

It's the End of the World. Again.

by Kerry Cue

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Fact Checker (Below)

The end of the world is coming to Melbourne. Again. In the 1959 film, *On the Beach*, Gregory Peck and Ava Gardner waited in Melbourne to die from radiation poisoning. Now, according to friends, life as we know it will end soon for us. Let me explain. I hang out with engineers. They're strange folk. I'm married to one so I know. They do calculations in their heads. My beloved, HRH, doesn't yell at us to 'turn off the lights'. He lectures us on how many mega watts will be consumed over a 20-year period. The family tends to turn lights off just to shut him up.

My friends and some esteemed institutions are hot and bothered about power outages. Summer has been hellishly hot. Power consumption hit a record in Victoria on the 10th January. It was, admittedly, a 40 degree scorcher, but schools and many businesses were shut. In the meantime, folks are rushing out and buying air conditioners. But each new swishing, hissing unit adds a burden to the system.

There's no power crisis claims Rob Hulls while advising Victorians to turn off air conditioners. There's no power shortage say suppliers while explaining recent blackouts as problems with individual electricity companies. You can believe them or do the maths yourself. Victoria has a supply capacity of around 10 million kilowatts. Let's assume Melbourne has 1 million households-a conservative figure- and that we all want to be cool, which we do. If every household installs a mid-range 10 kilowatt unit, at peak demand, air conditioners alone will use up our State's full power supply capacity. We don't all own air conditioners but we're buying them. Some time soon – Bang!- the system will be overloaded, the power will fail, life as we know it will end and we'll be propelled back in time, way back to a pre-digital, pre-automated, pre-programmed existence.

I've lived through a power failure in my bit of suburbia and it's an ugly sight. It looks like the end of the world. Latte addicts sit dumbstruck outside cafes unable to get their caffeine fix. People stand in the street holding dead eftpos cards as the ATMs refuse to work. Zombies appear out of the dark in supermarkets with trolley loads of food that they can't buy because the barcode scanners won't work and the tills won't open. Even the doors have to be prised open because they're electric. Macdonald's closes. That's a vision from a post-apocalypse movie especially for the mother with ten 7 year olds expecting a party.

Back on the home front tellies won't work. Video games are cactus. Computers are down. You may squeeze an hour or so out of a lap top, but there's no internet. The family is under pressure. They have to relive the olden days. Play Monopoly or talk to each other. They can't cook. The electric appliances are useless and the gas stove uses an electric igniter. If they can't find any matches they are reduced to boiling a billie on the gas barbecue to make a cup of tea.

Meanwhile, in the state of Victoria nothing is happening to offset this disaster. No new power stations are imminent. There are no restrictions on air conditioners.

My friends could be wrong, but if there is a power outage this summer I'll be gunning for Rob Hulls to come to my place and reset all those bloody digital clocks.

Fact Checker:

*AAP Jan 11 NEMMCO (National electricity grid management) set Victoria's power supply at over 10 million kilowatts, but less than 11.

* Hitachi reverse-cycle air conditioners use between 7 and 15 kilowatts. People are installing more than one.

*The government estimates for the no. of households in Victoria in 2008 is almost 2 million.

*We received an e-mail this week from AIE Australian Institute of Energy (Melb) expressing concern about Victoria's power supply.

*In 2008, Rob Hulls was Minister for Industrail Realtions.