

## ***Civil defence as the way to deal with: Power system collapse: EESA bulletin 2/09***

**“The main threat to our communities is not failure of our power systems, but failing to understand that power outages are an inevitable part of our world. As customers we need to be able to deal with power interruptions without loss of life, personal injury, major pollution events or large economic loss. Every year we are becoming more and more reliant on our power systems. Continued added reliance on a system vulnerable to major collapse is a threat to us all.”**

**Dr Robert Barr, EESA National President**

I live in a flat in Melbourne. Visitors sometimes wonder about the large water containers in my bathroom. Well, half a century ago, i worked in Sweden and Switzerland. From these countries came another view of life: basic personal responsibility for surviving infrastructure breakdowns. With that in mind, in the early 1980s i wrote Collingwood Community Health Centre’s response to the SECV’s environment effects statement for the proposed Brunswick to Richmond transmission line. My position was that if the SECV was to be taken at its word, delivery of raw energy was not the issue behind its proposal to upgrade its line in the Yarra and Merri Ck. valleys from 72.5kV to 245kV, but *security of supply* was. If this were so, replacing a “weak” link with a heavy duty link would not give us security.

Security is something that arises in people and their capacities to deal with what makes them insecure. It is never a function of technology although many labour under the illusion that it may be.

Consider fire security. Were it not for Australians’ regular confrontations with fire, there would be no political constituency for fire brigades nor for the volunteers that form our justly famous rural fire defence. By the same token, security in the event of black or brown-outs arises when we know what to do when they happen. Currently, few Australians know much about these things. At best, rural people have a fire plan. Urban Australians have no plan to help them through any dislocation. And, from my long experience of trying to generate it, we seem to have no interest in developing it. Worse, our emergency services (from the State-based systems to the private systems of the Salvation Army and the Red Cross) get defensive when we suggest that some kind of population-based social infrastructure such as civil defence training, would be the way to go.

My proposal for dealing with Robert Barr’s fears about reactions to a “Blackstart” are to set up community-wide civil defence training – a kind of national service. Expensive in the short-term, yes, but the social benefits would be virtually endless.

### References:

- o Frank Fisher, 1986, "Comment from Outside: Generalised Comment from a Community Health Centre's Criticism of an Environmental Impact Statement for a Large Engineering Development", *Multi-Disciplinary Engineering Transactions of the I.E.A.*, GE10/2, 96-99.
- o Frank Fisher, 2006, *Response Ability: Environment Health & Everyday Transcendence*, Vista.

Frank Fisher

[Prof. of Sustainability, Faculty of Design & Nat. C. for Sustainability  
SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, PO Box 218, HAWTHORN, Vic., 3122]