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The Nuclear Fuel Cycle and South Australian Parliamentary Debates - 1976 to 1982

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Abstract

On the 27 September 1977 Opposition leader, Dr David Tonkin, moved:

That this House believes it is safe to mine and treat uranium in South Australia, rescinds its decision taken on 30 March 1977, and urges the Government to proceed with plans for the development and treatment of the State’s uranium sources as soon as possible (SAPD 1978, p.1,204).

Enriching uranium was included in his vision for the treatment of the State’s uranium resources and, in this regard, he shared bipartisan ground with Rex Conner who, some years earlier as Minister for Minerals and Energy in the Whitlam Government, argued for constructing an enrichment plant in South Australia. Initially, Premier Don Dunstan supported uranium mining and enrichment but his change of tack presented Tonkin with an opportunity to unsettle an otherwise dominant Premier. The Advertiser and The News were solidly behind mining, while on the other side of the divide a public campaign joined with Labor’s left-wing to demand a moratorium on mining and enrichment activities. Debates over the virtues or otherwise of mining and enriching uranium are at the forefront of public debate today and thus enticing us to revisit the passionate debates that took place in both Houses between 1977 together with Norm Foster’s decision in 1982 to cross the floor to pass the Roxby Downs Indenture Bill. Foster’s move left a legacy of good fortune in train for Labor on the nuclear front. Had he remained ‘loyal’ to the party platform Tonkin would have campaigned at the 1982 State election with his trump card intact, namely attacking Labor’s uranium moratorium. Given the shift in community support in favour of Roxby going ahead, it is highly likely that Labor Opposition Leader, John Bannon, would have struggled to win the poll. The ignominy for Tonkin lies with his losing office after one only term. For Labor, the luck Foster’s move generated remains, oddly, a lasting legacy. The Rann Government enjoys the buoyancy offered by the creation of the largest uranium mine in the world and the jobs Tonkin so often argued to be the mine’s great virtue.
Introduction

One thing Opposition leaders crave is an issue with which to browbeat the Government. During the two years leading up to the eclipse of the Dunstan government in 1979 the issue of whether or not South Australia should mine and export uranium, and go further by adding value to the resource via its enrichment, presented the Liberal Opposition leader, Dr David Tonkin, with just such an issue. Ironically, Tonkin lost his advantage when that other thing Opposition leaders crave, political luck, visited Labor leader, John Bannon, in the form of Labor MLC, Norm Foster’s decision to cross the floor and support Tonkin’s legislation to begin uranium mining at Roxby Downs.

This paper chronicles the debates leading up to the election of the Tonkin Government in September 1979 and its eventual demise. Foster’s refusal to support the party line effectively neutralized this issue in the lead up to the 1982 election campaign because Bannon committed an incoming Labor Government to the legislation, albeit with the proviso that amendments were likely. In the absence of his favoured issue on which to chastise Labor, Tonkin struggled and faced the ignominy of being one of the State’s few Premiers to be defeated at the polls after only one term in office. His vision of the mine as a catalyst for jobs and investment is now a reality underpinning the electoral fortunes of the Rann Government.

The many debates in Parliament, and the extensive coverage of this issue in the media, occurred against the background of the Cold War. The arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union, and various proxy wars throughout the ‘third world’, made this a period when nuclear war implied the mutually assured destruction of both combatants (the popular acronym was MAD) and much of the world as well. The peaceful use of ‘the atom’ for nuclear power faced an uphill battle against understandable public fear over matters nuclear. A broad based campaign against nuclear power involving the ALP’s left wing, fringe left wing parties, environmental groups and, by the mid 1980s, the ‘Nuclear Disarmament Party, made it difficult for supporters of uranium mining and nuclear power to prosecute their case. Moreover, revelations concerning the carelessness of British nuclear bomb testing at Maralinga, 1,200 kilometres north-west of Adelaide, during the 1950s added to a picture of public consternation. The State faced with increasing unemployment coupled with a real sense of the relative economic decline compared to other States and this acted as a counterweight to the anti-nuclear camp in terms of winning over public opinion.

