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CULLING FIELDS

THE BATTLE FOR BELCONNEN



SECRET WEAPON

HOW A TEA SET SANK THE SYDNEY - PAGE 5

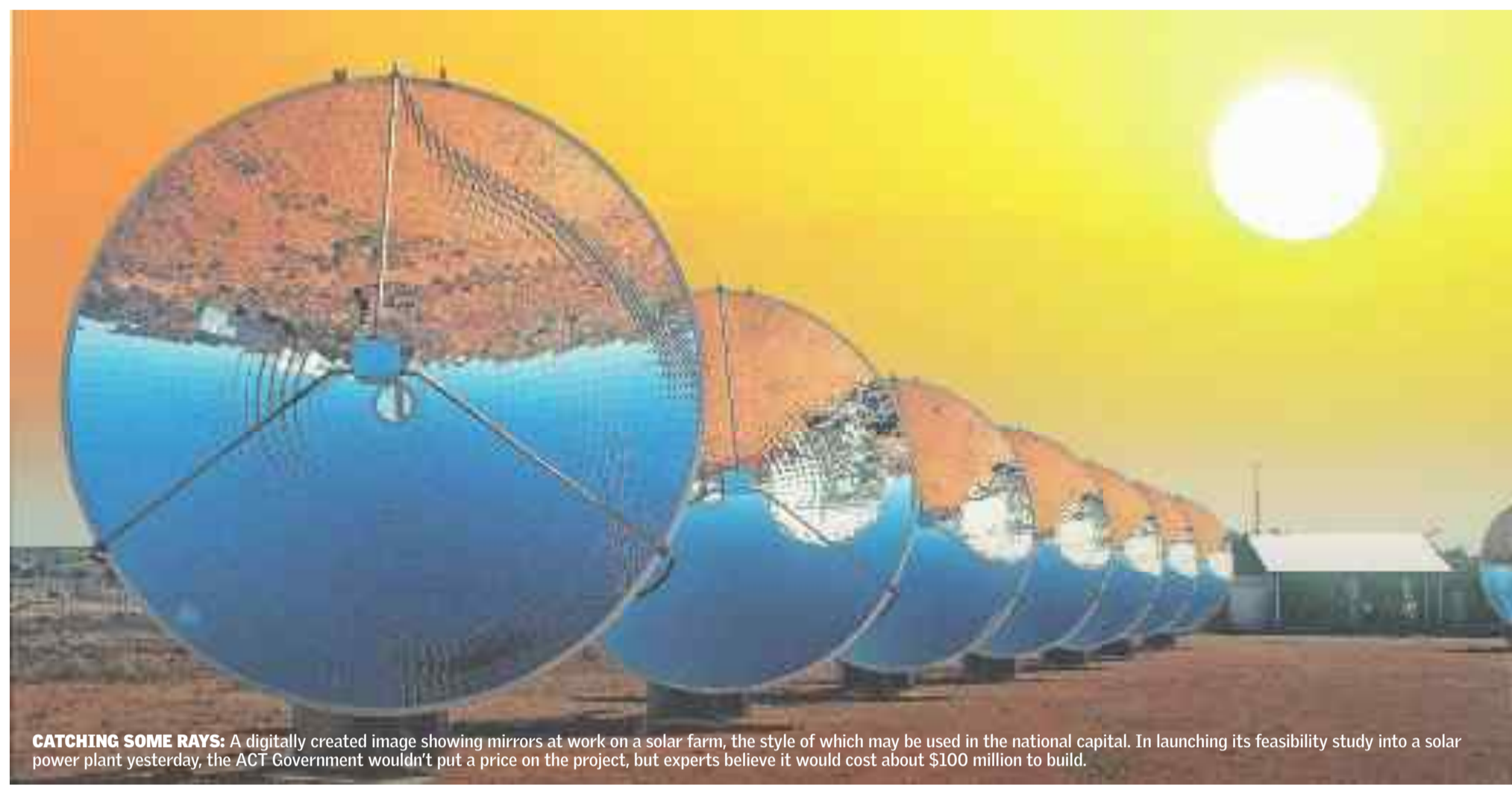


CASH STRAPPED

BRUMBIES COUNT INJURY COSTS - PAGE 36



Here comes the sun: Stanhope plans solar city



CATCHING SOME RAYS: A digitally created image showing mirrors at work on a solar farm, the style of which may be used in the national capital. In launching its feasibility study into a solar power plant yesterday, the ACT Government wouldn't put a price on the project, but experts believe it would cost about \$100 million to build.

