

Keeping the lead out of the plumbing system: Ways to win Australia's nuclear debate

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John Howard has plunged Australia into a nuclear “debate”. He has thrown down the gauntlet to The Greens, the environment movement and the entire country. The challenge is not only to reinforce community opposition to the nuclear fuel cycle. The challenge is also to seize the opportunity to build an irresistible case for a jobs-rich clean energy future that poses none of the risks or costs of nuclear energy.

If we are successful, the proposition that nuclear power is “cheap, safe and green” will be seen in the same light as tobacco companies and their attempts to discredit the scientific evidence against their product.

To make this happen, we need to bring into focus the dangers of nuclear power. Like the ancient Roman plumbers who used lead water pipes and hence poisoned most of the urban population, the nuclear industry must be exposed for the risks that it presents to this planet's future health.

We need to remind people of the consequences of weapons proliferation and terrorism, the economic irrationality of nuclear power, the scarcity of high grade uranium, the risks associated with waste storage and the ethical issues of needlessly dumping persistent toxic materials onto hundreds of future generations of Australians.

It is useful to begin by exploring the possible motives behind the Prime Minister's politically risky flirtation with the nuclear fuel cycle. It is hard to take seriously the proposition that nuclear fission is a sensible energy source for Australia, either in terms of economics – there are far cheaper options – or in terms of technological risk.

Nuclear power a bad option for Australia.

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. Even he could not find an existing reactor technology that would be suitable for Australian conditions, instead suggesting instead 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 and would expose our electricity industry to enormous financial risks.

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

Playing politics with nuclear power?

Discounting the option of believing that this was simply about nuclear power in Australia, it has been suggested that he was trying to wedge the Labor party by inflaming internal disagreement over uranium mining for export and at the same time winning favour and hence campaign donations with the minerals industry by opening up more mines. If so, he may well have overplayed his hand by taking the debate well beyond the comfort zones of many Australians.

Climate change and nuclear energy.

Given that denial is no longer a tenable approach to climate change in the face of overwhelming scientific evidence and community concern, it has also been suggested that Howard was beating the nuclear drum to cover his government's appalling record of doing almost nothing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The problem with this approach is that the majority of the uranium resource is low grade and requires massive amounts of energy to mine and mill into reactor fuel. In fact, with current reactor technologies, low grade uranium produces more greenhouse gas emissions than coal. High grade uranium, which may produce fewer greenhouse gases, is a very limited resource and can not make a significant dent on the world's total energy demand. Combined with the time taken to develop a new reactor, nuclear power is no answer to greenhouse. At best promoting it would be a smokescreen for inaction on climate change.

Waste storage and reprocessing

It is now emerging that the most likely driver for Howard's nuclear push is fuel reprocessing and waste storage in Australia. On his June 2006 trip to the USA, Australia was invited to join the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership which is the Bush administration's solution to two pressing problems. First, the US has not yet succeeded in creating a long term high level nuclear waste storage site. Australia with its supposedly empty deserts and stable political environment is a very attractive proposition. Secondly, the US wants to sell nuclear technology India which has not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty. The perfect solution is to "lease" the fuel to countries like India which then return the wastes to Australia for cooling, reprocessing and storage. Those countries would thus be, at least in theory, denied the ability to manufacture weapons from Australia's uranium.

From Australia's perspective reprocessing is really bad news. Some nuclear wastes are highly toxic and have half lives of 24 thousand years, or seven hundred generations. Whatever economic gains are made in the next twenty years from taking these wastes will need to compensate at least seven hundred generations of Australians for the costs and risks of running and securing a high level waste storage system. The ethics of asking future generations to pay for our profligacy is highly vexed.

Further, storage and transport of these types of materials are an attractive nuisance to terrorists. It is time to be alert and alarmed at a government that on the one hand is restricting civil liberties to supposedly protect public safety while on the other hand creating the perfect terrorist target.

Australia a nuclear weapons state

The final hypothesis, which is directly related to the storage and reprocessing of nuclear wastes, is the idea that Australia needs a nuclear weapon. As attractive as this might be to certain elements within the Coalition government, there is no doubt that kick starting a nuclear arms race with Indonesia as such action would inevitably do is probably the single most silly thing Australia could do. Nonetheless it is important to remind the community of the intimate connection between nuclear weapons, nuclear terrorism and the uranium fuel cycle.

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