Rex Connor vision for ‘enriching’ South Australia

Addressing the 1975 ALP State Convention, Rex Connor’s vision for a uranium enrichment plant in South Australia met with a cool reception. Connor embodied the labourist tradition that doggedly defended unions, tariff protection and economic nationalism. Connor wanted to ‘buy back the farm’ which entailed raising a huge loan to buy out the foreign corporations and build industry infrastructure. He hoped to access the vast coffers of oil money flowing into the OPEC States but Treasury officials were skeptical of his methods. Nevertheless, he convinced Whitlam for a while with his plan to use a shadowy intermediary, Mr Triath Khemlani who, for a $100 million fee, promised
to raise $4 billion from among Arab sheiks.\textsuperscript{1} Connor persisted with this pursuit after Whitlam had withdrawn his support and, when the media became aware of the shenanigans, the so-called ‘Loans Affair’, the demise of the Whitlam Government was imminent. Just prior to his death in 1977, Connor informed the weekly newspaper, \textit{The National Times}, that the loans he sought included the development of an enrichment plant.\textsuperscript{2} Connor predicted that the price of uranium would rise to $100 per pound by 1980 and that, by enriching it, the nation would quadruple its uranium resources. Indeed, he claimed it was the ‘biggest deal in Australia’s history’. He told Convention delegates that the top of Spencer Gulf is the safest place in Australia in regards to marine and rocket attacks ... and was the best site for the plant both economically and strategically’ and that he was certain this would happen in the near future.\textsuperscript{3} Dunstan, seconded a motion deferring the mining, treatment and export of uranium until future investigations were made a position that did not fully accord with the views of his Minister of Mines and Energy, Hugh Hudson, who tended to support development of the State’s uranium assets.\textsuperscript{4}

South Australian’s read and heard much about the Redcliff petro-chemical site planned for the upper Spencer Gulf and in June 1976 they learned, via a leak to the media, that enrichment was part of the plan. This seemed to sit uncomfortably with the Labor Party convention’s opposition to enrichment and, not surprisingly, opened the way for the Opposition to highlight vacillation and division within the Government. Muddying the waters for the Government somewhat was leaking of a report emanating from the Development Division of the Premier's Department recommending that the export of uranium should be ‘made subject to refining and enrichment in Australia’. Dunstan convened a press conference to explain that the report was not released due to pending environmental investigations and, whatever the outcome, any enrichment plant ‘would be subject to conditions of Labor Party policy to guarantee the safety of uranium sales to customer countries.’\textsuperscript{5} He rejected suggestions that internal party and union opposition to uranium mining were driving his decision and made the point that decisions on the matter must await the Commonwealth’s Ranger Uranium Environment Inquiry chaired by Justice Fox. Clouding Dunstan’s picture, at least in the eyes of the Opposition and local media, was the fact that the Minister of Mines and Energy, Hugh Hudson, had toured abroad earlier in the year assessing the market for an enrichment plant.

\begin{itemize}
\item[1] David Wroe, ‘How the loans scandal became an affair to remember’. \textit{The Age}, January 1, 2005. The amount Connor, initially with Whitlam’s consent, represented about one sixteenth of national gross domestic produce or about $50m in today’s equivalent.
\item[5] \textit{Advertiser}, 1 July, 1976.
\end{itemize}
When Parliament sat next in late July 1976, Tonkin moved, rather clumsily, to censure the Government for being ‘gravely irresponsible and contemptuous of public concern in promoting proposals for uranium enrichment at Redcliff without having first set up and independent public inquiry into the project and is therefore to be censured.’ Dunstan ridiculed the motion pointing out that the Fraser Government was close to tabling the findings of the Ranger Inquiry. However, the picture remained somewhat confused with Hugh Hudson displaying his knowledge of European interests in Australian uranium. He explained to the House that should Australia refuse uranium exports the Europeans would simply develop fast breeder reactors that reprocessed spent nuclear fuel rods and, thereby, produce more plutonium that could be used for nuclear weapons production. He also noted a conundrum still very pertinent today:

I would like to believe that some ideal solution to the energy problem exists other than returning to a caveman state. Some have suggested that we should supply coal to Japan so that the country would not need more and more nuclear energy, but environmental problems arise from using coal, pollution and the emission of CO₂, and so on. It is argued that, in the Japanese situation, the degree of air is already so intense that future coal-fired stations in that country are not possible…Certainly, the Japanese do not see their future in terms of using coal rather then nuclear energy.

One needs only add China and India to Hudson’s summary to see the contemporary resonance. Interestingly, he went on to ponder the contribution of coal burning to global warming saying, ‘I believe it can be demonstrated that if the temperature of the earth rises by as much as one or two degrees, the ice caps will start to melt and cities such as Adelaide will turn out to be inappropriately located’.

Confusion reigns – 1977 and a ‘meaningless motion’

The news of Western Mining Company’s discovery of a copper, gold and uranium deposit at Roxby Downs acted as the backdrop to the Government’s decision to adopt a ‘leave it in the ground’ attitude toward uranium mining. With the advantage of hindsight this was, arguably, the ‘beginning of the end’ of Dunstan’s domination of State politics as Labor’s equivocation on mining uranium presented Tonkin, and the local media, with an issue with which they could paint Dunstan as captive to radical elements within his Party. As unemployment worsened, the sense of a Government prepared to deny job opportunities permeated public opinion. Premier Dunstan moved in the House of Assembly:

That this House believes that it has not yet been demonstrated to its satisfaction that it is safe to provide uranium to a customer country and, unless and until it is so demonstrated, no mining or treatment of uranium should occur in South Australia. [My emphasis]

He noted that there were ‘quite compelling economic reasons for considering that we ought to be supplying uranium to a customer country’ but he said a number of matters.