By Cathy Alexander
Assembly Reporter

The ACT could have one of the country's largest solar power plants operating next year, pumping out enough electricity for 10,000 homes. But it might take higher power bills to make it happen.

First, the ACT Government needs to find an area the size of 20 football fields for the solar panels, or dishes.

The Government and ActewAGL announced yesterday a feasibility study into building a large-scale solar plant, touting the need to tackle climate change.

The plant could involve one hundred or more large solar dishes, or rows of solar panels on the ground, or it could be made up of trough-like mirrors.

Whatever it looks like, it will be big. It has been welcomed by the Conservation Council, which said Canberra was on the way to becoming "a solar capital".

Chief Minister Jon Stanhope said the feasibility study was wide open so he could not say how much the plant might cost, or where it might be built.

It may service 10,000 homes, which scientists said would require a 33 megawatt plant, which might cost \$100 million to build. Such a plant might cover about 100ha.

CANBERRANS BLOWING THE WATER BUDGET

Canberra's Indian summer has residents exceeding autumn water-use targets by as much as 73 million litres a day.

Actew says the combined dam storage has been falling by about 0.1 per cent a day in the unseasonable heat.

Canberra has sweltered through eight consecutive days above 30 degrees this month, well above the average top temperature for the month of 24.4 degrees.

Saturday's temperature of 35.2 degrees was almost 11 degrees above the average.

And on Sunday, the city guzzled

185 megalitres of water - 73ML or 73 million litres above the 112ML target.

Yesterday the mercury got to 29.9 degrees, which meant a record set in 1983 when the first nine days of March exceeded 30 degrees, was safe.

The Bureau of Meteorology forecasts a high of 29 degrees for Canberra today and fine conditions and above-average temperatures for the next couple of days.

The summer-like conditions were brought home yesterday when a smoke haze wafted over Canberra coming from hazard-reduction burns interstate.

In the meantime, the ACT is drying out.

The combined dam storage for the territory had fallen to 47.95 per cent yesterday.

Canberra received above-average rainfall last summer, helping the city to use only 127ML of water a day, below the summer target of 139ML a day.

By contrast, Canberra Airport has so far received only 3.6mm of rain this month, the March average being 51.1mm.

ActewAGL would have to source more green energy to meet the Federal Government's growing national mandatory renewable energy targets.

Mr Saddler asked why the ACT Government was getting involved in the plant when it could achieve far more if it focused on reducing demand for electricity.

The Federal Government had created the market for renewable energy and the industry could take it from there, he said.

Possible locations for the plant are a mystery. Mr Mackay said surplus land which was sunny would be ideal.

The plant could be under a flight path, in a noisy location, or on contaminated land. Sheep could graze beneath it. Mr Mackay said the study should be finished in July and the plant by mid next year. The technology used could be either photovoltaic or solar thermal.

Chief executive of renewable power company Wizard Power Tony Robey said Australia did not yet have a solar power plant on such a large scale. It had only small research plants.

When built, Canberra's plant would be one of the biggest, if not the biggest, in the country.

Solar power plants had taken off in Spain, Greece, Portugal and southern France, and a massive power plant of 64 megawatts had just been completed in Nevada.

The ACT Liberals welcomed the feasibility study, but raised concerns about the cost of the plant being added to electricity bills.

Liberal environment spokeswoman Vicki Dunne said she was worried that increases to bills had already been flagged.

"We would want to make sure that the less well off would not be made even more worse off," she said.

RBA's glimmer of hope on rates

By Peter Martin
Economics Editor

INSIDE



Struggling home buyers have been presented with hope by the Reserve Bank, whose board minutes issued yesterday suggest that the next move in interest rates could be down.

