

Nuclear energy: Is it the answer for anything?

John Kaye

Greens Upper House Candidate

NSW State Elections March 2007

19 November 2006

Based on a speech given at Politics in the Pub, Gaelic Club, Sydney, 6 October 2006

G:\Articles\AusSoc_Nukes_18Nov06.doc

Nothing has really changed. Nuclear energy generation still produces wastes that are highly toxic, long lasting, attractive to terrorists and useful ingredients in weapons of mass destruction. Deepening Australia's engagement in the nuclear fuel cycle would still risk starting a nuclear arms race in South-East Asia. Nuclear energy is still far more expensive than many renewable alternatives like wind and, in the case of Australia, would take too long to develop to be a sensible response to global warming. Known reserves of high grade uranium are still too small to make a substantial impact on greenhouse gas emissions.

There has been no miracle cure for the ills of nuclear power that made it an expensive, dangerous and ineffective energy generation option ten years ago.

The only real change is that the nuclear industry and its cheer squad in Canberra are working hard to manufacture a renaissance for their industry. They have decided to exploit growing public concerns that continued use of fossil fuels is producing life-threatening changes in the climate.

The Howard government has lead the charge for the nuclear lobby. From their perspective, a debate on the nuclear fuel cycle is a great opportunity to pursue their objectives. Understanding their motivations is key to countering the propaganda and mounting an intelligent and active campaign to put the nuclear genie back in its bottle.

Protecting the profits of the mining industry

The Howard government has always been a good friend to the giant mining corporations that operate in Australia. Not only do they share an ideological distaste for the environment movement but also the revolving door between the industry and the ministry and bureaucracy has been very active.

The uranium mining industry in Australia and elsewhere has perfected the art of turning a profit from supplying a fuel that is profoundly uneconomic. The secret is to get governments to pay part of the costs. In South Australia, the public purse is stumping up \$22.5 million over the next five years for exploration. The 2005 US Energy Bill gifted A\$17.5 billion in subsidies and tax breaks to the nuclear industry. The clean-up bill for disused nuclear facilities in the United Kingdom will be about A\$173 billion, much of which will need to be paid for by the UK government.

With this sort of money covering costs, it is not hard to make a big profit, provided the political support exists to cover the flaws in the argument for nuclear power.

Like so-called "clean" coal, "safe nuclear power" remains a convenient untruth. The idea serves not only the economic objectives of the uranium miners but also the coal corporations who profit either from a delay in reducing fossil fuel consumption or directly from the nuclear fuel cycle itself.

It is ironic that the Howard government's active promotion of a competitor to coal would be welcomed by the more forward thinking colliery owners. As long as the public can be convinced that there are technological solutions to global warming, the pressure is off coal mining in the short term.

Exposing the economic fallacy of these arguments is important. The Federal government's nuclear agency ANSTO commissioned a report by British nuclear scientist and power plant insurer Professor John Gittus, whom one would expect to place nuclear power in the best possible light.

Professor Gittus further found what was already known in almost every other country: to make nuclear energy cost competitive with other energy sources, it would require massive subsidies and would expose our electricity industry to enormous financial risks. The Howard government would have a hard time explaining the nuclear option given its fetish for competition and economic rationality.

Pursuing partisan political objectives

For John Howard, the nuclear fuel cycle is a quality wedge against the ALP. By initiating the debate on more mines, enrichment, waste storage and reprocessing, he has neatly divided the Labor party. While there is significant opposition within his party, leader Kim Beazley obliged the prime minister by moving to dump the three mines policy. Shadow Resources Minister Martin Ferguson has shown particular enthusiasm for promoting increased exports.

The divisive debate that will inevitably alienate many on the left of the ALP is bad news for the Labor party, and the rest of us, a year out from a crucial federal election.

One of John Howard's most popular past times is demonising the left and the environment movement. The nuclear debate creates a playing field in which he feels he can divide off mainstream voters. By asserting that a rejection of nuclear power reduces options to respond to climate change, he can undermine the environmental credentials of the opposition to the nuclear fuel cycle.

This is easily countered. Even Professor Gittus could not find an existing reactor technology that would be suitable for Australian conditions, instead suggesting we buy into Westinghouse's AP1000, which is still on the drawing board. Such technology would be at least two decades away from reality in Australia. As the Stern report so eloquently argued, waiting two decades to reduce carbon emissions is not a viable option.

Pursuing strategic objectives

While the idea of possessing nuclear weapons has long been nurtured by a group of policy makers in Canberra, it attracts strong political opposition, not only within Australia but also from the USA, who would prefer to keep a monopoly on weapons of mass destruction. The climate debate has created the perfect cover to take Australia one large step towards nuclear arms readiness.

Enrichment of uranium ore to nuclear fuels is a key option John Howard has placed on the table for Australia. It involves the same family of technological process that would enrich uranium to nuclear weapons grade.

Those in Canberra who want nuclear weapons presumably know that enrichment in Australia would be highly threatening to our neighbours in South East Asia and be likely to be met by a quest for similar technology in those countries. The inevitable arms race would certainly see Australia become nuclear armed but it would lead to a volatile and dangerous situation in the region.

Selling uranium to China and India might improve the balance sheets of some of Australia's corporate mining giants but it would also undermine the nuclear proliferation treaty and Australia's credibility as a non-nuclear power.

The Howard government argues that safeguards will sequester Australia's uranium for peaceful purposes. This is transparently silly. Once in the hands of a nuclear weapons state like India or China, Australian uranium frees up other nuclear fuel to be directed into bomb manufacture, even if our materials never physically enter the arms cycle.

It is also important to argue that the Howard government's fixation on terrorism seems to stop short of target minimisation. By involving Australia with enriched uranium or nuclear wastes, the

Coalition is creating an attractive target for terrorists. Given the long half life of these materials, that target will persist for thousands of years, passing a costly and dangerous burden to future generations.

Conclusions

The environment movement, the Greens and other progressive people who care about the future have an important task ahead. Rebuilding the mass movement against nuclear power will require spreading the arguments amongst many young Australians who were not part of the debates of the 1970s and 1980s.

With both state and federal elections scheduled for 2007 and the torrent of nuclear misinformation already beginning, the anti-nuclear movement, the Greens and progressive people have a challenging time ahead. By mobilising public concerns and by maintaining the rage, we can stop John Howard and make Australia nuclear free.