



Speech by

# Hon. PETER BEATTIE

MEMBER FOR BRISBANE CENTRAL

Hansard Wednesday, 7 June 2006

---

## NUCLEAR ENERGY

**Hon. PD BEATTIE** (Brisbane Central—ALP) (Premier) (4.28 pm): I move—

That this parliament expresses its opposition to any nuclear reactor or nuclear waste dump in Queensland and calls on the Prime Minister to rule out using any federal powers to impose such facilities on Queenslanders.

John Howard has ignited a debate that is frightening families and neighbourhoods right around our country. His proposal to push through on nuclear power without any consultation has communities fearful that reactors will be placed smack bang in the middle of suburbia. However, I can give this guarantee: while I am Premier of this state there will be no nuclear reactor in Queensland.

The federal government claim that they have the power to place a nuclear power plant anywhere in Queensland if they wish. They are wrong. Under Commonwealth and state legislation nuclear power plants in Australia are prohibited and, as such, there is no provision for a process whereby permission for such plants may be granted by the Commonwealth. If the Commonwealth were to enact legislation permitting nuclear power plants, this would be a complete erosion of states rights overriding state legislation prohibiting such plants by virtue of section 109 of the Constitution. I can guarantee that I would fight tooth and nail to prevent this happening.

I have asked for legal advice to be provided to me about this. If there is any doubt about any possible gaps in this matter, then we will introduce specific legislation to prevent nuclear power plants in this state and waste dumps as well. We will legislate to make certain that within our powers we will do everything to prevent it. Let me be clear: we believe the law does not exist to allow the federal government to put nuclear power plants here. They do have power in relation to nuclear waste dumps, but we will try, if the legislation does not currently exist, to legislate to prevent it.

This argument is quite extraordinary. It reminds me of the old principle that, if you do not believe in anything, you will fall for anything; if you do not have any principles, you will fall for anything. There are several problems with this. The first point is that nuclear power is not cheap. The second point is that it is about the same price as renewable energy, which is something we are trying to focus on. If the federal government is going to spend this sort of money, then for heaven's sake let us spend it on renewable energy. The third point is we do not have the skills in this country to build and operate nuclear power stations, which would mean we would need to import them from overseas. I saw a suggestion in one of the press that we would need to go to China to do it. What are we going to do? Go and get these technical skills off the French or some other country of a similar nature?

The fourth point is that we have not adequately dealt with the waste issue. The fifth point—and this is my argument about coal—is that nuclear energy is roughly three times as expensive as coal. Why would the federal government do this? It makes no sense other than it is some crude, political stunt that they are pursuing to try to divert attention away from their own problems and difficulties. As I said, if they believe in nothing, they can fall for anything, and that is exactly what is going on here. If they believe in nothing—which is the position of this federal government—then they will fall for anything.

Let me look at the history of this. I will be very interested to hear what the National Party has to say about this, because it has been interesting to look at the Queensland state archives, and I will table an extract from the Queensland state archives in a minute. In January 1972, the Japanese foreign ministry

announced the chances for the construction of a joint Australian-Japanese uranium enrichment plant had improved. On 22 February, the Queensland cabinet gave approval for a joint committee to be established with the Commonwealth government—which was the conservative McMahon government at the time, because it was February 1972—to develop the uranium industry in Australia.

Cabinet noted the Prime Minister's request for no publicity and discussed the requirements of a uranium enrichment plant in Queensland. Queensland ministers noted that the plant's establishment would mean doubling the existing capacity of electricity-generating stations in Queensland and guaranteeing supplies of water and fuel for 25 years. There was further discussion of a proposal on 25 March, with cabinet noting the preference for a gaseous diffusion method and the need to seek French technical advice—hence, the point I made before about technical advice. And it goes on.

In other words, the National Party back in 1972—when Sir Joh was Premier, and they were in coalition with the Liberals at the time—were quite happy to go down the road of a uranium enrichment plant. They were not worried about the effect on the coal industry and they were not worried about the dump issues; they simply could not have cared less. I table that for the information of the House.

This is a major issue. It is a major issue for our economy. Even the Liberal Party in Victoria does not support it. Philip Davis, the Victorian energy spokesman, said that brown coal had secured for 80 years a competitive advantage for Victoria and that there is no evidence at all that the nuclear industry is in a position to compete with brown coal. Now that is to compete with brown coal; that is not even in the same category of the class of coal that we have in this state. So, for the life of me, I cannot understand what this is about, other than some stupid political game.