The indication comes as the Treasurer, Wayne Swan, has warned that the turmoil engulfing US financial markets presents a "significant risk" to the Australian economy.

The board's minutes issued yesterday - 14 days after the meeting, in accordance with the bank's new rules - indicate that the decision to lift rates in March was finely balanced.

It says that although "standard macroeconomic considerations" continued to suggest the need for a rate rise, there was "some evidence, albeit tentative, that a slowing in private demand was starting to emerge".

The board members were presented with staff forecasts of inflation somewhat lower than those previously made public.

After making their decision to lift the cash rate by a further 0.25 percentage points to 7.25 per cent, the board members described the overall tightening since the middle of 2007 as "substantial" and said that if the private banks tightened their lending standards, the effect would be even greater.

In an indication that the board members were uncertain about whether the next move on interest rates would be up or down, the minutes concluded by noting that the members felt the higher rate "would leave adequate flexibility to respond as necessary" over the months ahead.

This is a sharply different form of

- Bush: We'll beat turmoil
 - Miners drag down market
 - Reverse mortgages up
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words to that used after the February meeting, which said that the board would continue to review whether policy was "sufficiently restrictive".

The ANZ's chief economist, Saul Eslake, said that on his reading the words used by the bank conveyed "the possibility that the next movement in rates, whenever it occurs, could actually be downwards rather than inevitably being upwards" as the bank had been suggesting in its February minutes.

He said that the big slide in consumer confidence reported since the March meeting had increased the likelihood that the next move in interest rates would be a cut. The equities economist at Commonwealth Securities, Savanth Sebastian, added that the likelihood of a further rate rise had also been cut by an extra fortnight of weakness in global share markets. "Fear-driven sentiment remains a common theme amongst investors."

Continued Page 4

Iraq 'job is done' - or is it?

Five years on and Iraq is arguably little better off than before the "coalition of the willing" invaded, deposing Saddam Hussein and supposedly bringing democracy to the Middle East.

The weapons of mass destruction were never found, but Saddam's brutal regime is gone and elections have been held - although the Iraqi Government is still far from stable.

Although United States President George W. Bush declared "mission accomplished" less than two months after the first bomb was dropped in the "shock and awe" campaign, Iraq remains in what many term a civil war between Sunni and Shi'ites.

Popular opinion has turned against the war across the world. It is a significant issue in the US elections and the Rudd Government came to power promising to bring combat troops home.

Australia's Overwatch Battle Group and training team will finish their tours mid-year and not be replaced.

Chief of Defence Force Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston says "the job is done".

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Court orders Mokbel back to Australia

By Belinda Tasker
in Athens



A Greek court has ordered convicted drugs trafficker Tony Mokbel to return to Australia to face a string of criminal charges, including two of murder.

After a lengthy legal battle, judges at the Supreme Court in Athens granted last night Australia's request for Mokbel's extradition.

However, the final decision on whether Mokbel returns to Melbourne still has to be made by Greece's justice minister, which could take several weeks.

Mokbel's legal team could also appeal to the European Court of Human Rights.

The 43-year-old was arrested in Athens

last June after fleeing Australia in early 2006 while on trial for cocaine trafficking. He was convicted in absentia and sentenced to a minimum nine years' jail.

Australian police want him returned so he can serve his time behind bars.

He also has been charged in Australia with the murders of Melbourne under-

world figure Lewis Moran and drug dealer Michael Marshall, and is accused of a string of other drug offences.

Mokbel was flanked by security guards and his lawyers when the court handed down its decision, with his girlfriend, Danielle McGuire, sitting in the back row.

Mokbel said, "It was always going to be a tough hearing."

As he was being led back to the cells below the court building, he had a brief reunion with his baby daughter, Renate, who he kissed on the cheek and said, "I love you, babe." Mokbel then said he did not believe he could ever get a fair trial in Australia. "You will get a fair trial anywhere [except Australia], you would probably get a fairer trial for me in Indonesia." AAP

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