On 7 November 1983, the ALP caucus voted to allow the development of the Roxby Downs uranium mine in South Australia and to permit the continuation of the Ranger uranium mine in the Northern Territory. This decision represented a significant departure from what many people believed was the stated ALP uranium platform, phasing out existing mines and not allowing any new mines to proceed. In this article, Ronald Leeks and Mark Hayes argue that, despite government rationalisations to the contrary, Australian uranium exports will contribute to nuclear proliferation and render support for the status quo of the nuclear arms race.

These papers were:
1. "Background Paper on Australia and International Nuclear Issues", prepared by the Department of Foreign Affairs, Resources and Energy, and Trade, and sometimes referred to as the Hayden Paper.
2. "Review of the Australian Uranium Industry — Caucus Discussion Paper No. 1" — apparently prepared by the Prime Minister's office. This paper will hereafter be referred to as the Hawke caucus paper.
4. A fourth paper circulated in October 1983 and prepared by the Australian Democrats, "Why We Must Keep It In The Ground: A Case Against Uranium Mining and the Nuclear Industry and the Alternatives for Australia and the World", is also worth noting in this context.

A close reading of these papers reveals much about the government's decision.

On 7 November 1983, the ALP caucus voted to allow the development of the Roxby Downs uranium mine in South Australia, which can produce gold and copper as well as uranium. At the same time, the Ranger uranium mine in the Northern Territory was allowed to continue, but other Northern Territory mines were denied permission to continue.

This decision on 7 November 1983 represented a significant departure from what many people believed was the stated ALP platform with respect to uranium mining: upon attaining government, the ALP would phase out uranium mining and not allow new mines to proceed.

The decision also represented a victory by factions in the ALP led by the Prime Minister, Mr. Hawke, and a number of Commonwealth departments which appear to have significant bureaucratic 'capital' invested in promoting the mining and export of Australian uranium.

Prior to the 7 November caucus meeting, a series of discussion and position papers were circulated widely among caucus members.
The Hawke caucus paper clearly indicates that the Prime Minister wants to connect his position on uranium mining and export with growing public concern over the threat of global nuclear war.

The objectives which should be common, in order of priority, are to concentrate our efforts on reducing the possibility of nuclear warfare; of bringing about nuclear disarmament; of turning around the expansion of vertical and horizontal proliferation; of tackling the problem associated with the peaceful use of nuclear power including the associated waste problem.4

Given the fragility of world peace and the potential for nuclear warfare our view is that our priorities should be focused on the use to which uranium is put rather than eliminating our supplies from the world cycle.2

The main thrust of the government position, as approved at the 7 November 1983 caucus meeting, is that a withdrawal by Australia as a uranium supplier would adversely affect the international non-proliferation regime.

THE NON-PROLIFERATION REGIME AND SAFEGUARDS

The nature of the non-proliferation regime has been outlined by Warren H. Donnelly:

Today the world depends upon a loose structure of treaty commitments verified by international inspection, not to acquire nuclear weapons; informal and voluntary understandings of nuclear supplier states to limit certain nuclear exports, to require safeguards for others, and to limit their nuclear co-operation to the least dangerous nuclear technologies; bilateral agreements between some nuclear supplier states and their clients; and a general predisposition against nuclear weapons.3

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), based in Vienna, is the major operating arm of the non-proliferation regime.4 Its primary mandate, however, is to promote nuclear power worldwide. The terms of the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty assign to the IAEA the responsibility over safeguards of fissionable material used in civil nuclear power programs. The IAEA also co-operates with certain regional groupings and individual nations in providing safeguards.3

A major argument presented in the Hawke caucus paper for continued Australian uranium supply is the leverage Australia could apply in promoting safeguards.

Withdrawal will bring no benefit to the broader questions of non-proliferation and the future direction of the industry and the arms race.

