



Speech by

**Shane Knuth**

**MEMBER FOR CHARTERS TOWERS**

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## **NUCLEAR FACILITIES PROHIBITION BILL**

**Mr KNUTH** (Charters Towers—NPA) (12.41 pm): I rise today to make a contribution on behalf of the Queensland coalition to discuss the Nuclear Facilities Prohibition Bill 2006. This legislation has the stated objective to help to protect the health, safety and welfare of the people of Queensland by prohibiting nuclear facilities, and this noble statement is repeated in the minister's second reading speech. In reality the bill, if passed, will achieve nothing.

The bill is initially set on a false premise that the state has some control of nuclear facilities in Queensland. This is untrue. In reality, the regulator in relation to nuclear facilities is the Commonwealth government. This bill, therefore, is little more than a state government public relations exercise designed to voice the Beattie government's objections to issues raised in the recently released report of the uranium mining, processing and nuclear energy review conducted by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. The government is assisted in its propaganda by the Australia Institute, which has been scaremongering Queenslanders on where nuclear power facilities may be built. The Australia Institute released a report on 30 January listing 19 likely sites. These sites included Townsville, Mackay, Rockhampton, Gladstone, Bundaberg, the Sunshine Coast and Bribie Island.

While we are talking about a report from the Australia Institute, let us have a look at the background of the people who are deliberating on such a report on the siting of a nuclear power station. They included Meredith Edwards, affiliated to Labor, senior policy adviser to Paul Keating; Barbara Pocock, affiliated to the Democrats, senior policy adviser to the leader of the Democrats; Christian Downie, affiliated to the Greens, policy adviser to New South Wales Greens; Emma Rush, affiliated to the Greens, a member of the Melbourne City Council Greens movement; and Andrew McIntosh, affiliated to the Democrats, policy advisor to the Democrats. The board of the Australia Institute is littered with left wing hacks and cronies whose political affiliation is linked in some way to the left wing of the Queensland Labor Party. Therefore, anything that this group puts forward can only be taken in the context of being part of the farce that is this bill.

On 6 June 2006 the Prime Minister announced the appointment of a task force to undertake an objective, scientific review of uranium mining and the possible use of nuclear energy in Australia. The results of this task force are pertinent to this debate, to say the least. At a time when greenhouse gas emissions is the most talked about subject in political forums, one of the key findings of the task force is that nuclear power is a low-emission technology. The report states—

Life cycle greenhouse gas emissions from nuclear power are more than ten times lower than emissions from fossil fuels and are similar to emissions from many renewables.

It goes on to say—

The challenge to contain and reduce greenhouse gas emissions would be considerably eased by investment in nuclear plants.

The report then concedes that—

Australia's greenhouse challenge requires a full spectrum of initiatives and its goals cannot be met by nuclear power alone. The greenhouse gas emission reductions from nuclear power could reach 8 to 17 per cent of national emissions in 2050.

That is why it is amazing that a party that supports the continuation of uranium mining in Australia and its export to countries that will be using the mineral in nuclear facilities stands here today as a vocal opponent of what its own federal Labor policy encourages, that is, the responsible use of uranium. It is interesting, as this Labor government has voted in this House to do away with the free hospital system, with all Labor members feeling totally embarrassed over betraying their own political ideologies. However, within a few months the Premier announced that he was going to retain the free hospital system and there were many roars and cheers from backbenchers who were relieved that the Premier had come to his senses.

The state Labor government will oppose nuclear energy in Queensland but will change its position when its federal Labor colleagues reverse their position on nuclear energy. So this bill is a waste of time and will deliver nothing when this government may support nuclear power further down the track.

I would like to acknowledge the importance of our great coal industry and the wonderful employment opportunities: the billions of dollars in royalties and gross revenue and also the need for a coal-fired power station in north Queensland. I would like to bring to the minister's and the Premier's attention a potential site. As they are aware, the National Electricity Market Management Company—NEMMCO—report said that Queensland could face widespread interruption to its electricity supply by 2009 if no extra power stations are brought on line with existing ones. Mineral development and investment in north and western Queensland have been put on hold because of a lack of reliable power sources. It is logical to identify Pentland as an alternative site for a base load power station. The report states—

Major stakeholders have already done extensive investigations into the feasibility of building a power station at Pentland, including a \$2 million drilling program completed by the owners of the Pentland coal reserves, Xstrata, who confirmed the ore body is a good enough quality for an economically viable 600-800MW power station for the next 35-40 years.

About the site it states—

It is commonsense as we have one of the biggest river systems in Queensland with a plentiful supply of water, a nearby rail facility, a rural environment, and a potential power station that sits on unlimited coal reserves and Pentland is a vital link to North and Western Queensland.

This proposal has the support of federal and state members, Charters Towers Chamber of Commerce, city and shire councils, Townsville Enterprise and investors. I note, too, that the state government has licensed the Steritech irradiation facility that uses radioactive materials at their facility in Narangba. It is hypocritical for the government, on the one hand, to license a nuclear facility and, on the other hand, to ban them. I do not know if the anti-nuclear lobby within the government has forgotten about this facility. I would like to refer to the web site of Steritech to explain to members what ionising radiation is.

