

Nuclear issue still generates heat

Uranium mining and export was a contentious issue at this year's Labor Party National Conference, but that is nothing new.

The uranium issue has been dividing the party since the early 1970s.

Many people in Australia believe that opposition to uranium mining and nuclear power is inherently a left-wing cause. But on a world scene this is simply not true.

Communist parties in the Soviet Union and many other socialist states have long supported nuclear power. So have communist, socialist and social democratic parties in many western countries.

Whether to use uranium and plutonium to produce electricity has been a people's issue more than a party issue. In the 1970s, opposition grew up in all sorts of quarters — among fishing communities in Japan, farming communities in Europe, and suburbia in the United States. The opposition cut across the usual political divisions.

Governments of all complexions have promoted nuclear power because it fits into existing electricity

grids and requires government regulation and experts to control it.

Nuclear power is complex, large-scale and potentially dangerous, and that means that ordinary citizens or small entrepreneurs cannot be trusted to run it.

Opponents have pointed to environmental impacts, ranging from reactor accidents to disposal of long-lived radioactive waste. They argue that nuclear power technology and skills can lay the basis for manufacturing nuclear weapons.

They also argue that energy efficiency and

energy generation using sun, wind and biofuels are better prospects, both environmentally and politically.

The Australian Labor Party has always been torn between the pros and cons of the nuclear fuel cycle: Capital investment and profits on the one hand; environmental impacts and nuclear proliferation on the other.

Ever since 1977, the rank and file of the ALP have opposed uranium mining. But some influential members of the party were never happy with this.

Bob Hawke, then Presi-

dent of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, was one who disagreed with the anti-uranium stand. Hawke and others worked hard behind the scenes to weaken and overturn the party platform.

The chance for the pro-uranium forces to change policy came with Labor's anti-uranium platform was put through as a result of concern by the party's rank and file. The overturning of the platform, by contrast, was pushed through by party power brokers.

Whatever the economic effect of uranium mining — this also is a matter for

Briefings

BEHIND THE NEWS ANALYSIS

By Dr BRIAN MARTIN, lecturer, Dept of Science and Technology Studies, Wollongong University. Briefings can be heard every Friday on 1430 Radio 2WN between 9 and 9.30 am.

dispute — Australian policy has a vast symbolic importance.

The New Zealand government's ban on nuclear ships has little strategic significance but has had vast political consequences. Similarly, a ban on exporting Australian uranium would have enor-

mous political impact worldwide.

Opponents see the issue as symbolic of popular concerns for the environment and the prevention of nuclear war. That is why the uranium issue will continue to generate intense political heat.