

We must accept nuclear power: PM in Australia

Around the world the word is 'nuclear' after a dangerous hiatus in rational energy planning caused by the Kyoto conference.

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Prime Minister John Howard has warned Australians they must accept nuclear power and drought-proof their capital cities, in a speech outlining his long-term vision for the nation's energy and water use.

In the Sydney speech – which has reignited speculation that Mr Howard is planning to contest the next election – Australians were warned they would "pay a price" in the future if they do not engage in the debate on nuclear energy.

Mr Howard said Australia could not afford to "bury its head in the sand" on the issue of nuclear power.

"Australia cannot absent itself from global developments surrounding nuclear energy," Mr Howard told the Committee for Economic Development of Australia forum. "With close to 40 per cent of the world's known low-cost uranium deposits, for Australia to bury its head in the sand on nuclear energy is akin to Saudi Arabia turning its back on global oil developments." He warned that if Australia did not engage in the debate "we will pay a price".

Mr Howard also called for a "revolution" in addressing the nation's water challenges, saying water restrictions should not have to be tolerated. "The simple fact is there is little or no reason why our large cities should be gripped permanently by water crises," he said. "Our goal should be to drought-proof our large coastal cities.

"Having a city on permanent water restrictions makes about as much sense as to have a city on permanent power restrictions."

Mr Howard urged the SA, NSW and Victorian Governments to move quickly towards water trading arrangements. River Murray Minister Karlene Maywald said SA was "ready and our borders are open to trading". Labor's environment spokesman Anthony Albanese said Mr Howard had "failed to offer anything new to Australians concerned about climate change, water shortages and rising petrol prices".

Mr Howard's speech came as an AC Nielsen Poll showed most voters wanted Mr Howard to stay on as leader. Labor was found to have increased its two-party preferred vote by 1 point to 52-48.a