

EDITORIAL

Issue of wood-fired heaters will persist

THE topic of wood-fired heaters is, for Canberrans, as clear-cut as it is divisive.

It's either a deeply comforting and time-honoured method of heating one's home, or a pollutant that should be done away with.

Those who don't hold either position most likely have no skin in the game at all, and so have no need for an opinion.

And yet it's a topic that has caused the former Greens environment minister to accuse Labor of becoming a cowardly, complacent government that walks away from forward-thinking policy.

But Labor's insistence that it had only ever agreed in principle to a phase-out of wood-fired heaters is perhaps more accurate, in that the government appears to be hedging its bets on what will be a bitter and continuously divisive issue well into the coming decades.

It's not so much a backflip on policy, as Rebecca Vassarotti would have it, as a cautious reminder that a phase out will not be simple or smooth.

Nor is it necessarily an indication the government had misplaced its spine and risked losing the next election.

As the current environment minister, Labor's Suzanne Orr reiterated this week that the 2045 phase-out date had never been a

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firm commitment, and that extensive consultation would be needed on a future ban.

She said the government would continue working with the community to transition to clean energy by 2045 "with as little division

as possible".

But this should not become a complacent blind spot for the government either. It's an important flashpoint for both environmentalists and those who suffer from the effects of the pollution caused by wood-fired heaters.

As Ms Orr put it bluntly last week, "those who love their heaters love their heaters. Those who do not love the pollution that comes from the heaters really do not love the pollution that comes from the heaters."

It's not an intractable issue by any means, and plenty of work has already been done towards a phase-out.

New laws came into effect in February, which ban installing wood-fired heaters that do not meet current emissions standards, along with a prohibition on household fires in new development areas where studies

show there would be a negative effect on air quality.

In the meantime, the government will need to build on that work with what looks like a degree of urgency.

It also needs to build a better consensus as part of the process of building a stable policy that's less likely to be overturned by a Liberal government, should that day ever arrive.

Those who are affected every winter by the smoke from wood-fired heaters are right to be concerned that this policy continues to be subject to any kind of debate at all.

There are many who believe, often correctly, the loss that will ensue from an eventual ban will be far outweighed by the environmental and health benefits to the community and the territory overall.

But the government still needs to build more decisive support for a policy that will be far from straightforward to implement.

The approach, as foreshadowed by a government spokeswoman on Wednesday, will need to be educative, rather than hectoring, and involve convincing a stubborn portion of the population to relinquish something they hold dear.

The fact that the majority of Canberrans don't care one way or another is not a reason to relegate the issue to the backburner.