

ACT Energy Transition Insights



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About ACTCOSS

ACTCOSS acknowledges Canberra has been built on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We pay respects to their Elders and recognise the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. We celebrate Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contributions to the ACT community.

The ACT Council of Social Service Inc. (ACTCOSS) advocates for social justice in the ACT and represents not-for-profit community organisations.





ACTCOSS is a member of the nationwide COSS Network, made up of each of the state and territory Councils and the national body, the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS).

ACTCOSS's vision is for Canberra to be a just, safe and sustainable community in which everyone has the opportunity for self-determination and a fair share of resources and services.

The membership of the Council includes the majority of community-based service providers in the social welfare area, a range of community associations and networks, self-help and consumer groups and interested individuals.

ACTCOSS advises that this document may be publicly distributed, including by placing a copy on our website.

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Learning from the ACT Energy Transition: Mini Report Series

Few jurisdictions have led as decisively as the Australian Capital Territory in the transition to clean energy. In 2020, Canberra became the first city outside Europe to power its electricity grid with 100 percent renewable energy. Today, with a legislated target of net zero emissions by 2045, the Territory is on track to become the first jurisdiction in Australia to phase out fossil gas.

The ACT's transition offers valuable insights for policymakers, community advocates and governments across the country. The ACT Energy Transition Insight Series is a biannual publication designed to share these insights, highlighting the people, policies and programs that have driven change. Each edition focuses on the principles of equity, effective leadership and practical reform, using interviews and case studies to explore what has worked, what challenges remain, and how other jurisdictions can apply these lessons.

We launch the series with insights from Mr. Shane Rattenbury, former Minister for Climate and Sustainability, who played a pivotal role in shaping the ACT's forward-looking energy framework and programs for a just energy transition. His experiences shed light on the balancing act between ambitious targets and pragmatic execution offering real-world lessons for governments and consumer advocates across Australia navigating the complexities of the energy transition. The interview below primarily consists of direct quotes. However some sections have been condensed and partially paraphrased to enhance readability.

Inside the Energy Transition: Reflections from an ACT Minister for Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction

In an interview with ACTCOSS, Mr. Shane Rattenbury, member of the ACT Legislative Assembly, and the leader of the ACT Greens, discusses the ACT's energy transition journey and reflects on his experience as the ACT's Minister for Climate and Sustainability from 2016-2024.

A longtime champion of climate action, both in the ACT and on the global stage, Rattenbury has been an instrumental force shaping the ACT's decarbonization trajectory. In this interview he provides insights on the policies, partnerships, and principles that have positioned the capital as a national leader in clean energy.



Q1. The ACT has been leading the renewable energy transition in Australia for quite some time. What are the forces driving this transition

The politics of it really started back in 2008 when the Greens gained the balance of power. We pushed hard for a legislated target of cutting emissions by 40% by 2020. Now once that became law, the public service had to meet that target – and the public sector is really good at gearing itself around what government wants to do, and that's where things like the move to

renewable energy came from —there was a **clear legislative mandate and accountability.**

Another critical factor has been **political continuity.** The ACT has enjoyed long-term cooperation between Labor and the Greens, which means our public service can steadily develop and refine climate policy. We're also fortunate to have a **community that expects strong climate action.** Combine that with the fact that we don't have major fossil fuel industries here, and you get an environment where ambitious ideas can take root and thrive.



“The government has a central role in ensuring households aren’t left behind”

Q2. The ACT aims to phase out gas by 2045. What are some of the biggest challenges it faces in doing so?

I see four main challenges. The first is **technology and cost**. Simply put, we need the right technology at the right cost and quantity, so electric alternatives—like induction cooktops or heat pumps—so people can afford the switch. The second is **workforce and skills**. We have to grow a trained local workforce to install and maintain these technologies at scale, which doesn’t happen overnight. The third barrier is **culture**. Many people in Canberra still see gas as “clean” or “cheaper,” and many are personally attached to cooking with gas. Changing those long-held views can be challenging.

Finally, there’s **equity**. Some households simply can’t afford a pricey retrofit or new appliance, so the government needs to step in. If we don’t handle the equity side properly, we risk a real backlash. The government has a central role in ensuring they aren’t left behind—whether that’s through direct subsidies, interest-free loans, or robust consumer protections.

Q3. How is the ACT addressing some of these challenges?

There is a **central role for government to play** here, markets alone will not provide the solution. In the ACT we recognized early on that policy ambitions mean little if residents can’t access affordable electric alternatives or if there aren’t enough skilled

tradespeople to install and maintain them. That's why we launched the Sustainable Household Scheme.

By offering interest-free loans for solar panels, heat pumps, and induction cooktops, we've been able to **leverage private capital** to create robust market demand—**kickstarting industry and workforce development** at a relatively **low cost to the public purse**.

