



Speech by

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NUCLEAR FACILITIES PROHIBITION BILL

Ms NOLAN (Ipswich—ALP) (4.46 pm): I, like my colleagues, rise to speak in support of the Nuclear Facilities Prohibition Bill. So far this has been a fascinating debate. I have frankly been astonished at what I have heard. I was shocked a little while ago to read on the front page of the *Australian* that our Prime Minister, Mr Howard, was confident that Australians would soon come to understand that nuclear energy was a clean, green energy source for the future. What I have heard today is, with varying degrees of honesty, the coalition in this House support that fundamental proposition.

The member for Charters Towers began essentially with an argument that we should leave it all on the table and that we should be open to a range of possibilities. That suggestion was subsequently followed, I thought in a somewhat interesting manner, by the suggestion from the member for Moggill when he fronted up. The thing that shocked me about the member for Moggill's contribution was its many internal inconsistencies.

He argued fundamentally two things. He argued that it was right to keep all of the options on the table. He argued that we should leave the door open, as his colleagues had, to the possibility of nuclear power in Queensland. But when it was suggested that there might be a nuclear power plant at Cairns, at Townsville or, in his case, specifically on the Sunshine Coast he said, 'Of course there will not be a nuclear power plant on the Sunshine Coast.'

I cannot begin to understand how it is that, whilst arguing that we must leave open the door to nuclear power plants across Australia, whilst knowing that the Switkowski report brought down by his colleague the Prime Minister has suggested 25 nuclear plants across Australia, and whilst knowing that nuclear power plants are best situated near the ocean, the member for Moggill could then suggest that, of course, there will not be one on the Sunshine Coast. When we join those dots we come logically to the conclusion that if we are going to have nuclear power in this state and in this country, as the Prime Minister has asked, a place with a growing population close to the sea—that is, the Sunshine Coast—is the most obvious site that possibly comes to mind. I cannot see how it is, therefore, that the member for Moggill can be telling us that it is okay to leave open the door to nuclear but, of course, there is no possibility for the Sunshine Coast.

Mr Wilson: His logic is that it is self-evident.

Ms NOLAN: The minister is entirely correct. That is the fundamental hypocrisy of the member for Moggill's contribution.

The second contradiction in the member for Moggill's contribution was that he suggested that it was outrageous to bring forward this bill today before we have had the debate—that is, it was outrageous to establish a bill of which the fundamental provision is that if the federal government continues with its aim of trying to force nuclear power upon the states we will have a plebiscite. Dr Flegg came in here and argued that having a plebiscite was contrary to the interests of debate, that we could not bring forward this bill of which the fundamental facet is a plebiscite because to do so pre-empts or stifles debate. I cannot begin to understand how that can be. I would have thought that the fundamental proposition of this bill was that if we are going to have nuclear power it will be against this state government's will and it will be through the process of a plebiscite. How you can say that that is not a debate quite fundamentally confounds me.

To come to the provisions of the bill, this debate is the kind of debate that will absolutely characterise politics across Australia and indeed across the Western world in the 50 years ahead of us. We live in the richest and the happiest time in human history. We have had 50 or more years of peace and of almost continuous economic growth. We are the fattest, the happiest and the richest people ever to have lived. We do not often talk about from whence that growth and that wealth has come, but we need to understand that it has come quite fundamentally from an increasing ability to exploit our natural resources for economic growth and for human gain. What politics has largely been about in the last 60 or so years is sharing that wealth around—continuing the growth and distributing the wealth.

We have now in our human history come to a fundamental crossroads because we have now, for the first time since the Industrial Revolution, realised that there are natural limits to our capacity to exploit our natural resources for economic gain. The first point at which we have come to a real hurdle is with the fundamental realisation that continuing to burn fossil fuels for cheap energy leads to climate change, and there will be other hurdles like this. Unlike a debate simply about splitting up the wealth, in the next 50 years we will talk about if we can continue to have that wealth in light of climate change, as we are talking about today. Can we continue to have that wealth in light of peak oil? Can we continue to damage our soils for often quite low-value agricultural production? What are the natural constraints on the exploitation of our natural resources for human economic gain? This debate is the harbinger of what will be the political debate in at least the next half century. This debate is important in that sense. In that debate there are essentially two clear positions. There are those who will say, 'Don't worry. You should leave it for tomorrow. It will all be okay,' and there will be those like this state government who argue that it is imperative that we genuinely seek to live sustainably. Climate change, as I said, is the first time we have come to that hard question, but here it is that we find ourselves today.

I am, as I said, genuinely shocked by the Prime Minister's proposition that what we should do to deal with climate change is simply skip forward—we should simply move from burning coal as we have done for a long time now and switch to nuclear power in Australia. There is no doubt that we have to deal with the emissions from coal. Coal constitutes about half of Australia's greenhouse gas emissions, and emissions from stationary energy have increased by 43 per cent between 1990 and 2004. So it is absolutely necessary to put the brakes on that.

This afternoon my colleagues have talked about a number of their concerns about nuclear energy. They have talked about nuclear weapons proliferation, they have talked about the impact of nuclear power plants on communities and they have talked about the use of water. My fundamental concern when it comes to nuclear power is, as I acknowledge some other members have mentioned, that we simply have no answer to the question of nuclear storage. Spent fuel such as plutonium-239, which is one of the components of spent fuel, takes hundreds of thousands of years to break down. All around the world we simply have no answer to the question of what do we do with the spent fuel from nuclear power plants.

In Australia we have been having this debate about a nuclear waste site for at least the last decade, and it is a question that this Howard government has been unable to resolve. Members will have seen the Howard government talking about putting medium-level nuclear waste first in the Northern Territory and then in South Australia. Members will remember that in the lead-up to the last federal election the Howard government, with all of its courage, abandoned plans for a nuclear waste site in South Australia for fear of offending voters in a handful of marginal seats. So this government, which cannot even address the nuclear waste we have got now, is now proposing to give us much more. All around the world this question remains unresolved. The United States, for instance, has 500,000 tonnes of nuclear waste scattered around the nation in 50 temporary sites because it cannot resolve what to do as a permanent solution to nuclear waste. The only answer that is genuinely on the table when it comes to dealing with nuclear waste is to put it in a hole—hardly a groundbreaking solution. Again, in the United States the one nuclear waste facility called a pilot plant which it does have is a 655-metre deep hole in what is understood to be a fairly geologically secure structure in New Mexico.

We cannot go down the path of nuclear power until we have resolved the question of nuclear waste. It strikes me as fundamentally immoral to suggest that because we want to have cheap power today we will cast this burden not just upon generations to come but for millennia to come. I cannot understand how any individual can think that that burden upon humanity for millennia to come is in any sense a reasonable price to pay so that our power can be cheaper today through nuclear power than it would have been through available renewables. I cannot understand how it would be that the Howard government should put forward that proposition—that we as a nation should accept the cost of polluting the earth forevermore when we have not even genuinely explored the options of clean coal and renewable power.

That possibility strikes me quite simply as being fundamentally immoral. If the question is can we pay more in order to prevent our earth being polluted forever, then I think the answer to that question can only ever be yes. I think this debate about what price we are willing to pay for the earth and for generations to come is, as I said, the question that will consume political minds for at least the next generation. But in that debate there will at every point be two sides, as there is in this debate today. There will be one side

who will say, 'We need to keep living it up. We need the power to be as cheap as possible and hang the consequences,' and there will be another side—our side—who will say, 'We owe it to ourselves and to generations to come to genuinely seek to live sustainably.' That is the only side on which I can comfortably live, and it disappoints me that members opposite do not share that, I believe, fundamentally moral view. With that, I support the bill.