

Western Australia misses U-boat

He says "nuclear power or global warming" but global warming has little to do with man's actions, so it is coming anyway. However, we still need nuclear energy to improve and sustain our standard of living.

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Uranium has become a crucial energy source. Edith Cowan University politics lecturer Peter van Onselen says WA must allow it to be mined

It is unfortunate that environmentalists have been left with what can only be described as a difficult choice – nuclear power or global warming.

But that is exactly the choice the world faces. The International Energy Agency predicts that by 2030, the world's energy needs will be 60 per cent higher than they are now.

That's not surprising considering the growth going on in places such as China and India, the world's two most populous nations. The only energy source capable of servicing such demand without causing global warming is nuclear power. Dirty coal simply won't do.

This dilemma will force the WA Government to confront the fact it needs to permit uranium mining. The world needs our stocks, just as our state's economy will soon need the mining royalties.

As much as many of us would like to believe that wind farms, blocking the ocean views of otherwise-relaxed South-West communities, can carry the state's energy needs, they can't.

The WA coastline is one of the most windswept in the world, but wind and solar power are a long way from emerging as stand-alone alternatives to coal and gas.

Australia – and WA in particular – is well placed to reap the economic benefits of nuclear power.

Australia has more than 40 per cent of the world's uranium resources, much of it in WA. The next-closest country is Canada, with 17 per cent.

However, thanks to Labor's three-mines policy (and state Labor's ban on uranium mining), the WA economy misses out.

All three functioning uranium mines are in South Australia and the Northern Territory. From those locations alone, Australia already supplies 22 per cent of the world's uranium.

Australia is the Middle East of uranium and WA has the potential to be the Saudi Arabia.

WA's ban on uranium mining is all the more absurd when you consider the State Government simultaneously grants exploration licences. So you can't dig it out of the ground, but you can go looking for it.

Why does the Government do this? Because it has not shut the door on uranium mining . . . one day.

Good for them, that time should be now. But it won't be. Premier Alan Carpenter will not want to change his policy of banning uranium mining until after this electoral cycle, given that Labor took the ban to the last election.

It's an admirable honouring of a promise, but unfortunate for the economy and the environment.

Both the state and federal Treasurers, Eric Ripper and Peter Costello, have warned that the commodities boom cannot last forever. Costello went so far as to put a two-year cap on it.

If the commodities boom were to slow, WA would be hit hard. Unlike other states that have poker machine taxes, WA relies on mining royalties.

The end of the commodities boom could turn our state's budget right around; that is, unless we embrace uranium mining to supplement declining returns for coal, gas and iron ore.

State Labor's anti-uranium mining policy was strongly supported by former premier Geoff Gallop. And because the WA Labor Party is controlled by the Left, it will be a long road to convince party powerbrokers (read Jim McGinty) of the need to allow uranium mining. Arguments it will help the economy simply won't do, particularly when the economy is going gangbusters.

Pro-uranium mining groups will need to point to the environmental benefits of uranium over dirty energy stocks. This argument has already swayed sections of Labor's Left in the eastern states.

Former ACTU president Martin Ferguson has started a campaign to turn the Left around to the idea of uranium mining and nuclear power. He wants a debate at next year's ALP national conference on overturning the three-mines policy.

WA should have its own debate before then. The State Government needs to begin the process both internally and through public consultation with citizens and experts on the advantages and disadvantages of uranium mining.

Uranium, as everyone knows, is used to make nuclear weapons. So Australia, rather than just exporting uranium in its raw yellowcake form, should strictly control the enrichment level and export the fuel rods on lease agreements, requiring them back so we can dispose of the waste safely.

Australia's geographic setting is the most stable in the world. Not only would this be of enormous economic benefit to WA and environmental benefit to the world, it would also help ensure exported uranium was not used for making nuclear weapons.

And if Labor's Left needs an anti-uranium cause to fight, can I suggest they take up export restrictions.

Sell it to India by all means, even if it hasn't signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, but not to authoritarian China with its contempt for the rule of law and its threatening presence in our region.