

Is it the international impact
that our politicians fear most?

Uranium: the case against stays strong

By BRIAN MARTIN *

ON November 7 the Labor caucus gave the go-ahead for Roxby Downs, an enormous mine containing several minerals and whose uranium reserves exceed all other reserves known in Australia.

An inquiry into the nuclear fuel cycle by the Australian Science and Technology Council has been set up but, as its terms of reference presume the continuation of uranium mining, anti-nuclear groups are setting up an alternative inquiry and many groups are considering boycotting the ASTEC inquiry. These decisions by the Government provide a pointed contrast with events more than eight years ago.

In July 1975, the previous Australian Labor Government set up the Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry. Although at that time Labor policy favoured uranium mining, there were sufficient reservations being raised to warrant waiting for an inquiry into uranium mining and nuclear power. These reservations included concern about Aboriginal land rights and criticisms of nuclear power. By the time the Ranger inquiry submitted its reports in 1976 and 1977, uranium mining

had become a big political issue.

Without waiting for the public debate recommended by the first Ranger report, the Liberal-National Party Government gave the go-ahead for uranium mining in August 1977, and mining began at some mines in 1979. In the meantime, the ALP and ACTU had adopted policies opposing uranium mining.

In the years since 1975 many arguments have been raised for and against uranium mining. This article takes a brief look at the status of the main arguments raised against nuclear power and uranium mining.

Environmental hazards. The Three Mile Island accident in 1979 dramatised the possibility of a disaster at a nuclear-power plant. Further revelations continue to be made about shoddy construction, defective engineering and materials, suggesting that this problem remains an important one.

Nuclear-power plants generate significant quantities of radioactive waste, and disposal of this waste is a significant problem. In 1978 Professor Ted Ringwood, of the Australian National University, proposed a new disposal method based on embedding high-level radioactive waste elements in a synthetic rock called Synroc which would be buried deep in granite formations.

While the Synroc approach seems promising, the stability of Synroc under radioactive bombardment still has to be thoroughly tested. Furthermore, Synroc does nothing about low- or medium-level wastes, or about the high-level wastes during the most dangerous period — the years of storage before they are embedded in glass or Synroc. Even if its technical shortcomings can be overcome, the Synroc approach would not remove the most significant environmental and political hazards

associated with radioactive waste.

Proliferation. The Ranger inquiry concluded that the most significant hazard posed by the nuclear-power industry was a contribution to the risk of nuclear war. This occurs partly through the provision of nuclear facilities — nuclear power plants, uranium enrichment plants and reprocessing plants — which can be easily used or adapted to produce weapons-grade uranium or plutonium. The spread of nuclear power also requires the training of nuclear scientists and engineers whose skills may be "diverted" to the production of nuclear weapons.

Despite the efforts of Australian governments to obtain strong safeguards agreements covering uranium export contracts, the intrinsic inadequacy of such safeguards means that an Australian con-

tribution to the proliferation of nuclear weapons cannot be ruled out.

If the fast-breeder reactor, which uses and produces vast quantities of plutonium, were widely introduced, this would significantly increase the potential for nuclear proliferation. Even some of the proponents of nuclear power oppose the fast reactor. But by promoting the present thermal reactors, a vast economic, political and technological commitment to nuclear power is fostered. When uranium eventually runs short or becomes expensive, there will be enormous pressures to introduce fast reactors to provide fuel for existing thermal reactors.

The nuclear fuel cycle is not the only path to nuclear weapons, but it is an important one. Certainly the Israeli Government must have thought so when it authorised bombing of an

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