Uranium Policies of the ALP, 1950 - 1990

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Introduction

The following chronology documents the various policies of the Australian Labor Party towards uranium mining and export over an extended period, namely, from 1950 to the present. The forty years can conveniently be divided into stages:

- **1950-1970**: Cold War and beginnings of nuclear power
- **1970-June 1975**: Uranium policies dominated by Rex Connor
- **June 1975-July 1982**: Anti-uranium policies in ascendancy
- **July 1982-present**: Three-mine policy

Note that changing community attitudes towards the environment, nuclear power and related matters have influenced many of the policy changes to be described.

The first twenty years under review (1950-1970) will be passed over quickly here because there is little evidence that the ALP had any direct policies on uranium during that period. The first significant discoveries of uranium in Australia were at Radium Hill (1906), Mt Painter (1910), Rum Jungle (1949), South Alligator Valley (including Coronation Hill) 1953, Mary Kathleen (1954) and Westmoreland (1956). The Atomic Energy Act of 1953 gave the Commonwealth total control over Territorial uranium and control over State uranium for defence purposes. An early principal task of the Australian Atomic Energy Commission was to locate, mine and supply uranium to Britain and the US for nuclear weapons production. Uranium was first produced in Australia in quantity at Rum Jungle, NT, in 1954.

There appears to be little in the ALP platforms of the time which would oppose the above use of uranium in nuclear weapons. In fact, defence platforms stressed the need for cooperation with allies, although the fear of nuclear war is clear enough. The foreign policy platform of 1957 contains the following words:

'We urge, nevertheless, that nuclear research to hasten the application of atomic power for industrial purposes be encouraged in the development of Australia. Further, we demand the protection and safeguarding of Australia by the retention here of basic raw materials and the necessary manufacturing and industrial processing rights, so as to ensure this country's self-sufficiency in time of emergency or conflict.'
This can perhaps be interpreted as a call to ensure adequate supplies of uranium in Australia.

As ample uranium was discovered in the US, Africa and elsewhere, Australia's importance in the nuclear arms race of the fifties and sixties declined. Future uranium exports would have to serve the slowly developing nuclear power industry.


1972: In its last days of office, the McMahon Government approved a number of uranium export contracts. The price agreed to was very low, about $A6 per pound. The new Labor Government stopped all further uranium contracts, but reluctantly allowed the approved contracts to stand. Mr R. F. X. Connor was appointed as Minister for Minerals and Energy. Mr Connor's policies were to dominate Government attitudes on uranium for the next two years. At first, the main reason given for Mr Connor's uranium export embargo was that world prices were too low. Environmental or nuclear weapons considerations were not dominant in Cabinet at that time.

July 1973: ALP Federal Conference. Mr Connor's uranium embargo was being thoroughly vindicated on commercial grounds by the considerable increase in uranium prices worldwide since January. Labor approved a strong pro-nuclear policy similar to that of 1971.

October 1973: The oil embargo by OPEC (oil shock) forced a completely new approach to energy policy. Nuclear power was favoured, with forecasts of soaring world demand for uranium being made. Considering the recent discoveries of huge Australian uranium reserves, it seemed to Mr Connor that Australia possessed tremendous leverage for obtaining overseas capital and expertise for an Australian Government-owned nuclear industry. This argument was to dominate Mr Connor's nuclear policies.

October 1974: Mr Connor's uranium export embargo continued, even though world prices were very high. It became much clearer that price had been only one of Mr Connor's reasons for the embargo. Ambitions such as a 100% Australian
Government-owned uranium enrichment plant, a central Government-owned uranium mill in the NT, and Government part-ownership in uranium mining companies became predominant.

By this time, the uranium embargo was proving embarrassing to the Prime Minister (Mr Whitlam), who was being besieged by foreign governments wanting to buy uranium oxide but not Australian-enriched uranium. Mr Whitlam became somewhat sympathetic to these potential buyers.

Shortly before an Australian visit by a Japanese Prime Minister (Mr Tanaka), an agreement between the Government and the Ranger uranium partners was thrashed out (the Lodge Agreement). Although expressed in very loose terms, the agreement gave 50% of Ranger to the Government in return for generous Government development financing.

**February 1975:** ALP National Conference. Victorian delegates moved to ban uranium exports pending an inquiry, not on the basis of economics or national control but on environmental grounds. Mr Whitlam, however, successfully opposed the motion. Nevertheless, the Platform was changed significantly. On mineral resources, the amended section read:

> 'Labor will achieve and maintain full ownership and control of coal, oil, natural gas, uranium and all other fuel and energy resources provided that in Federal territories extraction of these minerals is to a rigid anti-pollution code.'

Also, under the heading Fuel and Energy, the Platform on nuclear power now became:

> 'Labor will continue to investigate the use of fissionable materials for peaceful purposes, although nuclear power stations will not be established until environmental safeguards have been guaranteed.'

