

The Nuclear Story from a GWA perspective

8 August 2006

Earlier this year Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, asked for a public debate about nuclear power in Australia.

Soon after, the PM announced an inquiry into nuclear energy and the *Review of Uranium Mining, Processing and Nuclear Energy in Australia* is due to be available for public comment in November.

The inquiries terms of reference include an assessment of the level of uranium mining and potential for enrichment.

In the decade since the Howard Federal Government was first elected, the political landscape has changed and it is timely that we look at what has happened in Western Australia ...

In 1996, John Howard relinquished the so-called Three Mines policy of the previous Hawke-Keating Labor governments (1983-1996) to “allow any (mine) proposal to be judged on its merit”.¹

In December of that year, Greens (WA) candidate Giz Watson was elected to the Legislative Council in Western Australia and took her place in the parliament in June 1997.

In her inaugural speech, Giz outlined her plans to continue the [Greens] campaign against uranium mining in, and export from, Western Australia.

“The uranium industry plumbs the depths of moral bankruptcy and leaves behind a radioactive legacy of thousands of years,” she said. “Exporting uranium is exporting cancer. It matters when we engage in this sort of unethical trade, and I am totally committed to stopping it.”²

In 1998, the federal ALP announced a change from its ‘three mines policy’ to a policy of ‘no new mines.’

In her 1998 statement to parliament, addressing the issues arising from uranium mining and the nuclear industry such as health, weapons and “pressure to receive waste material back into the State”³, Giz implored members to “think seriously about the topic ... as this is one of the major issues we will face in Western Australia over the next few years.”³ The Member proved to be prescient.

Later in 1998, the Western Australian community was outraged by the leaking of plans by a multinational company to build an ‘International Spent Fuel Repository’ in the State’s North West.

Pangea Resources – whose major financial backer is British Nuclear Fuel – was pitching to develop a nuclear waste dump in WA because of the State's geopolitical stability.

The Pangea plan was based on taking 76 000 metric tons of spent fuel and/or reprocessed high-level waste over 40 years. While a staggering amount of material, it is estimated it would only be one fifth of the spent fuel produced by commercial reactors across the world each year.⁴

50 000 people signed a petition to the government demanding legislation to ban the dump and the media attention and community interest was at a level not seen since the election of Jo Vallentine as Senator for the People for Nuclear Disarmament in 1984.

The Court Government (Liberal and National Parties coalition) and the Opposition, led by Geoff Gallop, was forced into action and the Nuclear Waste (Prohibition) Act was passed in November 1999.

Giz thanked the broader community for its support in her second reading speech [to] the bill.

“It is a credit to the level of community activism and outrage in this State that we have now reached the point where all the political parties in this State recognize that is not sufficient just to move motions in this Parliament saying that we do not support the Pangea proposal and we need to enact specific legislation.”⁵

As the Anti-Nuclear Alliance of Western Australia states,
*In theory, this law bans the importation of nuclear waste into Western Australia. Our legal advice is that the legislation is critically flawed and could leave the way open for Pangea to establish their dump. The law could also be repealed by a pro-nuclear government in the future.*⁶

The critical flaws included a failure to address the issue of transportation of nuclear waste in Western Australia and the problematic definition of ‘nuclear waste’.

In 2000, in attempts to address the flaws of the Nuclear Waste (Prohibition) Act, Giz introduced the Nuclear Activities (Prohibition) Bill but it was not debated in the Legislative Council.

A change of State government in early 2001 saw Geoff Gallop installed as W.A. Premier and in June, Giz again introduced the Nuclear Activities (Prohibition) Bill:

“The purpose of the Bill is to prohibit exploration and mining for uranium and thorium. It will also prohibit the construction or operation of certain facilities associated with the nuclear fuel chain.

The intentions of this Bill, as clearly set out in the objects of the Act, are to protect the health, welfare and safety of the people of Western Australia and to limit deterioration of

the environment by prohibiting the establishment of uranium or thorium mining and prohibiting certain nuclear activities. This Bill is not intended to inhibit the lawful use of radioactive isotopes for legitimate medical or engineering purposes. These uses will continue to be regulated under the Radiation Safety Act 1975. There is a high level of community support for such legislation.”⁷

The high level of community support did not move the Gallop Government to debate the bill. While the Bill seemed to be consistent with the Labor Party election platform Labor politicians were unwilling to address the Nuclear Activities (Prohibition) Bill.

Giz began negotiations with the Labor government to support the Bill. The negotiations would prove to be long and drawn out.

Throughout the process, Giz wrote to every Member of Parliament and specifically to the Ministers whose portfolios affected by the Bill, namely the Ministers for State Development, Health, and Environment & Heritage in the winter of 2001.

Almost two years later the Bill was defeated in a totally inadequate and truncated debate.

