



PRIME MINISTER

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REPORT TO THE NATION

In 1975, the Labor Government established the Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry under the chairmanship of Mr. Justice Fox. That Inquiry has since reported. The reports have become known as the Fox Reports.

After the Inquiry had been established, the Labor Government also signed and tabled in the Parliament a Memorandum of Understanding with the companies involved with the Ranger Mine, committing the Government of the day to joint development with those companies.

My Government has examined all these matters and the Fox Reports very fully and very carefully. It has come to its decisions about the mining and export of uranium with four major concerns in mind.

First, the need to help prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. Second, the need to supply uranium to a world that is short of energy. Third, the need for a guarantee that the interests of the aboriginal people are protected. And fourth, the need to make absolutely sure that uranium development does not harm the environment.

Let me talk about these concerns for a while. First, the need to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

The Fox Report regarded this as the most important hazard associated with the nuclear power industry - the nuclear power industry for peaceful purposes.

My Government supports that view, and that is why last May I announced the most stringent set of safeguards yet adopted by any country.

If we are exporting uranium, we will be able to argue with effect around the world, in the councils of the world, to make sure that supplier countries maintain strict safeguards. We will be able to act to make sure the international arrangements in relation to safeguards are adhered to - that they are improved as time passes.

We will be able to act forcefully in these matters, and advance the cause of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons.

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But if we just leave Australia's uranium in the ground - if we opt out of the world in relation to these matters - Australia will not be able to act with any effect, with any force, in matters which are important to all of us and to our children.

There are other matters associated with the proliferation of nuclear weapons, with the nuclear power industry - the problem of waste which I know concerns you. It concerned the Fox Report, and it concerns my Government.

Let me emphasise as forcefully as I can that here the scientific knowledge does exist. The technology does exist. The scientific knowledge and technology have been applied to the problem of waste. The technology is known. It has worked on a trial basis, and plans are now under way to adopt it on a much larger scale.

We are not talking about some scientist's theory that has not been applied, that might have doubts about it. The scientific knowledge does exist. It is now going to be applied on a large scale.

I know people are concerned about the future generations in Australia, about their children. We are concerned about that. I have four children. Many of my Ministers have children. We would not be taking any decisions that put at risk your children's future, or our children's future.

There is one other matter - reprocessing. Under the Australian safeguards policy, any country that purchases Australian uranium would not be permitted to reprocess without the consent of the Australian Government. There is a very clear reason for this.

One of the products of reprocessing is plutonium. That can be used in a reactor for peaceful purposes, for energy purposes; but also, as many of you would know, it could also be used for military technology.

Reprocessing, we believe, takes countries too close to military technology at this stage. That is why reprocessing would not be allowed under our safeguards policy without the prior consent of the Australian Government.

Let me come now to the second of our major concerns - the need to supply uranium to a world that is short of energy.

I think it is sometimes difficult for Australians to understand that many countries in Europe and in the developing world are very short of energy, short of natural resources.

I think it is difficult for us to understand this because we have massive reserves of coal, significant reserves of natural gas, reserves of oil, uranium, and many other minerals. Australia is very well endowed with natural resources.

There are many countries around the world, the developed world and developing, that have to rely entirely on the energies and capacities of their own people, and that do not have the same resources as Australia.

That does create international obligations of a country, such as Australia, to make sure that others do not go short of the materials that Australia can supply.

Sir Macfarlane Burnett a few days ago said "I believe the majority of thoughtful people accept the inevitability for at least an interim period of large-scale use of nuclear energy in most parts of the world. Things being as they are, nuclear power generators will be needed for the next twenty or fifty years in most of the developed countries."

We have the energy which is necessary for other countries to maintain jobs for their own people, to heat their homes in the winter, to maintain their standard of living. If we refuse to supply energy, that would be very serious indeed.

These are matters that my Government has had to take into account in the uranium decisions. Therefore, subject to the safeguards policy, we believe that we have an international obligation to supply energy in an energy-short world.

The third concern is the need for a guarantee that interests of the aboriginal people are protected.

Even though my Government believes that it is important for Australia's voice to be raised in international forums to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons, and even though we believe it important that Australia should supply energy in an energy-short world, we would not have made the decision to mine and export uranium were it not possible to protect fully the interests of the aboriginal people.

We have accepted all the recommendations of the Fox Report in this matter.

Aboriginal people will be able to earn and live on their traditional land. They will be consulted in the developments that take place. They will be able to influence those developments, and substantial sums from royalties will be devoted to the welfare of the aboriginal people in the Northern Territory.

The fourth concern involves the need to make absolutely sure that uranium mining does not harm the environment.

In the Alligator Rivers Region we have one of the most important, and, in many senses, one of the most fragile, environments anywhere in the world. It is important to Australia, and it is important, environmentally, to everyone.

There will be a National Park, one of the largest and most significant in the world. There will be a plan of management that will arrange a very strict control. Until the whole Park is proclaimed, other areas will be under control under strict supervision.

There will be a code for mining that will make sure that mining operations are again under very stringent control indeed.

I emphasise the decision my Government has made concerning the mining and export of uranium has been taken with the highest sense of moral responsibility to all Australians and to the wider world community; a sense of responsibility to provide energy in an energy-short world; but in particular a sense of responsibility to make sure that Australia's voice can be used with effect to prevent nuclear proliferation.
