACT government must better monitor and manage the impact of the transition to net-zero greenhouse gas emissions on Canberrans on low income," she said.

# Australia has won supporters: ambassador

Doug Dingwall

JAPAN'S ambassador says Australia has won supporters through its response to China's trade tariffs, while signalling his nation is willing to "compare notes" in dealing with challenges presented by the superpower's rise.

Ambassador Shingo Yamagami said his nation had full sympathy with Australia as it faced restrictions on multiple exports, and that many people in Japan had marvelled at its resilience under the trade pressure.

Australia's "consistent, steadfast" response, combined with its handling of COVID-19, had made it stand out, he said.

"In these two regards, Australia has won a number of supporters and sympathisers," Mr Yamagami said.

Japan's top diplomat in Australia, who began his posting to Canberra in February, said nations must reject attempts to apply political pressure using trade.

He said the list of China's trade restrictions targeting nations "goes on and on", referring to similar actions against exports from the Philippines and South Korea following political disputes.

"We have to say this has to stop. Because we will try to all promote prosperity through liberalisation of trade and trade based upon international rules," Mr Yamagami said.

"If trade could be used as a tool to apply political pressure, the effect of liberalisation and rules-making under the World Trade Organization could be significantly undermined," he said.

China last month confirmed it would extend major restrictions against Australian wine producers for five years after imposing interim tariffs of up to 200 per cent in 2020.

The federal government in December referred China to the WTO over its tariffs on Australian barley. China has also imposed restrictions on Australia's coal, lobster and beef amid a deterioration in relations last year.

Mr Yamagami said Japan had encountered similar trade difficulties when China restricted imports of rare earths in 2010 after a dispute relating to the Senkaku Islands.

Japan responded by diversifying its trading partners, and taking the matter to the WTO, which ruled against China.

"These are the kind of experiences we can share with our friends in Australia," Mr Yamagami said.

"Where you have this kind of trade dispute, there are two important things we have to keep in mind.

"One is we have to abide by international trading rules, specifically WTO rules. Second, the important thing to do is to try to solve the issue peacefully."

Japan and Australia were



Japan's ambassador to Australia, Shingo Yamagami. Picture: Dion Georgopoulos

in a position to take advantage of opportunities from China's rise, Mr Yamagami said.

"At the same time, our two countries have to address the challenges presented by the rise of China. In this regard, there is a lot we can do together comparing notes, sharing our experiences," he said.

### 'Remarkable speed'

Mr Yamagami, who joined the Japanese foreign service in 1984, said he wanted to raise Japan's profile in

## There is a lot we can do together comparing notes, sharing our experiences.

Ambassador Shingo Yamagami

Australia - and Australia's profile in Japan.

"Our relations are in an excellent state, but at the same time it seems to me we have taken each other for granted," he said.

"The Japanese love things Australian, but that said, are

we really aware of the full potentials of our bilateral relationship? There is a lot we can do together."

Japan in recent years has been Australia's second-largest trading partner, and was its largest trading partner for 26 years

# 'Win-win': NZ-Australia bubble finally set to open

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On Tuesday, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern revealed the keenly anticipated date for scrapping the quarantine requirement for Australian travellers.

For about six months, Kiwi arrivals have been able to visit Australia without undertaking quarantine.

"The trans-Tasman bubble represents the start of a new chapter in our COVID response and recovery. One that people have worked so hard for," Mr Ardern said on Tuesday.

## The bubble represents the start of a new chapter in our COVID response.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern

"I know families, friends and significant parts of our economy will welcome it, as

I certainly do."

Ms Ardern defended her government's tardiness in opening up, saying this was "exactly the right time" to do so.

Australia provides more visitors than any other country to New Zealand, and the announcement is expected to start a stampede across the Tasman.

Mr Morrison said the bubble was "win-win" for both countries.

"[This is] the first of many more steps to come, I believe, as we get back to a more nor-

mal position," he said.

The Prime Minister said Singapore, Japan and South Korea were being assessed as potential future travel bubbles.

"At this stage we're not in a position to move forward on any of those at this point," he said.

The Australian and NZ borders have been shut to almost all non-citizens since March last year.

Ms Ardern also announced a traffic light system to guide Kiwis while travelling overseas, saying they may be

subjected to prolonged stays in Australia or be required to quarantine on return in the event of outbreaks.

"Quarantine-free travel will not be what it was pre-COVID-19, and those undertaking travel will do so under the guidance of 'flyer beware'," she said.

Travellers will not be required to produce a negative test before jetting off, though that may be added in the case of outbreaks.

The travel industry welcomed the news, but said the direct benefits would

be minimal as most people wanted to visit family and friends.

"Given the massive holes in the market ... the flow on benefits for our hotels and motels, and the many small businesses who supply them, is negligible," Accommodation Association chief executive Dean Long said.

Australian Federation of Travel Agents chair Tom Manwaring said it wouldn't increase business, but would provide much-needed confidence.

- with AAP





starting in the 1970s. The nations' relationship had the potential to expand beyond close trade ties to include greater defence cooperation, Mr Yamagami said.

