

Australia considers uranium enrichment

Interesting idea to add to the value of mined uranium, Now, what about Canada?

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Australia will consider enriching uranium and storing the waste products to deliver value-added exports to the world in preparation for the age of nuclear power.

Opening up a new front in the nuclear energy debate, Industry Minister Ian Macfarlane said yesterday that voters were ready to confront uranium enrichment after years of simply digging it up and selling it overseas to be processed.

The move would bring the option of nuclear power a step closer in Australia because enriched uranium is a key component of nuclear energy, but it could also be established much earlier than the estimated 2020 timeline for power plant options.

Uranium enrichment would also raise environmental concerns and spark national debate on how to store and secure the toxic waste generated by uranium enrichment.

"It's a debate that Australians are ready to have," Mr Macfarlane said.

"That's based on the rising cost of energy and the fact that nuclear energy provides an answer to the climate change issue. Enrichment is value-adding and in the context of a nuclear debate there will be a series of issues.

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"My understanding is enrichment of uranium doesn't produce a radioactive by-product but it does produce waste that is toxic. Uranium enrichment is the next step in terms of the exporting of uranium."

Enriched uranium is not the highly enriched or weapons-grade uranium used to produce nuclear weapons. Large commercial enrichment plants operate in France, Germany, The Netherlands, Britain, the US and Russia.

Australia produced about one-fifth of the world's uranium output last year and stands to reap multi-million-dollar profits as China embraces nuclear power. However, it has always outsourced the job of creating enriched uranium, which is required by most of the commercial nuclear power reactors operating or under construction.

As John Howard called for a "full-blooded" debate, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer also backed a discussion over uranium enrichment yesterday.

"There's the question of whether Australia itself would eventually, some time, no doubt in the far distant future, build nuclear power stations. There's a question of whether Australia would ever enrich uranium – in other words, we go up the processing chain, rather than just dig it out," he said.

However, the enthusiasm is not shared by Finance Minister Nick Minchin, who is concerned nuclear power plants would be too expensive to establish as an alternative to coal and finding a site to dispose of the waste would be too politically difficult.

Mr Macfarlane conceded dealing with the by-products of a nuclear industry in Australia was a key consideration.

"Whilst the environmentalists argue what it leaves is a legacy of radioactive waste, the reality is the Swedes are storing it in deep-buried stable rocks. We could do that if we're talking about our own nuclear waste from our own nuclear power stations," he said.

The nation's premier science agency, the CSIRO, is working on ways to use a synthetic rock known as Synroc to immobilise some forms of high-level radioactive wastes for disposal.

Australia demands assurances exported uranium and its derivatives cannot benefit the development of nuclear weapons or be used in other military programs.

A spokesman for Education Minister Julie Bishop said she was optimistic about the potential for the nuclear power industry in Australia. She is working on establishing a panel of experts to consider the issue.

Mr Howard's decision to talk up Australia's nuclear future has been interpreted as an attempt to exploit tensions within the ALP.

New candidate and Australian Workers Union secretary Bill Shorten said yesterday the jury was still out on nuclear power.