

Ceiling insulation scandal blows up

by Jim H.

Environment Minister Peter Garrett found himself in considerable bother over the insulation scandal. He and the federal Labor government had to get themselves out of a hole. And they did this by abandoning the scheme that had handed out millions of dollars to just about anyone who could claim to be an insulation contractor.

It was a flawed scheme from the start, for it was an open invitation to outright crooks and corner-cutters. This does not suggest that everyone involved in the industry is a shyster.

The fault lies squarely with a government that continues to stick to the old mantra and worship of "competition and outsourcing", leaving it all to unregulated market forces. This is the problem.



Coalition protests, although partly hitting on the truth, are nonetheless hypocritical. They follow the same line. Focus on the competency or incompetency of Garret is a diversion aimed at point scoring.

Anyone not blinkered by the mantra would have realised that this scheme was an accident waiting to happen. It is more about the incompetency, or more accurately, the role of the existing government system as a means to provide avenues for private profit and not to protect and promote the interests of the people.

The scandal is one more episode that proves that Labor is a party of

big business. Sadly, in the process of unfolding, the scheme has cost 4 workers' lives, the burning down of houses and many more put at risk.

The response has been disgraceful. The scheme has suddenly been abandoned. In its place will be another that forces people to pay, and then they may get a partial rebate later on. Contractors who did the right thing are to be left high and dry. It does not answer the need to improve insulation and cut energy costs. The new scheme will discourage people.

The setting up of an authority that will carry out installations, not through contractors, where there is applied standardisation along the highest standards, is needed. Not putting the burden on ordinary people who cannot afford the cost. It is a cost that should be borne by government. Contractors who did the right thing should not be left out of pocket.

If this had been the approach in the first place, what has passed would not have occurred.

Vanguard

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'Green Loans' go down the gurgler

by Bill F.

Environment Minister Peter Garrett could have been born with a dunny brush in his hand. Everything he touches seems to get flushed away.

Already gone are the Solar Hot Water Rebate scheme and the ill-conceived, shonky and dangerous Home Insulation Program. The latest one heading for the gurgler is the much-trumpeted 'Green Loans' scheme.

Under this scheme, people could book one of 360,000 free assessments to show how their home could save energy and water. They could then apply for an interest-free loan of up to \$10,000 to pay for measures such as installing water tanks and solar panels.

The government expected it would take four years to complete the assessments. But with 270,000 of them already booked, the remainder will be completed within a few months.

The Department of Environment initially estimated that just 800 people would sign-up to be home assessors, but the accreditation body appointed by the government, the Association of Building Sustainability Assessors (ABSA), has been forced to freeze applications at 10,000.

Assessors are first trained by a registered training organisation, at a cost of around \$2000, and are then accredited by the ABSA. Assessors wanting accreditation have to become an ABSA member, which costs \$660 for the first-year, meaning the ABSA can make \$6.6 million from the

scheme. Assessors may have paid out for training, insurance, and membership fees, but with scheme set to close down, thousands now face unemployment.

The original concept relied on independent assessors, people keen to learn new skills and do something practical about climate warming. The reality of capitalist market forces, subsidised by taxpayer dollars, quickly destroyed the plan, with crooked operators employing unqualified assessors and creaming off big profits. Deja vu for Peter Garrett – much the same has happened with the roof insulation fiasco.

And, that's not the end of problems.

Under the loans scheme an assessor is supposed to arrange with a household for a green audit, then call the hotline to get a booking number, for confirmation that the Government will pay. The glut of assessors has meant the hotline is jammed and many assessors can't get through.

Just to rub salt into the wound, only 1000 of 70,000 available loans have been approved.

In desperation, Garrett has finally announced a more regulated system with properly accredited assessors and more people eligible for assessments on their house. The loans component has been killed off and low income households will now have to pay up-front for improvements such as insulation or solar hot water and then claim their rebate via the Medicare network. Ah, capitalism never neglects to make life harder for the working class.