A new treaty bolstering defence relations between the nations - the Reciprocal Access Agreement - would formalise the framework for joint training and drills for Japan and Australia. Mr Yamagami said it would serve as a deterrent against any possible disruptions to peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific region.

"The Aussie-Japan relationship is developing at remarkable speed. That's

my impression," Mr Yamagami said.

"Our two countries share global values, such as democracy, respect for human rights, the rule of law, and the market economy. But not only that, another commonality is Australia and Japan do share strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region."

A free and open Indo-Pacific could bring a "tremendous amount of benefits" to every nation in the region, he said.

"Australia and Japan are in the same boat, in this regard, to promote this great vision."

Mr Yamagami's com-

ments follow the historic first meeting of leaders last month for the revived Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, which counts Australia, Japan, the United States and India as members.

The ambassador called "the Quad" a vehicle to promote the vision of a free and open Indo-Pacific region, and rejected descriptions calling it an "Indo-Pacific NATO" or an alliance targeted at any particular nation.

He said the Quad was inclusive for any country that supported the vision, including freedom of navigation, disaster relief and maritime security.

## CENTRELINK

# Robodebt continued regardless of 'legally insufficient' data

Sarah Basford Canales

SERVICES Australia pushed on with its robodebt program for more than six months despite concerns many of the debts were based on "legally insufficient" information, a new ombudsman report has revealed.

A report by the Commonwealth Ombudsman into Services Australia's controversial income compliance program has shown the agency continued to raise debts despite question marks over the quality of the income data it held.

The agency's income compliance program, or "robodebt", began raising debts for Australians based on averaged income data from the Australian Taxation Office through Centrelink from 2015 until 2019.

It compared tax office data with reported income to Centrelink and raised debts where discrepancies were detected, but in November 2019, the agency conceded the debts raised using this information alone were "legally insufficient".

The ombudsman's report, published Tuesday, found while Services Australia admitted debts raised using this data were not valid, it continued to proceed with the program.

The agency argued its debt management system was not capable of easily freezing specific debts.

But the ombudsman said a more appropriate response would have been to pause all income compliance debt collecting until it was possible to differentiate between debts raised based on incomplete or poor quality data.

"We consider this created a high degree of risk for Services Australia and unnecessary hardship for individuals affected," the report read.

"The more appropriate approach would have been for Services Australia to be able to immediately freeze recovery on all income compliance debts while it conducted its identification process, only re-starting recovery once a debt was determined to have not been raised relying on income averaging."

The ombudsman also criticised the agency's lack of transparency and communication with affected recipients, saying this



Picture: Dion Georgopoulos

caused further confusion.

"[The agency] should have communicated in a more transparent manner with impacted individuals, ideally to complement the November 2019 announcement, rather than waiting until the further announcement in May 2020," the report read.

Nine recommendations were given to the debt recovery agency, including better written communication to affected individuals and to implement improved processes to find further proof of income beyond the tax office.

Services Australia accepted seven of the recommendations, noting two that recommended the agency publish general information and write to affected individuals if it plans to re-raise the debts of those who have already been subjected to refunds.

In November, the federal government agreed to pay nearly half a million Australians affected by the controversial robodebt scheme a total of \$1.2 billion.

The payout to members of the class action was agreed to on the basis the government, nor any of its officers, not admit it was legally liable.

As of September 2020, the agency told the ombudsman it had paid back 356,570 people, equating to approximately \$620.4 million or 86 per cent of the refund money owed.



## Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

### WHAT'S HAPPENING IN YOUR ASSEMBLY DURING APRIL 2021?

#### COMMITTEE INQUIRIES

- Inquiry into 2020 ACT Election and the Electoral Act (Submissions due 30 April 2021)
- Inquiry into Draft Variation 365: Housing Choices – Co-Housing and Boarding House (Submissions due 22 April 2021)
- Inquiry into the Drugs of Dependence (Personal Use) Amendment Bill 2021 (Submissions due 4 June 2021)
- Inquiry into Giralang shops (Submissions due 8 April 2021)
- Inquiry into the management of ACT school infrastructure (Submissions due 1 May 2021)
- Inquiry into Renewable Energy Innovation in the ACT (Submissions due 29 April 2021)
- Review of ACT health programs for children and young people (Submissions due 4 June 2021)

For further details about these committee inquiries, including terms of reference, see the website [www.parliament.act.gov.au/parliamentary-business/in-committees/inquiries](http://www.parliament.act.gov.au/parliamentary-business/in-committees/inquiries) or contact the Committee Support office on (02) 6205 0127.

#### PUBLIC HEARINGS

All public hearings are live streamed and open to the public (subject to social distancing requirements and room capacity limitations). Programs are regularly updated and can be downloaded from the website.

#### The Assembly meets – 20 to 23 April

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[aod.parliament.act.gov.au/live](http://aod.parliament.act.gov.au/live)

##### Sitting Pattern at:

[www.parliament.act.gov.au/parliamentary-business/sitting-calendar](http://www.parliament.act.gov.au/parliamentary-business/sitting-calendar)

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