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ON THE DRY SIDE 406

Risk

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Labor's policy of allowing uranium to be exported from only three mines is an arbitrary compromise. The policy has been described by the Prime Minister himself as illogical. And now the Industries Commission has, somewhat euphemistically, described a rationale for it as "hard to find".

The official Party line that further uranium mines are unlikely to be profitable should not be taken seriously. It is a cynical sour-grapes rationalisation designed to show that not much by way of wealth and employment is sacrificed by giving in to left-wing pressure.

The rationalisation is, moreover, a particularly shallow one. If additional Australian production would be unprofitable, then companies hardly need a government policy to stop them from losing money. If, on the other hand, Australian uranium production is potentially more efficient than some existing foreign production, then Australian production will replace foreign production and Australian employment and profits will replace foreign employment and profits. We could do with the employment, profits and export income right now.

If the Industries Commission will go looking for economic rationales where only political rationales exist, then they are bound to be disappointed.

The real issue is whether uranium mining is a morally acceptable activity. A significant minority of Labor Party members believe that it is not. Let us examine their position.

The moral case against the mining of uranium ores rests on the belief that their development makes the world less safe. A world made less safe for humans must be one in which the additional injury or death suffered by some people exceeds the injury and death averted for others. No sensible person denies that uranium mining involves some risks; but what is

the net effect? Will profitable Australian uranium mines, on balance, make the world more or less safe?

While there can be no logical guarantee that any present trend will continue---the sun may not rise tomorrow---we must start with current causes of premature death and injury. Accidents connected with uranium barely rate. Twenty three people are said to have died at Chernobyl. Even if we multiply that figure by ten---Soviet officials are sometimes careless with such data---as coal mining and power generation accidents go, Chernobyl remains small beer. Those who oppose nuclear power generation because of the risk of accident it entails need to demonstrate that nuclear accidents will, on balance, do more harm than accidents with alternative sources of power.

What of nuclear weapons? Certainly, a full-scale nuclear war would wreak more havoc than any previous war. But two other points are relevant. First: it was the very horror of the nuclear threat that allowed us to get through the Cold War relatively unscathed. Those who might once have doubted this now have the evidence of the Khrushchev tapes. Second: the amount of fissionable material required to make a bomb is minuscule. Denial of nuclear weaponry to the Husseins, Qadafis and Castros will be achieved for longer by restricting technology, not by restricting the supply of yellow cake nor even of enriched uranium. But, in the long run, even that hope is forlorn. Our best hope of lasting peace lies in a world in which, through trade, most people's living standards are rising, transnational social and commercial intercourse are commonplace, and in which it is easy to flee tyrants. We might try lowering our own trade barriers and being more generous to refugees.

This century, in spite of two World Wars, the commonest cause of premature death has not been war, and certainly not industrial accidents of any sort. Famine, disease and natural disaster are still by far the biggest killers. Because the 20th Century saw Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedung and Pol Pot, the risk of being murdered by one's own government has also been high.

Leaving to one side the risk of being murdered by one's own Government, for which democracy offers nearly 100% protection, to be richer is to be much safer. Yet, the proverbial man from Mars listening to rich people talk about the risks of new technology might be surprised to discover that they are not dropping like flies. In fact people in technologically-advanced nations live about 18 years longer than people living in developing countries; where technology has advanced in any country, life expectancy has increased; and individuals in wealthy families (perhaps to the chagrin of their heirs) make old bones.

The reason should be obvious. Although new technologies certainly do bring risks, they also bring benefits and the two cannot be separated---no risks: no benefits. There are the more-or-less predictable benefits. Nuclear power generation, for instance, will, to the extent that is the cheapest form of

energy in a given situation, provide cheaper power to light and warm houses, pump water, power industry, mill food, synthesize medicine etc. It will also take the pressure off coal and oil supplies, thereby reducing the prices of those commodities. People who spend less on energy have more to spend on such life-enhancing goods as food, shelter, education, healthcare and sewerage disposal.

And there are the unpredicted benefits. To take an example, the numbers of people killed in American typhoons have been reduced from hundreds to single figures. The typhoons have become no less severe, but warning time and transport have been improved immeasurably. If Bangladesh were as wealthy, the world would, indeed, be a safer place. The possession of knowledge and other non-specific surplus resources, available for use against events that are not forecast, are the greatest safety measures of all. When nuclear power becomes cheap enough it may be used to irrigate the deserts or to make oil from coal, and probably it will be used for things as yet unthought of.

All we can say with certainty is that, if current material and intellectual wealth had been banned in response to yesterday's fears, the world would be a lot less safe today. There is no reason to believe that nuclear energy is an exception to the trend. It is not their intention, but those who would stop its development are asking for shorter life expectancies than will be possible---that is, a less safe world.

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