**Mr Springborg:** Ha, ha!

**Mr BEATTIE:** The Leader of the Opposition laughs; it is that sort of canned laughter. He does not take anything seriously; he thinks he can laugh his way out of any problem. It is about time he actually stood for something instead of being the parliament's hyena. The facts of life are that this is about serious jobs, this is about the coal industry, this is about the future of the economy, and the Leader of the Opposition thinks it is a joke. It is about time he grew up.

I am totally opposed to the Prime Minister's secret plans because they have the potential to undermine the strength of our booming coal industry, costing jobs and funds that are used to employ doctors, nurses, police and teachers. It is crazy to suggest we need nuclear plants in a state that has some of the most plentiful coal supplies in the world. Our Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Water estimates that the state contains coal reserves of more than 32 billion tonnes. Of that total, more than 11 billion tonnes are classified as coking coal. Our coking coal reserves are of a very high quality and in keen demand from the steel industry throughout the world. We are the largest seaborne exporter of coal, and industry believes that demand will continue to rise substantially as the years go by. In fact, Queensland's coal export capacity is forecast to grow a staggering 210 million tonnes per annum by 2009-10 and possibly higher if demand continues to grow at such a rapid rate.

In addition, one of the main implications of stronger growth in emerging economies such as China is the growing importance of these markets to Queensland exporters. Certain sections of Queensland's export industry—such as mining—are benefiting most from this growth. China's rapid economic development has resulted in a surge in demand for raw materials—a trend that is likely to continue as the Chinese economy continues to expand. For example, China is the world's largest producer and consumer of coal, which contributes about 70 per cent of China's energy supply. However, the Chinese coal industry has been characterised by many small and inefficient mines with poor safety standards and low quality coal. As a result, China has required its domestic coal production to be supplemented by coal imports, which is where we come in.

Just last week, I announced we were investing more than \$825 million to support the resources industry in the central Queensland region. We also lead the world in research into reducing or eliminating greenhouse gas emissions from using coal as a fuel, whether that is for power generation or steel making. Under our Queensland Future Growth Fund, we recently allocated \$300 million to further the development of clean coal technology. If the federal government were serious about energy, they would immediately invest anywhere in the vicinity of \$400 million to \$1 billion in our clean coal technology. Why are they going down this nuclear power road? Why don't they put their money where their mouth is and invest their money in clean coal technology? Anyone from New South Wales, Victoria or Queensland who goes out and supports the nuclear industry is doing nothing more than cutting the throat of their own economy and costing them jobs. This is crazy stuff.

Let me come back to the growth fund. This money will be used to complement a \$300 million industry fund set up by the consortium COAL21, which includes BHP Billiton, Rio Tinto, Xstrata and Anglo, as well as the \$500 million Low Emission Technology Demonstration Fund, which we are hoping the Commonwealth government will establish.

Let me come back to the central points. If we look at the economics, it does not stack up. It is very clear that, at the end of it, nuclear power is not cheap. It is three times as expensive as coal and the same

price as renewable energy. Frankly, we do not have the skills, so we will be importing them from overseas, and we have not solved the problems about waste. So where does it leave us? It leaves us with a half-baked idea that is not in the interests of Australia and certainly not in the interests of the Queensland economy.

Why is this debate important today? It is important because we should send a clear message to the Howard government that we do not want to have a nuclear waste dump or a nuclear industry in this state. This is a totally different issue from the export of uranium. There are three aspects here: waste, a power plant and export. We can debate the export issue on another occasion, but the important thing about this is that every member of this House has an opportunity via this motion to stand up clearly—whether they are in favour of nuclear waste dumps and nuclear reactors or they are opposed to them—and give a clear indication of where they stand. We will be passing the results of this motion on to the Prime Minister and no-one will be allowed to get off the hook.

Members either stand up for Queensland and stand up for the jobs that come from the coal industry or they follow a road of destructive approach to energy where one of our major industries—coal—is undermined, and we end up with all sorts of problems involving waste. I just say to the Leader of the Opposition and the Leader of the Liberal Party: you can provide some leadership today, leadership that will importantly support us in our bid to protect the Queensland economy.

*Tabled paper:* Internet article from Queensland State Archives 1972 Cabinet Documents titled 'Issues—Uranium Enrichment Plant'.