



Ramping Up Our Coal And Gas Production Is The Only Way To Power Australia While We Get Over Our Nuclear Energy Hang-up

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**Refurbishing our coal plants to extend their working life, scrapping the renewable energy target and increasing gas exploration is the simplest solution to Australia's power demands in the immediate years to come.**

Good on Peter Dutton for bringing on a debate about nuclear energy this week, taking aim at a longstanding sacred cow in Australian energy policy.

Starting a debate, though, is one thing.

Presenting realistic options to address Australia's serious energy crisis is – in the case of nuclear energy – quite another.

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Let me be clear that both I and The Institute of Public Affairs have long argued in favour of legalising nuclear power.

Repealing the ban on nuclear power plants, currently contained in the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, was included in our 20 Policies to Fix Australia, released during the 2019 election campaign.

And it is clear that both recent advances in nuclear technology and the experience overseas – not to mention the fact Australia has about a third of the world's uranium resources – makes nuclear power a sensible and workable power source in Australia.

It is beyond time that Australia had the debate. But a debate will not, in itself, keep the lights on.

In the meantime there are simpler and easier ways to address our energy crisis.

Here's what a nuclear energy debate will look like.

The best case scenario is Peter Dutton goes to the next election with a pro-nuclear policy and wins. With the next federal election due in 2025, that's about three years away.

Upon taking office, the new government will have to go through the motions of commissioning feasibility studies and the like, costing millions of dollars and in all likelihood taking a year or two to complete.

If the early studies check out, the next step will be to remove the ban on nuclear power plants (which, again I make the point, has long been supported by the IPA).

For that to happen, the Dutton government will have to shepherd an amendment act through Parliament.

Labor will probably oppose it, and the Greens definitely will, so the government will be drawn into a convoluted process of legislative horse-trading with the Jacqui Lambies and David Pococks of the world.

And even that would probably only happen after more time and resources are chewed up when the bill is punted to some committee which will relitigate all the issues addressed during the feasibility study phase.

Meanwhile, the government will have to hold its nerve in the face of a groundswell of confected opposition as various well-funded environmental groups come out of the woodwork.

Rational arguments about the safety of contemporary nuclear reactors will be drowned in a sea of emotive TV ads dredging up memories of Chernobyl and Three Mile Island.

At the same time, there would be a long, protracted debate on where any new nuclear plant would be located.



Australia does not have a good track record of such conversations.

The Coalition spent most of its recent term in government scrambling to find a long-term solution for disposing of waste from the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor in Sydney.

The process started in May 2015, and it wasn't until December last year that then-Resources Minister Keith Pitt announced a site had been found at Kimba in South Australia.

And that was just the process of finding a site for low-level nuclear waste – things like gloves used in the process of creating nuclear medicine.

God knows how long it will take to find a community that would welcome an actual nuclear power plant – let alone a site for disposing of high-level waste such as spent fuel rods.

Maybe the Dutton government would manage to sway some state premier with a hefty bag of taxpayers' money, but even then, one bad state election result would send the feds right back to square one.

Then comes the red tape, the green tape, the black tape, and sundry other forms of bureaucratic equivocating that need to be undertaken to do damned near anything in this country, let alone something as ambitious as a nuclear power plant.

In the meantime, the project will need to attract some hefty capital – most likely from overseas - which will dry up as environmental groups filibuster via the courts.

But even if we assume that, by some miracle, all of these obstacles and more are overcome and the thing actually gets built, it will probably require a compromise to pacify the army of entrenched rent-seekers in the “renewable energy” racket.

Most likely this will come in the form of a beefed-up renewable energy target because the political zeitgeist dictates that failed technologies like wind and solar “continue to form an important part of our energy mix”.

The upshot will be the nuclear plant will be effectively undercut by heavily-subsidised intermittent sources when the sun is shining and the wind is blowing, just like coal generators are now.

And because nuclear generators, like coal, cannot easily be “spun up” to respond to higher demand, they need to run more or less constantly, even when they are being outbid by wind and solar.

So in all likelihood, our skewed energy market will render the nuclear plant unprofitable.

When the operator waves the white flag a few years in and takes the nuclear power plant offline, its opponents will say they were right all along, and that the “energy of the future” really is renewables after all – even though the real reason is that the regulatory environment was gamed



against nuclear from day one.

Now, I'm sure that I will be inundated by a flood of correspondence from a great many intelligent, knowledgeable people who will offer a suite of perfectly sound reasons why the technical obstacles I've identified can be easily overcome – and they'd probably be right.

But the point is not what can work years down the track, the point is what can work in Australia in 2022.

And more to the point, it is a question of whether we have the luxury of embarking on a process spanning quite possibly more than a decade when soaring power bills demand solutions here and now.

Making up for years of government fiddling with our energy market can only be achieved by reverting to the simplest and cheapest option, and that is coal and gas.

Refurbish our existing coal plants to extend their working life, scrap the renewable energy target to remove the disincentives to keep them running and ramp up gas exploration so that we have enough to meet peak demand.

By all means, let's start a debate to get over our national hang-up over nuclear energy.

Nuclear power may very well form an important part of Australia's energy mix one day. I hope it does.

But in the meantime, we have easy and affordable solutions ready to go.

Let's kick the decades-long habit of running our energy grid on wishful thinking and go back to energy sources that we know Australia can do, and do well.

A nuclear debate is all well and good, but what really matters right now is a sensible discussion about coal and gas.

**Original Link:**

<https://www.skynews.com.au/opinion/coal-and-gas-are-the-only-way-to-power-australia-while-we-get-over-our-hangup-over-nuclear-energy/news-story/bab41f8fb3b90c3cfa4be9b5a4efa326>

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