Thus, although Mr Connor had achieved a new clause on full Government ownership and control of minerals, the nuclear industry section except for uranium enrichment was much more subdued.
April 1975: Dr Cass, Labor Minister for the Environment and Conservation, announced that an environmental inquiry would take place (the Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry).

June 1975: (1) The Lodge Agreement bogged down. Mr Connor claimed that the Ranger partners were 'strapped for cash'. No overseas interest was forthcoming in financing Mr Connor's proposed uranium enrichment plant.

(2) Mr Connor's pro-uranium policies were opposed by three State Labor Branches (Victoria, NSW and SA). The Branches called for delays or bans on uranium exports for environmental reasons. This was a significant defeat for Mr Connor.

(3) Upon receiving suggestions that Australia as a seller of uranium would have to take back nuclear waste from its customers, Mr Connor strongly disagreed. He was reported to say:

'When we sell the stuff (uranium) to another country it's their property and their responsibility.'

He also said that, with adequate coal and hydro-power supplies, Australia was not prepared at present to consider building its own nuclear reactors considering the problem of radioactive waste disposal.

October 1975: (1) Mr Connor was sacked from the Ministry after 'misleading' Mr Whitlam on the Loans Affair. Mr Connor was trying to raise money from unusual foreign sources for his enrichment plant and other large projects.

(2) The Labor Government overcame Mr Connor's previous objections to the Lodge Agreement and signed a much more detailed Memorandum of Understanding with the Ranger partners. The Ranger Inquiry was not expected to be much of a 'hindrance' at this stage.

November 1976: In the face of increasing community interest in matters environmental, and despite strong Labor grass roots opposition to uranium exports, a five-point resolution of Mr Keating and Senator Button (with Labor now in Opposition) was passed by Caucus, but opposed by the environmental group of Mr Uren, Dr Cass, Senator Mulvihill, Dr Cairns and Senator Gietzelt. Mr Keating (then spokesman for
minerals and energy) was generally regarded as pro-uranium. The resolution was as follows:

1. That existing contracts for uranium mining should be honoured, provided that no new mining developments are permitted to take place.

2. That the Labor Party should continually press for stricter international safeguards and controls over the handling of nuclear materials.

3. That it be made clear that the next Labor Government will not be bound to honour any future contracts entered into by the present Government.

4. That if, in government, the Labor Party is satisfied that the hazards associated with nuclear power have been eliminated and satisfactory methods of waste disposal developed the question of uranium mining be reconsidered in the context of full public debate.

5. The ALP condemns the Government for their haste in announcing decisions on the mining of uranium, without giving the Australian community time in which to debate this highly important subject, thereby disregarding the commission of inquiry's final recommendation.

Note that the words 'ban' or 'moratorium' did not appear in this resolution, which merely undertook to reconsider the question of uranium when Labor came to power.

**July 1977:** At the ALP National Conference, Mr Keating proposed that the November 1976 Caucus decision should stand, plus a two-year moratorium. However, feeling against uranium was running extremely strongly, and a much tougher policy presented by Mr Dunstan and Mr Holding was accepted instead.

Following the preamble, the new Labor uranium policy ran as follows: a Labor Government will

(a) declare a moratorium on uranium mining and treatment in Australia;

(b) repudiate any commitment of a non-Labor government to the mining, processing or export of Australia's uranium;
(c) not permit the mining, processing or export of uranium pursuant to agreement entered into contrary to Labor's policy.

November 1978: In a debate in the House of Representatives on an amendment to the Atomic Energy Act, Mr Hayden said:

'Labor in Government will not be constrained by this Government's permissive uranium policy. We give fair warning to the companies, their financiers and potential customers that Labor will treat uranium responsibly. We will implement our policy of preventing the exploitation of Australian uranium while it poses unsolved threats to the environment, human health and welfare and to international security.'

January 1979: Mr Dunstan (SA Premier) announced a 2-week fact-finding tour of overseas nuclear installations, following (i) 'more than promising' developments in uranium technology overseas, and (ii) 'significant changes' in the regulation and management of the nuclear fuel cycle. Mr Dunstan admitted that his trip could lead to a 'modification' of policy. Intense lobbying was prompted within the State Labor Party by this statement.

February 1979: Mr Dunstan returned from his overseas tour, decided to maintain SA's uranium ban because nuclear safeguards were still inadequate, and because there was still no solution to nuclear waste disposal despite the 'dramatic developments'. Mr Dunstan resigned in the same month for health reasons. Note that South Australia had become important in the uranium debate because Western Mining Corporation had discovered the huge Olympic Dam (Roxby Downs) deposit in 1975.

July 1979: At the ALP National Conference, the uranium moratorium policy was retained. In addition, policies to (i) repeal the 1978 uranium mining enabling legislation, and (ii) prohibit the establishment in Australia of nuclear power plants and all other stages of the nuclear fuel cycle were adopted. The Harrisburg (Three Mile Island) nuclear accident and the falling off of projected uranium demand seemed to vindicate the strong anti-uranium stand of Mr Uren and his supporters.