In summarizing her frustrations about the ability of the Greens (WA) to debate Bills placed on the Notice Paper (in May 2003) Giz decried the Government’s blocking of the debate by their refusal to discuss the Bill in any meaningful way.

“...the minister agreed to a meeting in June (2002). No amendments were proposed at that meeting, and no commitment was given to debate the Bill. Meanwhile, as I said previously, the Leader of the House in the Council, Hon Kim Chance, had given a signed agreement on 11 April 2002 that the Government would facilitate debate on the Nuclear Activities (Prohibition) Bill 2001 in the spring session of 2002. That agreement was broken.”⁸

The Greens (WA) Member for the North Metropolitan Region went on to tell Parliament:

“If we had used the opportunity today to pass the Nuclear Activities (Prohibition) Bill through this place, it would have sent the clearest message to the federal government that Western Australians, and the Western Australia Legislative Council, oppose the imposition of such a dump in Western Australia. I find it interesting that the Labor Party did not support this proposition, because if we revisit the debate on the Pangea Resources Australia proposal, we see that the now Premier, Geoff Gallop, drafted a Bill that passed through both Houses of Parliament, and it went a fair way towards prohibiting the importation of international nuclear waste. He made it clear that the reason he did so was that legislation sent the clearest message and was the only option that would be acceptable to the Western Australian community. He made a point of saying that the then Liberal Government’s approach of simply saying that it would oppose it, and that its policy was to oppose it, was not enough; legislation was needed.”

On 4 June 2006, Western Australia Premier, Alan Carpenter responded to media reports that the Federal Government had secretly considered 14 sites for a nuclear reactor, including one near Perth Airport, in 1997.

“I have repeatedly warned of the Howard Government’s push to soften up Western Australians for a nuclear waste dump,” Mr. Carpenter said.
“We will not let it happen.”⁹

Simply saying that the government will oppose it is not enough. Legislation is needed.

Legislation is needed to protect the land and the people of this State, to keep Western Australia - and indeed the rest of the country - nuclear free.

Nuclear power is not the answer to the difficult questions of reducing greenhouse emissions or replacing dwindling fossil fuels.

With around 40 per cent of the world’s known uranium deposits in Australia and more than [300] sites being actively explored for uranium in Western Australia the community has a global responsibility to keep this dangerous mineral in the ground.

“My view and the view of many Western Australians is that we have a responsibility to ensure that no radioactive material sourced from Western Australia is introduced into the global environment, because nobody can guarantee that the safeguards will be adequate to prevent that material being used in weapons programs. That is one of the strongest arguments for our responsibility to ensure that our uranium stays very firmly in the ground, which is the safest place for it.”¹⁰

The Legislative Council will have a role to play regardless of who is in power – this is where we can provide a safeguard through legislation.

“**Uranium is the asbestos industry of the 21st Century.** Australia should take responsibility for our uranium by leaving it in the ground. Not by polluting our own landscape in further uranium mining and peddling nuclear risks to our neighbours.”
Australian Conservation Foundation’s *Habitat* Magazine April 2005

To find out more about Uranium in Western Australia and the following sites Yeelirrie, Manyingee, Kintyre, Murchison Project visit the Anti-Nuclear Alliance of Western Australia at <http://www.anawa.org.au>

For a summary of basic information about the uranium mines in Australia from 1954 you can read the Senate Committee report on Contemporary Mining and Milling of Uranium in Australia at http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/Committee/uranium_ctte/report/c01.htm

To read the Joint Australian Environment Groups communiqué on the nuclear industry and climate change, go to

http://wilderness.org.au/campaigns/policy/joint_groups_nuclear_climate_change

To find the Greens (WA) Nuclear Issues policy visit

<http://wa.greens.wa.org.au/policy/environment/nuclear01>

¹ Australia's Uranium – A Brief Historical Overview <http://www.sea-us.org.au/overview/html>

² Extracted from the Parliament of Western Australia Web Site Hansard. Inaugural speech. Hon Giz Watson, MLC, North Metropolitan during the budget debate Legislative Council, 10 June 1997.

³ Extracted from the Parliament of Western Australia Web Site Hansard 24 June 1998.

⁴ <http://anawa.org.au/waste/pangea.html>

⁵ Extracted from the Parliament of Western Australia Web Site Hansard 23 November 1999 Nuclear Waste Storage (Prohibition) Bill 1999 – Second Reading Speech.

⁶ <http://anawa.org.au/wastre/pangeas.html>

⁷ Extract from Parliament of Western Australia Web Site Hansard 12 June 2001. Nuclear Activities (Prohibition) Bill 2001: Second Reading speech

⁸ Extracted from the Parliament of Western Australia Web Site Hansard 15 May 2003 Nuclear Activities (Prohibition) Bill 2002: Members' Statements

⁹ <http://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/media/>

¹⁰ Extracted from the Parliament of Western Australia Web Site Hansard 13 October 2005
Uranium Mining: Statement