All matter is made up of atoms consisting of a nucleus surrounded by negatively charged electrons, similar to the sun surrounded by the planets. The nucleus is made up of a zoo of different particles. The most significant are called neutrons, because they do not carry an electrical charge and positively charged protons. Atoms containing the same number of protons have identical chemical properties and are known as elements. Elements with a different number of neutrons are known as isotopes. There are 88 naturally occurring elements, some examples of which are oxygen, iron, sulfur, uranium and radium. Some atoms have an excess of energy in their nucleus. They get rid of this energy by emitting some form of radiation. The process is called radioactive decay. Most of these radiations emitted have enough energy to strip off one or more of the electrons orbiting a nucleus. This process is called ionisation and, not surprisingly, the sort of radiations that can produce it are called ionising radiations.

Ionising radiation comes in four main forms: alpha particles, beta particles, gamma rays and X-rays. Each one behaves rather differently and can present different sorts of hazards. X-rays are a particular form of ionising radiation produced when high-speed electrons are stopped by heavy materials. Steritech uses gamma radiation for its sterilising process. Where is the logic in this legislation, therefore, when the Beattie Labor government, on the one hand, decides to license this nuclear medicine facility and today, on the other hand, wants to completely ban nuclear facilities? I wonder whether this will mean the closure of the Narangba facility. Maybe this legislation is not supposed to have any logic attached to it. Maybe it is just supposed to be filled with grand statements because it is actually just a stunt. This legislation is a complete joke and yet another example of the time wasting that goes on in this place.

As we see countries such as the United Kingdom and the United States embrace nuclear energy, to rule out public debate on nuclear energy as a possible future option is typical of the Beattie government's cannot do, cannot build approach and bowing to the factions. Queensland's immediate energy needs have been wonderfully served and we are fortunate to have coal in abundance. With the world's demand for energy forecast to double over the next 30 years, demand for our coal will soar and this resource may not last forever.

Unfortunately, when it comes to looking at the future infrastructure requirements for our state, this government is about perception. It pretends to plan but never does. When it comes to infrastructure, the Labor government is always playing catch-up. It has no vision and it has never looked down the track and thought that we may need a low-emission energy source in the future so let us keep our options open. The way the Labor government thinks is that it is politically expedient to put a bill forward to prohibit a low-

emitting energy source. As it has done with hospitals, water, roads, housing and electricity, it will rue the day that it closed its mind to this greenhouse friendly electricity option.

This bill is in reality unachievable and is a waste of the time of this parliament. The regulator to nuclear facilities in Australia is not the state; it is, in fact, the Commonwealth. So when it comes to making decisions about nuclear facilities this bill is redundant at all stages. Interestingly, this bill does allow some nuclear facilities to be built. Clause 7 outlines a number of exemptions including the operation of a nuclear powered vessel. So does this mean that at no stage can we have low-emitting greenhouse gas friendly nuclear facilities in Queensland, but we can have a nuclear powered vessel that is more than likely regarded as a military target?

How safe does the Left of the Labor Party feel about that? I am sure that a number of those on the Left would have spent a bit of time hanging around the docks waiting for a US military destroyer to come in obviously for the purposes of protesting against its presence. By allowing this legislation, those opposite will continue to allow those military vessels to dock in populated areas.

Speaking of hypocrisy, I want to refer members to clause 21 of this bill which creates an obligation on the minister to conduct a plebiscite to ascertain the views of Queensland voters if the Commonwealth takes steps towards supporting or allowing construction of a nuclear facility. This is what we like to refer to as the 'get out of jail' clause. This clause adds further to the stunt nature of this bill. It would be interesting to seek the minister's views as to whether he would seek to have the legislation repealed if a plebiscite conducted under the provisions of this bill resulted in a yes vote.

The minister's second reading speech and explanatory notes to the bill both claim that this legislation is in response to 'community concerns about potential environmental and human health impacts and weapons proliferation.' However, the government has not consulted with the community in any meaningful way whatsoever in relation to preparation of this bill. Under the consultation heading in the explanatory notes the government has indicated that it has consulted with only two of its own agencies—the Office of Parliamentary Counsel, which has to draft the bill, irrespective of its own policy intent, and the Coordinator-General.

The community concern which the government claims to reflect in the bill must be ideologically driven rather than based on any empirical evidence to gauge community views on the nuclear issue. In conclusion, let me reiterate that this bill is a joke. It achieves nothing and is a waste of the time of this parliament. The Queensland coalition believes that the coal industry is still the most important energy-producing option for Queensland. This bill, however, does not look to the future options for electricity generation that we may have to consider.

This bill does not come under the jurisdiction of this parliament for a start because nuclear facilities are regulated by the Commonwealth. This bill rules out the future use of a low greenhouse gas emitting option which could be very desirable when coal supplies start to run out. This bill does not rule out the building of new nuclear facilities and allows nuclear powered vessels to dock in our harbour and so in reality does not achieve Labor's true policy outcomes.

This bill has had no consultation with the community despite the fact that it is based on the premise of community concerns. This bill should be treated with contempt by this parliament. It is purely a stunt that is set up for the Left and achieves no real outcomes because this state does not have the power to achieve outcomes on nuclear facilities. It is a joke and a waste of the valuable time of this parliament, and for this reason the coalition will be opposing this bill.