

## Australia faces tough choices on nuke future

*And I am sure they will get it right when all the politicking has died away.*

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Australia is facing a reinvigorated anti-nuclear movement as Prime Minister John Howard increases his support for expanded uranium mining and the prospect of its own reactors.

The Opposition Labor Party has dumped its earlier equivocation on the issue to front a campaign likely to repeat the furious hostility that capped uranium production two decades ago.

The Government is also facing division within its own ranks on the economic viability of nuclear power, and more general debate over its supposed environmental benefits.

Even so, Howard has firmly put uranium mining and nuclear energy on the political agenda, further defining the growing policy gap between the ruling Coalition and Labor.

It seems clear that the issue will join industrial relations as a major issue in next year's election.

Howard's enthusiasm for nuclear energy was spurred by United States President George W. Bush during the Australia leader's lavish reception in Washington last week.

Bush proposed a global partnership under which nuclear energy would be developed in energy-starved countries – subject to tougher and better-policed safeguards against weapons proliferation – and spent nuclear fuel would be returned to and disposed of by fuel suppliers such as Australia.

Canberra has already been stepping up its campaign to swing Australian attitudes away from opposition to increased uranium production, atomic generation, and the storage of waste.

Australia produces and exports more than 11,000 tonnes of uranium oxide a year to 11 countries, with sales worth more than A\$2 billion (\$2.4 billion) over the past five years.

It has only one research reactor, at Lucas Heights in Sydney, and has previously rejected nuclear-generated electricity on economic, political and environmental grounds.

South Australia has broken ranks with federal Labor policy by supporting a huge new mine north of Adelaide, which would make Australia the world's largest uranium producer. Australia holds about 40 per cent of the world's uranium reserves.

Senior Labor figures, including Opposition Leader Kim Beazley, have previously also called for a new debate on nuclear energy, with some supporting an end to the present three-mine cap on uranium production and the issue to be debated at next year's national party conference.

But in a surprise move Beazley and resources spokesman Martin Ferguson issued a statement rejecting the notion of nuclear power – although avoiding the question of expanded uranium mining.

"The economics [of nuclear energy] don't stack, we have abundant sources of alternative energy, waste disposal issues are unresolved and there are important national security issues to be resolved," the statement said.

"For these reasons Labor doesn't support nuclear power in Australia."

But the Government already has established one committee to look at the uranium industry, and a parliamentary committee is at present inquiring into the development of the nation's "non-fossil fuel" energy.

Howard has also revealed that another new committee has been set up to investigate Bush's proposal to establish a global nuclear partnership.

Advocates claim that nuclear power is much cleaner than other sources of energy for electricity – especially coal – and that its introduction would help abate greenhouse and other environmental concerns.

Controversy continues over how much uranium should be produced, and whom it should be sold.

Australia has recently agreed to sell uranium to China under safeguards to prevent its use in nuclear weapons – although critics claim there can be no guarantees.

Treasurer Peter Costello, Howard's heir-apparent, yesterday said there was no in-principle objection to nuclear energy, which he described as an efficient, safe form of energy – so long as waste was properly dealt with.

"If it becomes commercial, we should have it," he told Southern Cross radio.