As more households make the switch, local businesses expand their capacity, expand their workforce. Over time, that cycle of demand builds a larger industry, affordable products and a more skilled workforce capable of handling the transition at scale. We've also made significant investments, such as electrifying public housing, to further stimulate industry demand and ensure the benefits of the transition aren't limited to those who can afford loans. It's a steady, long-term approach that lets our workforce grow alongside the territory's ambitions, keeping us on track to meet our 2045 target without leaving anyone behind.

Q4. What role have external stakeholders such as business or community organisations played in the energy transition?

Civil society also plays an important in creating the grass roots momentum that enables government action. Community groups have been incredibly useful as both a critical friend and as a conduit of information. They raise issues the public service may not see or think to raise with you.

The work that ACTCOSS has done on some of the equity issues, has been really important in informing the conversations in the ACT. Some of the reports NGOs produce are important because they remind you of the issues and give you new evidence you can take into cabinet and argue. Reports like the ECA Annual Consumer Survey gives a good insight in to the economics of the transition and what it means to people.

Business in the ACT has been generally pragmatic; while some groups have raised concerns, we have not had sustained campaigns against the transition.



Q5: Do you have any advice for governments or leaders wanting to sustain and drive momentum in the energy transition

“Have legislated short-term targets. They break your end goal into manageable steps. If you only talk about 2050, everyone just defers action, milestones for 2025 or 2030 force accountability and drive progress.”

Legislated targets give public servants the mandate to plan good policies, value their expertise, give them the political space to make things happen. Good policy attracts committed public servants who, in turn, develop even stronger measures, which the political side tends to support because it works, creating a virtuous cycle that keeps the momentum of the transition alive.

“You also have to focus on equity from the start, if people feel worse off or shut out by the transition, they’ll push back, and momentum stalls.”

Q6: What impact does the NEM’s governing framework have on transition process, and how do different jurisdictions affect the NEM’s operations.

Because the ACT is relatively small, we’ve largely been able to chart our own path without affecting the NEM too much. But for bigger states like New South Wales, major shifts in policy can force the NEM to adapt.

It’s worth noting that the NEM is governed by multiple jurisdictions that don’t all share the same enthusiasm for phasing out gas. That **lack of consensus can slow or complicate bigger rule changes at the national level.**

You see this in the Ministerial Council. In theory it can issue policy statements or directions to the market bodies. In practice, though, you need enough states and territories on the same page. We haven’t seen that consensus; some states rely heavily on gas extraction and export. The ACT can champion reform, but we are one of many players in that room.



Q7. What advice do you have for organisations advocating for a just energy transition

I've thought this about this a lot having been a campaigner myself. I've learned spending more time at the beginning of a campaign thinking about the "ask" is important. Getting the "ask" right can help you get to where you want to a lot quicker.

Sometimes you want the big, overarching goal, but often it's smarter to begin with something specific and achievable—like asking for free school breakfasts instead of an end to child poverty. Once government sees it can deliver, it's easier to scale up.

Team up with the public service. Sometimes the public service is risk averse but so are ministers. Sometimes the public service wants to push for stronger measures, but they need external voices to validate the demand and reduce political risk. If as Minister I can see the public service is on board and the community is onboard that's happy days for me.

To get one layer of government to act, you may have to influence other layers of government, for instance, state governments are more likely to invest in things they see local councils supporting. This is where coordination among organisations working towards the same goal can help, although I acknowledge this scale of organization can be challenging.



Similarly, if you're trying to change the National Energy Market (NEM) rules, you'll need a minister to champion your issue and you will also need the market bodies on side or at least understand your proposal. If they flat-out reject it, it's much harder to convince other ministers. They're "the experts," and responsible ministers rely heavily on that advice.

Q8: Any additional insights you'd like to share?

Sometimes the most powerful influence comes from public servant to public servant. People in Queensland or Victoria reach out to our ACT officials to see how we ran certain programs or legislated targets. We freely share our models, which can then be adapted elsewhere. If you're an advocacy group, it's smart to encourage that cross-jurisdictional knowledge exchange. And always remember to document success—concrete results give others a blueprint to follow. People love success and they believe in things they can see.

Key Takeaways



1. Legislated, short-term targets

(e.g., a 2020 milestone vs. just 2050)
create urgency and drive tangible action.



2. Political Continuity

allows public servants to refine and
expand on successful initiatives without
constant policy reversals.



3. Equity Measures

loans, subsidies, and tenant protections
—are crucial for maintaining public
support.



4. Collaboration with Civil Society

strengthens policy design, identifies
gaps, and keeps governments
accountable.



5. Smaller jurisdictions can move faster

and act as “proof of concept” for larger states,
especially within complex national frameworks
like the NEM.

ACT Gas Transition Timeline

