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LAWYERS

Nukes in Our Future



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As I said last October in 'A Technological Answer to Global Climate Change' (www.mckeanpark.com.au), ". . . the likelihood is that we will shortly be debating (the use on nuclear energy)". And so it has transpired. With what seems a sudden realisation that global warming is a massive problem that will not await Australia's dawdling approach, the government has set up, with unbelievable haste, the inevitable inquiry to precede a "debate". Considering all this comes about nine years after Australia signed up to the Kyoto Protocol there will be many who believe this move is by no means before time.

The outcome of the inquiry and, whatever debate follows it, are of a course unknown. It would be difficult, however, not to conclude that a nuclear future now confronts all of us and that it will commence almost immediately. As the papers published on this website have said or implied often enough, coal is not the fuel of the future. In addition, the coal industry has taken far too long to come to grips with the inherent problems of CO₂ emissions. The nine years referred to, which Kyoto's framers provided for nations and industries to adapt themselves to change, passed by without any significant adaptation occurring. Those who attended conferences and seminars on global warming issues grew very tired of coal industry representatives forever proclaiming that nothing would happen to lessen the use of coal because the world couldn't live without it.

More recently Australians have seen the industry stampede towards a geosequestrational solution. Clearly this approach came far too late. Geosequestration (or CCS as it is now known) will be extremely expensive both to implement and to provide, and likely to make coal sourced energy more costly than renewable energy. Of even more

importance, are the uncertainties of the implementation, cost and safety of CCS that tell against its widespread adoption. If Australia were to pursue the CCS option as its preferred means of reducing CO₂, industry would be left to twiddle its thumbs for at least 20 years awaiting the outcome. It would take that long to introduce geosequestration on a widespread commercial basis and industry is not willing to wait that long. The construction of nuclear power plants, on the other hand, will commence as soon as the necessary decision is made.

Government, which still stubbornly resists an emissions trading market as a solution, therefore has little, if any, alternative in the short term other than to bring on nuclear energy at the expense of CCS – and so it will be. Were the government to continue its 'no action' policy our trade as well as our credibility would suffer. In the result, CCS is likely to wither on the vine or be implemented only sufficiently to assist Australia lessen coal emissions as the nation continue to use coal sourced energy on a continually diminishing basis.

The course of the debate is likely to be interesting. On the one hand, Australians have stoutly resisted nuclear generated power for over half a century. We commenced this rejection because of our fear of nuclear war. Since then Australia has witnessed the tragedy of Chernobyl; and profited by subsequently advertising our farming produce as clean (i.e. not nuclear contaminated), as well as green.

On the other hand, nuclear energy is produced all over the world from (currently) 441 nuclear power stations and many more planned or in the course of construction. Nuclear war is not the concern it once was and we can reasonably assume that nuclear power plants are safer than they once were.

Nevertheless there will always be risk. Some of us will live closer to that risk than others but all of us face the possibility of being affected by a nuclear accident of Chernobyl proportions. It is this that feeds the continued uncertainties about nuclear power generation, and in turn, provides one of the soundest arguments for the government to simultaneously establish an emissions trading market. A substantial

nuclear accident anywhere in the world will turn public opinion strongly against the continued sourcing of energy by nuclear means. Pressure that already exists in countries like the United Kingdom and Sweden, to permanently close down nuclear power stations as they reach their life expectancy, would be immeasurably strengthened. The fact, therefore, is that we need an emissions trading market as a back up in the event of such an occurrence.

In addition, nuclear powered energy may eventually provide most of our stationary energy needs but this is likely to take 30 to 40 years which is far too long in terms of our likely international commitments. In addition, although the switch to nuclear powered energy will remove the emission of carbon based gases in the stationary energy sector, there are many

other sectors in which emissions of those gases will continue to increase. To reduce emissions in those sectors requires the market approach recommended by Kyoto. As a conclusion, the government needs to extend the debate to include what is good and what is bad about such a market.

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