



PRIME MINISTER

OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE CRITICAL FACILITY AT THE ATOMIC ENERGY COMMISSION, LUCAS HEIGHTS, SYDNEY

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. William McMahon,
CH, MP

19 JUNE 1972

Twelve years ago, my distinguished friend and colleague, Sir Robert Menzies, spoke here on a similar occasion. And he said he believed Lucas Heights was a significant event in our national development. And he went on to forecast that this establishment would produce many practical results for Australia. Sir Robert was, of course, referring particularly to the role of Lucas Heights in developing the technical experience we will need when the time comes for Australia to embark on a commercial nuclear power programme.

It is pretty well accepted now that by the end of the seventies, one or more of our State generating authorities will be building a nuclear power plant. Thereafter, more will follow. It is not too much to say that if events develop as predicted, Australia could be involved in a very large capital investment in nuclear power plants before the end of the century.

Many of you are well aware of how essential it will be that we go into such a programme equipped with sound technical advice about the efficiency and safety of reactors and other nuclear facilities.

This critical facility is, I am told, a powerful tool for making studies directly related to this objective. The machine was built by a French engineering firm, working with Australian industry and the Commission's scientists and engineers.

Our recent agreement with Japan will also be important to our understanding of the future application of atomic energy for peaceful purposes. We also co-operate with the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada.

It will be seen, therefore, that the leading nations of the world in the extraordinarily complex field of nuclear energy have been willing to share the benefits of their work with us.

We occupy a seat on the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency as the nation most advanced in atomic energy in the South-East Asia and the Pacific region. But we do not have the technical nor financial resources even to attempt to take a place in the forefront of nuclear reactor development, and if I may be allowed to emphasise it here, today, there is no reason why we should seek to do so.

But we do make our contribution to the pool of atomic energy knowledge, and we do help our Asian and Pacific neighbours through the loan of technical experts and equipment. We also receive Agency and Colombo Plan fellows for training and experience in nuclear matters.

This new facility will both contribute to our objectives and extend our ability to collaborate with other countries. For these reasons I am glad to have the opportunity to open it today.

My colleague, Sir Reginald Swartz, has already reminded us of the benefits which are flowing to the community from this centre. In the years to come, nuclear energy will help ease our power problems.

Most industrially advanced countries are now either building nuclear power stations, or preparing to do so. More than 100 plants are already in service and about twice as many are being built or are on order.

We can expect nuclear power in the 1980's and 90's to account for an increasing proportion of Australia's new generating capacity. On a per capita basis, we have one of the fastest rising power demands in the world. One estimate that has been given to me is that by the end of this century, one-third of our electricity could come from nuclear stations. It is claimed that by that time more than 50 per cent of the world's electricity could be so supplied.

Such predictions have major implications in such diverse fields as foreign affairs, finance, industry and commerce. Within the Atomic Energy Commission, we have the experts to advise on all technical aspects of nuclear power. They have done wide-ranging research into all aspects of the control of radiation from nuclear installations. And over a long period, they have made close and careful investigations of possible effects on the environment, including on marine life, and on flora and fauna.

But uranium is not only an industrial material. It is a strategic material of high importance that involves the Commonwealth in certain obligations. Every country in the world which produces or uses fissile material imposes Government control for considerations of national security, and to honour international obligations, Australia must do likewise.

Before our first power station is built, there must be a necessary framework of regulations and administrative practices to provide such controls. We are working constructively with the States to achieve these objectives. There can be no better means of ensuring that nuclear power will be introduced to Australia on a safe, economic and responsible basis.

It is clear from what I have said that Australia's role in nuclear energy is concerned with its peaceful uses. The harnessing of this great force of energy for the benefit of mankind is one of the greatest challenges of this generation.

The task is twofold: We must learn to use the technology in peaceful pursuits, and we must contain and eventually dissuade its potential uses for warfare and destruction.

It is difficult for some people to accept that in the modern world - even in cases where there arise differences on certain major issues - there can still be co-operation on others. For example, the United States and the Soviet Union hold basic differences on many great international issues. Yet President Nixon and Mr Brezhnev were able last month to make a major step forward in the vital field of world disarmament.

They have slowed down the nuclear arms race, and they have done it in the context of maintaining a balance of strategic interests. I sent a message of warm congratulation to Mr Nixon for this achievement.

I would like to go back a little on Australia's record in these matters, because this is an area in which I very sincerely regret to say that France has failed to respond, despite our co-operation in other areas.

Many years ago, in 1963, a partial nuclear test ban treaty was concluded. Australia took its stand when it ratified that treaty. It specifically bans tests in the atmosphere, outer space and under water. It is unmistakeably clear that our present attitude is not a new one.

Our attitude at the Plenary Session at Stockholm was in accordance with long-existing policy. When the Australian Government ratified the partial test ban treaty, it was strongly opposed to the conduct of tests of nuclear weapons in the atmosphere, wherever they occurred. This remains our strong policy. It is therefore completely wrong to say that a new policy was developed at Stockholm.

In line with our long-standing policy, we have repeatedly conveyed to the French Government, as you, Your Excellency, have repeated and confirmed, through the proper channels and in the most unequivocal terms, the firm opposition of the Australian Government and people to the French nuclear tests in the Pacific.

Australia was the first country to protest against these tests in 1972. And we have repeated those protests. We will continue to do so, by whatever means are properly available to us to exert whatever pressures we can to bring about a cessation of these tests and all atmospheric nuclear tests for all time.

The Australian Government is dedicated to upholding the partial nuclear test ban treaty. That is our policy; it has not changed. We will continue to work within the framework of international negotiation and consultation with the United States and others so vitally concerned with the difficult technical issues underlying questions of world peace, including a more comprehensive treaty.

But central to our policy is a clear and frank unqualified opposition to atmospheric testing. Let there be no misunderstanding on this score. I and my Government want the present tests abandoned.

Further, we have taken every reasonable step we can to persuade our French friends to cease them. You will be aware, Mr Ambassador, that I have already conveyed personally to the President of France the views that I have now expressed.

And I want to confirm to you that none of the explanations you have given would in any way, in any shape at all, change my, or my Government's attitude, or the Australian people's attitude, to the atmospheric testing by any country. And I say this, notwithstanding the comments you have made about the protests that have been made by my Government to your Government itself.

This Facility I am opening today is, I emphasise, designed for peaceful purposes. It will assist our researchers to develop, in co-operation with the States, our capacity to use nuclear energy for the generation of electric power.

So I am glad to have the opportunity of officially opening this Facility, and at the same time to be able to set out the Government's reasons for building it. It will undoubtedly be an essential tool for our research workers, and I have now much pleasure in declaring it open.