Currently, whatever the limitations are in terms of controls and safeguards they are much the better for the involvement of Australia, who has supplied and will continue to supply, even more stringent safeguards.7

The limitations of those safeguards have been documented elsewhere and were sufficient for the Ranger Report in 1976 to give its well known assessment:

The Commission recognises that these defects, taken together, are so serious that existing safeguards may provide only an illusion of protection.6

The essential point with regard to safeguards under the IAEA is stated by Donnelly:

Its safeguards cannot control the future policies of states, but only verify present activities. The Agency cannot physically protect anything but only report diversions.9

Although there are many scenarios proposed for diversion of small and large amounts of nuclear material into a weapons program this represents only a part of the potential problem. A major issue turns around the implications for our civilisation of large amounts of separated or separable plutonium accumulating as the nuclear industry expands. As Donnelly points out:

To give some idea of the quantities of plutonium that could be involved it was estimated in 1980 that as much as 50 tonnes of separated plutonium could be on hand by the year 2000. At 10 kg per explosive, this amount could produce 5,000 warheads.10

It must be acknowledged that Australia’s support of safeguards is essential for as long as the industry exists. The real question, then, is this: Is the increased measure of influence (if any) over safeguards and controls obtained on the basis of our export of uranium sufficient to justify the support Australia thus renders to an industry with all its accompanying problems?

Not the least of these problems turns around the nature of our civilisation in the future as the global inventory plutonium escalates. Already, clear glimpses of that future can be seen.11 Australia’s blanket reprocessing approval also ensures that a fair proportion of that global inventory of plutonium will come from Australian uranium.

Whereas the longer-term consequences of the plutonium economy could be catastrophic, the immediate benefits of Australia’s alleged increased influence by maintaining uranium supply appear minimal and elusive.

The onus of proof therefore rests with the government. This paper contends that it has not proven its case.

An additional and key issue turns around whether or not the non-proliferation regime can endure the changing pressures being brought to bear against it. At the end of a detailed examination of this issue, Donnelly concludes thus:

To evaluate the changing pressures upon the non-proliferation regime is a subjective matter. It appears to the author that the balance of forces opposing the regime is rather greater than the balance sustaining it.12

Not least among the pressures opposing the regime is the total lack of serious and meaningful disarmament initiatives by the nuclear weapon states. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) commits these states to effect measures to end the nuclear arms race. Unless significant serious disarmament initiatives occur, the NPT itself is under threat of not being renegotiated when its term runs out. Thus, the global arms race directly threatens the likelihood of success of the aims and institutions of the non-proliferation regime.

Thus it can be argued that the impact of the arms race itself undermines the non-proliferation regime to such a degree that withdrawal of Australia’s uranium from the global nuclear fuel cycle is a necessity. This would be a clear signal to the world that Australia is serious in its statements to the effect that the global nuclear arms race and the escalating threat of nuclear war represents an intolerable situation.

Recent studies released in the United States, which have indicated that even a so-called ‘limited nuclear war’ could do irreversible catastrophic damage to the planetary environment, place the nuclear debate into a new level. It is now humanity versus the global nuclear system.13 As Jonathan Schell put it in The Fate of the Earth: "Extinction is not something to contemplate, it is something to rebel against.”

The rhetorical connection of the Hawke uranium policy with nuclear disarmament joins with the earlier propaganda and sophistry of ‘Atoms for Peace’ which, according to J. Robert Oppenheimer, have only an
"allusive and sentimental" rather than a "substantive and functional" link to which proponents of nuclear power make ritual obeisance.

THE NUCLEAR INDUSTRY AND PROLIFERATION

The Hawke caucus paper reflects a deterministic resignation to nuclear power as a fact of life:

The position we adopt is not really affected by the arguments of the degree of expansion that may take place over the next 20 years. Whether there is one new station or a thousand is not relevant to grappling with the central issue of the existence of the industry and its most certain continuation, in some form, at some level, for a considerable period of time.

Yet, witness the approval given to the Roxby Downs mine and the concomitant approval given to Ranger to continue mining and export, the government is actively supporting the nuclear industry. Ranger has some 80,000 tonnes of uranium to sell. The Roxby Consortium anticipates selling 1.2 million tonnes of uranium. The Hawke caucus paper essentially reiterates earlier arguments in favour of mining made during the 1970s:

In not proceeding with Roxby Downs, we would be denying the potential of an enormous economic and employment benefit to South Australia and the country in general.

It must therefore be an implicit part of the Hawke policy to employ whatever means are available to actively stimulate the global nuclear industry to gain as large a share as possible of the resulting demand for uranium from Roxby Downs and Ranger.

This position must be contrasted with that suggested in the principal findings and recommendations of the Fox Report:

7. Policy respecting Australian uranium exports, for the time being at least, should be based on a full recognition of the hazards, dangers and problems of and associated with the production of nuclear energy, and should therefore seek to limit or restrict expansion of that production.

