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User Participation Working Group  
Ministerial Council on Energy Standing Committee of Officials

To the Committee

I am a public housing tenant residing in Inner-city Sydney, who is a consumer of gas and electricity.

Before I address energy issues, I note that Australia and the United States have failed to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, an international instrument which binds signing states to reducing greenhouse gases. Most of our energy is electric, which is in the main produced by coal-fired power stations.

On Electricity:

I recently had my metering upgraded to Interval type, unfortunately I had to meet this expense myself. The state-owned energy supplier for my area, Energy Australia, was unwilling to finance this changeover, nor was the public housing authority, the NSW Department of Housing. In 2-3 months, I should be in receipt of my next bill, and will be able to review its anticipated benefits to me. I anticipate that in the very long run I will be able to recover the upgrade costs in the form of electricity savings, but that this will take at least five to ten years.

I contend that Interval Metering represents a great opportunity to assist some poorer households to gain reduced energy costs through the modification of consumption behavior and 'load shifting' through operating key appliances at off-peak times. It should be available at no cost to any consumer who requests it. After all, there is at some times of the year an emerging deficiency in the electrical grid to keep up with rising peak load demands, largely contributed to by the phenomenal recent growth in domestic air conditioning, where houses get units installed which use up to 20kW and often not less than 4 kW. It could, through higher peak prices, encourage well-off households to focus on insulation and energy efficient home design/renovation rather than air conditioning.

Many lower income households reside in dwellings with no gas, and the hot water service is a tank of 160 liters or less connected to a continuous electricity supply at the full tariff. Various modelling as well as personal experience of myself shows that this is the most expensive form of hot water - with power constantly being switched on and off at all times of the day in order to maintain temperature at 60 to 70 degrees. Most hot water heaters use from 3 to 4 kW when heating. Heat loss is greater when the capacity of the tank is smaller, and simply running the hot water to wash a couple of dishes can trigger heat loss significant enough to cycle the unit "on". Electricity authorities will not provide off-peak metering for hot water systems with a capacity of less than 250 liters.

Time of use billing, with the tenant manually switching off and on their hot water to coincide with the lowest rate periods, offers another opportunity for significant energy cost savings.

Time of use billing also offers considerable money saving opportunities for those using heaters, washing machines and dryers. Often the dryer can be necessary when there is several days of inclement weather, the tenant lacks a balcony, and is reluctant to place clothing on outdoor lines in times of better weather because of the risk of theft of drying bedding, clothes etc as many renters live in areas with a higher transient population and/or lower socioeconomic status, and many small unit blocks feature common areas which

are not fenced from, and are also easily accessible from/visible to the street.

Insulation of dwellings is a major issue for me, many apartments and houses which poorer households can afford to rent are often constructed with no or very poor insulation. This means that the tenant faces a very heavy burden of increased energy costs associated with cooling (if they can afford an airconditioner) and heating in particular. Electricity is a very inefficient system of heating and more expensive than gas for space heating in larger applications.

For example, I have limited insulation, several large western facing windows with eaves of less than 1 ft on the western side and no eaves on my southern facing window/northern facing window. The building does not have rotary roof ventilators, commonly known as whirlybirds, which facilitate extraction of in-roof heat build-up during summer. My unit is on the top floor of an ageing three story walk up, with brick external walls and rendered internal walls.

The public housing unit I commenced living in late last year had some refurbishment, as did the whole building. Modern 5.2 star continuous flow gas hot water heaters were installed, but a valuable opportunity to cut greenhouse gases and aid some of the poorest members of the community through solar hot water was lost due to the pennypinching of the housing authority. As our block is not high-rise, this would have been easily possible.

AAA or AAAA water fittings are not provided to us, these would allow considerable savings on hot water.

Previous dwellings I have lived in, rented through the private sector, were similarly poor in terms of insulation and energy efficiency. Nothing gets done as the owner doesn't have to pay our energy bills, we do. Perhaps if they had to pay! then something would be done to make homes more efficient.

On Gas:

Meanwhile, I have been writing to my state and federal MP's regarding National Competition Policy, NSW Residential Tenancy Legislation and access to Gas. I am fortunate to have gas on at home. My campaign expresses concern that while a property tenant has the right to have access to power and a phone, they do not have the right to have a gas line installed even when in an area serviced by reticulated natural gas.

Gas produces considerably less greenhouse gases in space (room) heating applications as well as cooking and water heating. Property tenants who wish to have the gas on for room heating can be denied it as they must have the owner's consent, even if only seeking to use a portable gas heater from a bayonet point in their lounge area. A property owner can withhold such consent for any reason, sound or not, or in fact no reason at all.

Consequently, the tenant when needing heating must use electricity which is far less efficient, produces considerable greenhouse gases at generation and far more expensive.

It is an issue for urgent consideration that codes for new construction must include a mandatory gas connection where reticulated gas is available in the street. This includes apartments, townhouses, semi-detached and freestanding dwellings.

Developers often avoid installing gas as it is cheaper for them to build "all electric" homes. Though I have no evidence, I wonder, are they receiving covert incentives from the electricity industry to do this? Mmm I wonder.

It is simply unacceptable that cheaper environmentally friendly heating be denied to consumers simply to satisfy the whims of a small army of bunyip capitalists.

If a person wants the gas on, it should legally be the same as having on the phone or the power, that is, the tenant must have a legal right to get a gas line installed into their abode for their domestic use. This allows cheaper heating in winter and has many positive environmental benefits through reduced greenhouse gas.