

Climate change: Nuclear is no solution!

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Despite being seen as a climate change “renegade”, Prime Minister John Howard is currently attempting to gain “greenie” points by pushing for acceptance of “cleaner and greener” nuclear power as the solution to global warming. However, environmentalists, scientists and opposition political parties have roundly dismissed Howard’s call for a “full-blooded debate” on nuclear power as a false debate with a pre-determined winner that ignores a gamut of possible renewable energy options.

While visiting Ireland on May 22, Howard made his call for a public debate on nuclear power as well as flagging the possibility of establishing a uranium enrichment plant in Australia. This would convert powdered uranium ore (“yellowcake”), which has 0.7% of the fissionable uranium-235 isotope, into nuclear fuel rods with a 3-5% U-235 content, thus adding value to Australia’s uranium exports.

Howard’s apparent motivation for pushing for nuclear power - that it is the “best” solution to reducing Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions and curtailing climate change - is not convincing. As Labor frontbencher and former Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) president Peter Garrett told the May 23 *Melbourne Age*, Howard has “done absolutely zip on climate change”.

The Howard government’s current climate change policy would allow a 100% increase in global greenhouse gas emissions, which would lock the world into a 3-4oC rise in average global surface temperatures, causing catastrophic climate change.

Australia is the world’s biggest coal exporter and allows a greenhouse mafia of powerful fossil-fuel resources corporations headed by BHP to write government greenhouse policy (as was revealed by ABC TV’s *Four Corners* program earlier this year). In its 2006 budget, the Howard government only allocated a measly \$100 million towards combatting climate change.

According to Climate Action Network Australia’s March 2004 report *The Real Way Forward*, the federal government is still giving massive subsidies to the fossil-fuel industry while cutting funding for research into renewable energy. In 2002, the government pulled funding for the Australian Cooperative Centre for Renewable Energy, a key alternative energy research institution. In the same year, the government provided \$22 million to invest in researching “carbon geosequestration” - a scheme to bury carbon dioxide emissions from coal-fired power stations.

If the Howard government were truly concerned with climate change, nuclear power would not be on its agenda.

Professor Ian Lowe, current president of the ACF, told ABC TV’s May 24 *Lateline* program, “Nuclear power is too expensive, too slow and makes too little difference and is too dangerous”.

A single nuclear reactor could take up to 10 years to build and cost \$3 billion, as well as releasing large amounts of carbon dioxide in the construction process. This rules nuclear power out as a rapid and cost-effective solution to climate change, to say nothing of the potential catastrophic dangers of

accidents and the still unresolved problem of storing nuclear waste safely for tens of thousands of years.

According to Lowe, “wind and solar could be delivering energy next year. Efficiency could be producing gains next week. These are cost-effective solutions that are much better, in terms of timing, than the hope that nuclear might be the answer.”

“Renewable energy (mostly hydro) already supplies 19% of world electricity, compared to nuclear’s 16%,” the ACF’s website notes, adding: “Renewable energy could meet most of the world’s energy demand by 2100, according to the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.”

The UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency predicts that nuclear power will only contribute to 12% of world electricity by 2030, despite the projected growth of nuclear power in China and India.

The ACF points out that Australia currently gets 8% of its electricity from renewable energy, down from 10% in 1999. By contrast, Britain plans to increase its renewable proportion of electricity by 100% by 2020, Germany and Denmark by 300%.

Why is Howard pushing for nuclear power? He first raised the need to look at the nuclear “option” on May 19, while visiting Washington. The US government is pushing nuclear power as the “best” solution to global warming.

Last year, US President George Bush won from Congress a host of “incentives” for the nuclear industry, including tax breaks and insurance against regulatory and legal delays in constructing new plants. On May 22, the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission announced that 16 corporations had expressed interest in building 25 new nuclear reactors in the US.

“For the sake of economic security and national security, the United States of America must aggressively move forward with the construction of nuclear-power plants”, Bush told 300 employees at Exelon Nuclear’s Limerick nuclear power station in Pennsylvania on May 24.

Addressing an anti-Bush protest rally in Limerick, Mike Ewall of the Energy Justice Network pointed out that a US Department of Energy draft report that has since been removed from the DoE’s website had concluded that a combination of renewable energy sources and increased energy efficiency could meet all US energy needs by 2020.

“Bush is following the need of corporate interests, not what’s good for the people”, Ewall said.

Corporate interests also lie behind Howard’s nuclear-power push. With increased demand for uranium from India and China, the market price for uranium has doubled in the last 12 months. Australia’s mining companies, including BHP, are champing at the bit to get their share of the market, and the number prospecting for uranium reserves increased from five in 2003 to more than 70 today.

With Australia having the world’s largest reserves of uranium, these companies stand to make huge profits from a global expansion of the nuclear power industry.

P.S.

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