Similarly, Donnelly cites as major factors which he assesses as supporting the non-proliferation regime:

A slow-down in nuclear power .... Weaknesses in world nuclear industries .... Nuclear difficulties of threshold states [and] Diminished use of highly enriched uranium.

Likewise, Holdren examines barriers to proliferation and suggests that:

The rate of increase in the number of nuclear armed nations depends on the strength of the motivations for nuclear weapons acquisitions which are mainly political relative to the height of the barriers which are political, economic and technical.

In short, to prevent or minimise the risk of proliferation, measures which limit or even reverse development of the global nuclear industry are desirable. The strengthening of the non-proliferation regime is essential and can be most effectively accomplished in a contracting rather than expanding international nuclear industry context. The Hawke policy, by granting permission to Roxby Downs, thus totally contradicts its stated desire to strengthen the non-proliferation regime.

In essence, the Hawke policy argues that uranium exports enhance our position in non-proliferation forums. This is the same logic used by nuclear weapon nations to justify their escalating arsenals to enhance their position — negotiating from strength — at arms control talks.

DETAILS OF THE HAWKE URANIUM POLICY

The formation of the Hawke policy on the mining and export of Australian uranium rests on a number of major and minor hypotheses:
1. Continued export of uranium strengthens Australia's position in the forums of the non-proliferation regime. Withdrawal of supply would weaken the government's voice in those forums and hence the working of the regime.

2. Withdrawal is technically irrelevant to the world supply of uranium and the ability of governments to make nuclear weapons. Withdrawal would only offer uranium trade with lesser safeguards.

3. Withdrawal obviates the possible use of a threat of non-supply in international negotiations in 'related' areas such as French nuclear testing and waste dumping.

The first point has already been discussed in this paper. The second and third will now be discussed.

In arguing the second point, the Hawke caucus paper observes that:

The potential for weakening controls and lessening influence on safeguards is starkly illustrated by the attitude of the Niger Government which states that it would supply uranium to the devil.

Similarly one would not expect high standards for supplies from South Africa or Namibia.

This is not a simple argument of saying if we do not supply it someone else will, but rather we are saying it will be supplied with lessened controls and that will be our responsibility.

This cannot, however, be sustained when the facts are examined. Already, South Africa, Namibia and Niger supply more countries than Australia, including those regarded as having a high proliferation risk, such as Iraq, Libya, Pakistan and Taiwan. (See Table.) It is illogical to believe that a country which requires uranium and has a desire to acquire nuclear weapons would choose Australia as a supplier over a less strict supplier nation.

Also, the important observation must be made that competition with Australia may in fact force other suppliers to seek and maintain contracts with proliferation risk nations. This would more likely result if they were squeezed out of whatever market were available from major uranium users which are of a lower short term proliferation risk. The uranium supply industry is not unknown to operate in cartels.

The third substantive point in the Hawke uranium policy is the so-called 'leverage' position, the deficiencies of which have already been examined elsewhere.

The Hawke Caucus paper argues that:

We would effectively be forced out of the international debate if we withdrew from supply. We would not be in a position to use the threat of selective non-supply as a weapon against nations' intentions such as dumping waste in the pacific or continuing with nuclear tests.

The history of such activities — selective withholding of supply, trade boycotts in specific commodities and similar activities — is a sorry one. From time to time. Third World producer nations seeking better prices for commodities have banded together to form commodity cartels and seek higher prices. Invariably, even where a number of nations pledge strong solidarity to each other, such solidarity is short-lived or is eroded by stockpiling or the seeking of alternative sources of supply by former clients.
The most telling case against the leverage argument, however, comes from "Background Paper on Australian and International Nuclear Issues". The high interconnectedness of the international uranium supply routes and the very nature of bilateral and multilateral safeguards agreements impede the unilateral leverage actions implied in the leverage argument:

As a major supplier of nuclear services to all end-users of Australian uranium, France has a pivotal role in the existing safeguards network under which Australian uranium is exported. France's continuing operation is essential to the uninterrupted flow of AONM (Australian Origin Nuclear Material) through that network. Withholding uranium supply to France for end-use in France in response to French nuclear testing in the South Pacific would be on grounds unrelated to observance by France of the conditions in the Australia/France and Australia/Euratom agreements. It would involve disrupting the Australia/France, Australia/Euratom and Australia/UK agreements. It would involve disrupting the Australia/France, Australia/Euratom and Australia/UK agreements.

