

Lucas Heights: small accidents, huge issues

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The four accidents which occurred last week at Sydney's nuclear reactor plant at Lucas Heights, and the various reactions to those accidents, have raised a number of serious issues for the Australian people.

In the most recent accident at fortnight ago, two Lucas Heights employees were contaminated by radioactive material, one being taken to hospital. Shortly before this, a waste canister exploded, and another incident halted production of radioactive medical isotopes. In the previous week the rupture of a pipe almost 500 metres from the reactor plant released radioactive gases into the atmosphere.

Safety concerns

Despite an agreement with the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO) regarding its Lucas Heights reactor, the local Council was not informed of the latest accident. ANSTO's secretiveness did little to instil public confidence.

Public concerns would not have been lessened by a delay in public notification of the accident, nor by the arrogant and dismissive statements from spokesmen for ANSTO. One representative, Craig Pearce, said that their press release did not contain details of the accident because people "would not understand it" and because "ANSTO staff have a greater understanding of these sorts of things".

ANSTO seemed to have personally resented the reactor's fickle malfunctions. The organisation's executive director, George Collins, stated petulantly that it was "very unusual to have them all together".

For its own part the government has risked the safety of residents living around Lucas Heights and within Sydney itself. Although it issued dire warnings about the risk of terrorist sabotage to the plant, the Government recently eliminated overnight inspections of it by health physics surveyors, ignoring vigorous objections from unions and concerned citizens.

After the accidents, federal Science Minister Julie Bishop issued comforting reassurances that recent accidents posed "absolutely no radiation threat", and that there had been no accidents at Lucas Heights. The Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency has revealed that there were 12 accidents at Lucas Heights last year.

For the Government, the accidents certainly serve as unwelcome reminders of the potential hazards of nuclear fission power generation. Over the last few months it has been trying to lull public into sense of false security and equated any expression of concern about nuclear hazards as "a scare campaign".

The government's claim that expressions of concern from Opposition MPs were an attempt "to close down a medical service for cancer sufferers in Australia" is in itself a cynical scare campaign aimed at avoiding dealing with the major issues involved in nuclear processes.

The government has acknowledged that the Lucas Heights plant is outdated. The existing plant produces valuable nuclear medicine, and a new OPAL nuclear reactor is being installed there. However, the continued use of the plant is linked to the greater issue of the development of a full nuclear industry in Australia. (See last week's Guardian on Bush's Global Nuclear Energy Partnership.)

The Howard Government recently advocated the pursuit of nuclear power generation, citing in particular the need to reduce global warming. This is the same government that refuses to sign the Kyoto Agreement. The obvious "in your face" alternatives, of developing renewable and safe energy sources such as solar, wind and biomass energy systems, are habitually dismissed or trivialised by the Government.

In an ironic twist to the "nuclear debate" saga, BHP has announced that it will derive electricity from the heat energy of boiling-hot aquifers from the Great Artesian Basin. This will supply power for the operation of the huge Olympic Dam mine in South Australia, which supplies uranium, which in itself is intended for the generation of electrical power.

The kinetic energy contained within the water of the Great Artesian Basin aquifer is estimated to be sufficient to power a quarter of the east coast's power needs. The Howard Government shows no sign of interest in using this huge source of clean and natural power as an alternative to developing a nuclear power generation industry in Australia.

Mining industry

The government is motivated not by any genuine concerns about either the environment or nuclear medicine, but rather by the need to satisfy their real constituents, the mining industry. Moreover, the Prime Minister has expressed avid enthusiasm for the US-led Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (effectively an agreement for developed countries and major corporations to control and benefit from the development of nuclear energy), and has made statements about the desirability of Australia having a uranium enrichment capability.

These initiatives raise the horrifying prospect of Australia becoming a nuclear arms power, as envisaged by former PM Menzies, as well as a dump for the nuclear wastes of other countries.