

Diatribes 166

Uranium power is no answer to global warming.

Not long ago, one of our listeners asked me to again explain why I didn't consider nuclear power a suitable way of reducing Australia's greenhouse gas emissions. By coincidence, there are currently major reasons why nuclear power has again become a topical subject at this time.

One is that our old Lucas Heights reactor, which went by the name of HIFAR, has been replaced by another, (called OPAL), which uses the same outdated technology. OPAL, which cost Australians some \$500 million, has just come on stream. The avowed purpose of these reactors was their use as a source of neutrons for so-called research purposes. One other reason is that the ALP has decided to abandon its old three mines policy in favour of open slather for uranium mining. The third is the official admission by the Howard Government that they will put uranium energy on their agenda of countering widespread concerns about climate change.

Let's first of all deal briefly with nuclear power. After the US dropped two nuclear bombs on Japan at the end of WW II, development of which had involved the biggest industrial research project ever in the US, run at the taxpayer's expense, the captains of US industry were desperate to turn this massive investment by the people into private profit. Indeed, even sceptics including myself and many of our friends were attracted to what seemed to be an inexhaustible source of power. If only!!!!

Much of this delusion was based on the secrecy and misinformation as well as the hype of the nuclear industry, which claimed that nuclear energy would be too cheap to meter, that it was safe, clean and cheap. A few years later it became clear that it was dirty, expensive and dangerous, and construction of nuclear power stations ceased. For 25 years no new nuclear power stations were built or even under construction.

It is not necessary to offer scary arguments listing the dangers of nuclear power, although these are of course realistic. There are many straightforward technical and commercial reasons why nuclear power is literally a fizzer. Let's list the technical ones first:

One: Only about a fifth of energy used in industrial countries is in the form of electricity, but nuclear power can supply nothing else.

Two: Currently, nuclear power contributes less than 2% to world energy consumption. If any appreciable part of the world's electricity were produced from nuclear sources, the world's uranium would run out in a matter of a few years. This was realised many years ago, and Britain, Germany and France amongst others built experimental breeder reactors which were supposed to generate more nuclear fuels than they consumed. None of these ever succeeded.

Three: Only a small amount of Uranium is in the form of U235, the isotope which can fuel nuclear power plants and which can be separated out for reactors at commercially viable rates. Beyond this nuclear power would become prohibitively expensive.

Four: No-one so far has found ways of disposing of the dangerous wastes, some of which have now been accumulating for fifty years or more. These wastes will remain dangerous for hundreds of thousands of years. The same goes for disused power stations which currently can only be moth-balled at enormous and so far indeterminate costs. There are now dozens of such dead power stations around the globe. They will remain as silent monuments to nuclear folly. Even encasing them in concrete, the currently favoured method of disposing of dead nuclear plants, would cost the earth and would require vast amounts of fossil fuel energy. Indeed, nuclear experts have argued that the preparation, building and decommissioning of a nuclear power station would ultimately consume more power than the station could produce during its lifetime. No-one knows for certain, because no plant has ever been taken through this full life cycle.

Five: We need relatively quick solutions for global atmospheric pollution. The time taken for the completion of a nuclear power station from the moment of decision to build one is never less than 15 years.

Six: Once again the world is threatened by the nuclear holocaust, which is inextricably linked to the nuclear fuel cycle. Australia's prospective participation in the nuclear weapons club is the only explanation for the enthusiasm of successive Federal governments to spend vast amounts of our money on out-dated nuclear technology and enormous publicity efforts on inventing lies to sell this otherwise pointless exercise to the public. It is not insignificant that ASIS, Australia's military secret agency, has played a large role in pushing the nuclear barrow, and that all these activities are kept secret from you and me.

So, what does the government expect to gain from publicising their efforts to go ahead with nuclear power? This is not the first time this spectre has been raised. It was raised by Philip Baxter, then head of the Atomic Energy commission and an unashamed proponent of building our very own nuclear weapons. With the advent of the Whitlam government, these plans were dropped from the official agenda but it is likely they still live on in the minds of the military. What does the Howard mob expect to achieve with the current move to nuclear power?

There are two possibilities. They have no intentions to co-operate with the rest of the world to counteract the current threat from global warming. John Howard has made it clear that to his blinkered outlook every dollar in the bank account of Australian mining companies, particularly the coal and uranium barons, outweighs the threat to humanity from the damage to our environment implicit in the current course his government is taking. He sees the current horrendous drought merely as a means of centralising power in Canberra. He would regard the announcement of nuclear power for Australia as a heaven-sent opportunity to do nothing for the next 15 years in regard to alternative energy sources, of which we have an abundance in this country, or in relation to energy saving, for which there are many opportunities. He favours only two pie-in-the sky options: Nuclear power which cannot contribute materially to the solution of the greenhouse gas problem, or the so-called clean coal project which would allow our coal barons continued super profit were it feasible. This would require a new raft of coal-fired power-stations which collect all their exhaust gases and concentrate them before forcing them underground into the earth where, it is claimed, they would stay safely stored for ever. This scheme, too, would take at least 15 years before it could come to fruition.

All these are Clayton's solutions which are intended to give the appearance of taking action on climate change, while in fact shovelling vast amounts of money - our money - into the pockets of the captains of the mining industry. These schemes are what would occur to the people in Canberra whose limited intellect has already denied Australia a chance to participate in the unlimited opportunities offered by the current world energy situation.

This scenario, however, is unlikely to succeed. During the last 15 years the federal government has pushed the concept of a nuclear waste disposal dump. Millions of dollars have been thrown at advertising campaigns designed to treat this as a technical problem. It is not. Both the siting of nuclear power stations of which the government wants to build some two dozen all round the Australian coast-line, will founder on the resistance of state governments and of the Australian people. This has already occurred in the case of the waste dump. After years of trying to force this unwanted imposition down the unwilling throats of South Australians, West Australians and people in the Northern Territory, the Federal Government has been to site the dump on Commonwealth land over which residents have no control. They have had to do this because the new OPAL reactor's licence was made contingent on the existence of a dump for its waste. It is time for us to revolt.