Total opposition by Australia to the sea dumping of radioactive waste could possibly lead to pressure for Australia to accept waste for disposal.

Economic factors also play an important part in the pressure to continue supply. Indeed, every time this issue is raised, the uranium mining industry responds by claiming that ceasing uranium supply would adversely affect our good international standing as a trading partner. Similarly, the Hawke caucus paper develops the same theme:

At the [ALP] National Conference of 1982, during what was a very traumatic debate, concerns were adequately expressed about the effect our withdrawal of supply could have in terms of our economic relations. Views were expressed that if we were perceived as unreliable suppliers because of decisions simply not understood by other countries, then our reliability as a trading partner would be undermined. Aside from the implied lack of faith in Australia's diplomatic representatives to adequately explain Australia's position overseas, the inadequacy of this argument has been established elsewhere. However, it raises a fundamental question with respect to the Commonwealth's capacity to act as an independent and sovereign entity among the world community of nations, not to mention debate on how far a government will go to accede to industry pressure. In 1976, the Ranger Report made the issue very clear indeed in its recommendations:

A decision to mine and sell uranium should not be made unless the Commonwealth Government ensures that the Commonwealth can at any time, on the basis of consideration of the nature discussed in this report, immediately terminate these activities permanently, indefinitely or for a specified period.

The "Background Paper" also observes that 2,600 tonnes of yellowcake ordered from Australia could easily be obtained by France from other sources and represents only about 2 percent of its civilian requirements.

It thus appears that Australia's participation in the nuclear fuel cycle puts substantial pressure on Australia to continue supply and often relatively little pressure on other countries from withdrawing that supply.

Indeed, even the threat to withdraw supply can bring as much or even more pressure to bear upon Australia, as the "Background Paper" points out:

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Roxby Downs, 1983.

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'release' other origin uranium, not subject to a peaceful non-explosive pledge, from the civil cycle to the military. It is, however, to sustain any argument that it could so 'release' other origin uranium, principally because the particular requirements of the nuclear weapons states, both in terms of quantities of nuclear material required and the need for absolute assurance of supply, would demand that they obtain that material from sources which provide long-term security and reliability of supply and which do not attract safeguards at any stage of its processing and use.37

In accepting the military nuclear fuel and weapons cycle as an immutable and unchallengeable fact upon which the supply of Australian uranium can have no effect, the Hawke policy supports what amounts to a conspiracy of silence which stifles public debate on a critical connection to the nuclear arms race.

AN ALTERNATIVE URANIUM POLICY

A well-known statement from the Ranger Report has as much relevance for us today as it did in 1976:
The nuclear power industry is unintentionally contributing to an increased risk of nuclear war. This is the most serious hazard associated with the industry.38

With the release of the US reports on the long-term environmental effects of global nuclear war in late 1983, the issue is increased in urgency.39 Simultaneously, the global nuclear arms race has significantly escalated. The "Background Paper" contains a section headed:
Degree of Australia's influence on non-proliferation paradoxically relates to role as uranium supplier under strict conditions.

Similarly, the Hawke caucus paper notes that...

Having supplied uranium, we have the 'Catch-22' situation of being morally responsible for Australian uranium currently in the world fuel cycle.40

The critical and growing danger of global nuclear war impels this country to avoid paradoxical and 'Catch-22' situations inherent in the continued mining and export of uranium.

It has already been argued that a moratorium on uranium exports consistent with ALP policy would signal to the international community the seriousness with which Australia views the escalating arms race. This policy would also place Australia in the context of supporting non-proliferation.

There are five measures which can be simultaneously undertaken by Australia which form the basis of a viable policy to reduce the risk of nuclear disaster. These are:

1. A moratorium on any new uranium mining developments and the export of uranium. This can be justified to the international community on the bases of all the problems associated with the nuclear industry, and in particular the adverse impact of the arms race on measures to limit nuclear proliferation and the catastrophic consequences which would result from global nuclear war.

2. A reaffirmation and extension of measures to effect recommendations 13, 14 and 15 of the Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry:

13. Steps should be taken immediately to institute full and energetic programmes of research and development into (a) liquid fuels to replace petroleum, and (b) energy sources other than fossil fuels and nuclear fission.