June 1981: The Leader of the Opposition (Mr Hayden) indicated that he believed the technical and safety problems with nuclear power should be resolved by the next federal election in 1983. This opinion was strongly rejected by Mr Uren. Meanwhile, it was being reported in the press that some Labor strategists in SA were
looking ahead to a pro-uranium policy in time for the 1982 SA election. At the time, unemployment in the State was very high, so the development of the copper-gold-uranium Roxby Downs mine was an important political issue.

**November 1981**: The official opening of the Ranger uranium mine, Jabiru, NT.

**December 1981**: Despite its formal anti-uranium policy, the ACTU agreed to lift its ban on the shipment of uranium from Darwin.

**April 1982**: The SA Australian Workers' Union reversed its policies, became pro-uranium.

**June 1982**: SA Labor MP Norm Foster voted against, resigned from the ALP, then voted for passage of the Roxby Downs Indenture Ratification Bill. His vote was crucial. The Leader of the SA Opposition (Mr Bannon) stated that a SA Labor Government might negotiate to alter, but would not repudiate the indenture.

**July 1982**: At the ALP National Conference there was tremendous pre-conference lobbying of delegates concerning a possible change in uranium policy. In the event, the strong three-point 'anti' policy was heavily qualified (one could say reversed) by the lengthy so-called Hogg amendment. Avowedly anti-uranium itself, the amendment committed the party

(i) not to allow any new uranium mines (thus, by inference, permitting the existing mines Nabarlek and Ranger to continue);

(ii) to **phase out** Australia's involvement in the uranium industry (because of the 'difficulties' of implementing the existing policy of repudiating existing contracts);

(iii) to consider export of 'uranium mined incidentally to the mining of other minerals on a case-by-case basis' (Roxby Downs/ new mine/SA election clause); and

(iv) only to contemplate supply of uranium to France 'subject to the government ceasing all nuclear testing programmes in the Pacific (note:
there was no specific requirement for France to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty).

October 1982: Mr Bannon's election policy announced: Roxby Downs was to go ahead.

March 1983: Soon after gaining office, the Federal Labor Government revoked all negotiating licences of uranium companies. ERA (Ranger) and Queensland Mines (Nabarlek) but not Pancontinental (Jabiluka) were permitted to negotiate for certain export contracts after they reapplied for the licences.

November 1983: Cabinet and Caucus (by 55 votes to 46) decided:

(i) to approve the Roxby Downs project federally;
(ii) to prevent the development of any other new uranium mines;
(iii) to set up an ASTEC inquiry into Australia's role in the nuclear fuel cycle;
(iv) to approve two new uranium contracts already negotiated by ERA;
(v) no further new contracts to be considered until after the inquiry; and
(vi) maintenance of ban on uranium exports to France.

Also in November, the Labor Government abolished the Uranium Advisory Council.

July 1984: ALP National Conference. A more clearly pro-uranium platform was accepted by 55 votes to 44. For the first time the so-called 'three-mine' policy was clearly delineated, Nabarlek, Ranger and Roxby Downs being named and new mines prohibited. There was no mention of 'phasing out' the uranium industry. The ban on supply to France held, as did the rejection of Australian nuclear power plants and all other stages of the nuclear fuel cycle. A new clause was inserted opposing the ocean dumping of radioactive waste.
May 1984: Release of the ASTEC Report 'Australia's Role in the Nuclear Fuel Cycle'. Expanded mining and development of other parts of the cycle were recommended among other matters.

October 1984: Shipments of contracted uranium to France became due. The Government decided to maintain its ban and agreed to buy two years supply from Queensland Mines at a cost of $56 million.

February 1985: The Government allowed uranium to be supplied to France indirectly through a German company, in the belief that the uranium would not actually be used in France.

May 1985: The Prime Minister (Mr Hawke) rejected two key recommendations of the ASTEC nuclear report calling for expanded mining and participation in advanced nuclear fuel processing.

July 1986: ALP National Conference. The three-mine policy was left virtually unchanged.

August 1986: A Federal Government decision to resume sales of uranium to France was made to increase Budget Revenue. After a reportedly 'bitter' debate, a special Caucus meeting endorsed the decision (74-42).

December 1987: Government approval for ERA to supply France with uranium over fourteen years was granted.

June 1988: At the ALP National Conference, the main change to uranium policy was in the France clause, which allowed recent government contract approvals to proceed but banned future contracts. A Uranium Policy Review Committee was set up with the intention of its reporting before the end of 1989.


December 1988: The Government announced an intention to sell its uranium stockpile.

September 1989: The floor price for Australian uranium was brought down from $US 31/lb to $US 26/lb for new contracts.

September 1990: ALP National Secretary Mr Bob Hogg claimed that the three-mine policy was 'contradictory' and in need of revision. Also, the Environment Minister (Mrs Kelly) raised the possibility of increased uranium mining. But both Senator Richardson and Mr Kerin (Ministers for Social Security and Primary Industries and Energy, respectively) indicated that no changes were likely, even looking ahead to the next ALP National Conference in mid-1991, because of 'the numbers' and because of economic conditions.

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