14. A programme of energy conservation should be instituted nationally.

15. The policy of the Government should take into account the importance to Australia, and the countries of the world, of the position of developing countries concerning energy needs and resources.42

3. The establishment of an Environmental Inquiry on Roxby Downs in accordance with the Environmental Protection (Impact of Proposals) Act of 1974, to be conducted under terms of reference at least as broad as those of the Ranger Inquiry. Particular reference should be made to the impact of the escalating arms race and related issues subsequent to the Ranger Inquiry, and the viability of Roxby Downs without uranium processing.

4. The affirmation of a continued emphasis of Australian research into radioactive waste disposal, in particular the safe and secure disposal of high level unprocessed waste.

It should be noted that a 'solution' to waste disposal is unattainable as any method developed involves risks and costs. However, the large quantities of radioactive wastes which have been and will be produced by both the civilian and military nuclear cycles must eventually be disposed of, as best as possible, for the safety of humanity into the future for the required thousands of years for long-lived wastes. Australian participation in this research therefore need not be connected in any way with support for the nuclear fuel chain, though the Hawke policy does imply such support. The abandonment of uranium supply would also eliminate inevitable pressure for Australia to become a radioactive waste repository.

5. The Australian Government can and should continue support for the non-proliferation regime. This is possible for any nation with or without nuclear developments. As it stands, Australia will have a vested interest in the non-proliferation regime because Australian uranium is already in the global nuclear fuel cycle, and also because of continued research into radioactive waste disposal and the long-term maintenance of uranium mine tailings.

WITHDRAWING AUSTRALIAN URANIUM FROM THE GLOBAL FUEL CYCLE

This paper has argued strongly that the Hawke policy contributes to nuclear proliferation and fails to institute measures which could have an influence on the cause of world peace and disarmament. The Hawke policy must therefore be opposed by the sections of the peace movement which agree with this argument. However, the terms in which the policy is formed by the Prime Minister offers an additional threat to the peace movement in Australia.

The rhetorical connecting of his policy with moves to bring about non-proliferation and a reversal of the arms race, may find some root in a largely supportive and uncritical public. If the public believe, or are led to believe,
that the government is doing all it can in the cause of peace — although it actually supports the status quo — they will remain inactive regardless of any personal fear or concern they may feel.

The Hawke uranium policy effectively clouds and confuses the issues, making the public debate both much more difficult and retarded in the development of its focus. Many people will suffer an almost schizophrenic debilitation as they try to reconcile what common sense demands with contrary government actions defended by loquacious government spokespeople. The political effect on the peace movement of a victory within the ALP at its forthcoming National Conference in July 1984 by the Hawke uranium policy wins the activists. The political effect on the peace movement will suffer a significant loss as it tries to reconcile with the political effect on the peace movement of the Hawke uranium policy wins the ALP. The political effect on the peace movement of the Hawke uranium policy wins the ALP.

We believe the peace movement must face this challenge urgently. 

This article has been published in the CANP Newsletter, PO Box 238, North Quay 4000 and Chain Reaction, Room 14, Floor 4, 37 Swanston Street, Melbourne 3000.

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FOOTNOTES
2. ibid., p. 15.
4. ibid., p. 73.
7. ibid., p. 11.
10. ibid., p. 73.
14. ibid., p. 27.
17. ibid., p. 23.
22. This point is expanded in the paper, 'The Case for Honouring Labor's Platform' p. 29 ff.
24. The Case for Honouring Labor's Platform, p. 27; Fox Report, Chapter 13; Australian Democrat paper, pp. 26 ff.
27. Background Paper, p. 35.
28. ibid., p. 36.
29. ibid., p. 39.
30. ibid., p. 39.
31. Nuclear industry literature provides numerous examples of this, e.g. ERA Prospectus, or many statements by uranium mining companies in Australia as reprinted in the national press.
33. The Case for Honouring Labor's Platform, p. 27.
34. Fox Report, p. 185.
39. See above, note 30.
40. Background Paper, p. 22.
42. Fox Report, p. 186.
43. Despite the rhetoric of the nuclear industry, the industry is in deep trouble economically and environmentally; See, for example, Brooks, G., 'Investors Force Nuclear Shut-Down where the Demonstrators Failed', The National Times, January 6-12, (No. 675) 1984, p. 14.