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6 SAPD, 27 July, 1976, p. 188.
10 The evening newspaper, The News 30 March 1977, reported the Cabinet decision as a “rebuff” to Hudson and a triumph for Mr Duncan.
11 SAPD, 30 March, 1977, p 3037.
required further investigation before his government would lift the moratorium on uranium mining. In particular, questions of nuclear power plant operational safety, the transport of uranium and, most importantly, means for disposing of high grade nuclear waste needed to be resolved before the Government would agree to uranium mining.\textsuperscript{12} The problem with this argument, and its obvious moral concern over prospective customers waste disposal problems, is that it did not accord with Hudson’s assessment of European and British nuclear industry officials he’d interviewed on his recent tour. They were not concerned about the disposal of nuclear waste, but rather, terrorism and the ‘possibility that someone would get hold of plutonium oxide…and manufacture some kind of nuclear device and hold communities to ransom.’\textsuperscript{13}

Tonkin said he found little fault with the motion but remained displeased due to its failure to crystallise ‘any one point of view’. When speaking to the media on the steps of Parliament House he reiterated his view that Labor’s moratorium ‘demonstrated how far the ALP Left-wing was in total control of the Government’.\textsuperscript{14} The nub of his complaint concerned how the Parliament, and community for that matter, would interpret ‘to its satisfaction’ because, he argued, the ‘Premier has not given a firm indication of how it will be demonstrated to anyone’s satisfaction that it is safe to provide uranium to a customer country.’\textsuperscript{15} Interestingly, he canvassed a host of alternative energy sources including ‘geo-thermal’ (so-called ‘hot rocks’) and sought to add to the motion that the Government ‘should give the greatest possible financial support to research into solar energy and other alternatives energy sources as a matter of urgency.’\textsuperscript{16} Tonkin returned to the House a day later to say it was ‘meaningless’ motion because it preempted the tabling of the Ranger Inquiry’s report.

The year closed with Premier Dunstan accusing Prime Minister Fraser of lying about a supposed meeting between senior SA Government officials and the British uranium enrichment company, Urenco.\textsuperscript{17} The Premier reiterated his Government’s commitment to the motion passed in March but Tonkin, with reports appearing in the media of other meetings between State government officials and uranium exploration companies, was keen to pressure the Government. Apparently a ‘German multinational company’ was exploring for uranium in the Adelaide Hills with the permission of Minster Hudson’s Department.\textsuperscript{18} Tonkin moved a no confidence motion in the Government:

That this house condemn the South Australian Government for its deceit and hypocrisy in allowing exploration for uranium with a view to its future development by mining and enrichment, while publicly maintaining the Australian Labor Party stance of leaving it in the ground.\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} SAPD, 30 March 1977, p 3037.
\item \textsuperscript{13} SAPD, 30 March 1977, p 3041.
\item \textsuperscript{14} SAPD, 30 March 1977, p 3038 and The Advertiser, 1 April, 1977.
\item \textsuperscript{15} SAPD, 30 March 1977, p 3038.
\item \textsuperscript{16} SAPD, 30 March 1977, p 3038.
\item \textsuperscript{17} The Advertiser, 25 November, 1977.
\item \textsuperscript{18} The Advertiser 23 November 1977.
\item \textsuperscript{19} SAPD 1 December 1977, p. 1,144.
\end{itemize}
Pointing to the fact that ALP Federal President, Bob Hawke, was in favour of uranium mining, Tonkin tried to paint a picture of Dunstan ‘holding double standards on the issue’ and the State Labor Party as ‘clearly split asunder’. Dunstan’s memories, of which I will focus on shortly, suggest that doubt did pervade his thoughts. This is apparent in media reports, for no matter how hard the Government tried to convey the message of the moratorium, the Opposition were able to counter with taunts of division and confusion within ALP ranks.

Dunstan’s overseas investigation and the uranium moratorium’s affirmation

Throughout 1978 uranium featured in parliamentary debates and in the media. The case for mining grew stronger after the Ranger Inquiry recommended uranium exports and the Fraser Government committed to a series of safeguards. Prime Minister Fraser argued in the House of Representatives in August 1977 that Australia had an ‘obligation to supply energy to an energy deficient world’ and, if it were not for this obligation, it would not approve mining. He appointed Justice Fox as an ongoing advisor on the legal and technical matters associated with developing reliable safeguards and, with this, the national debate shifted toward favouring exports. After all, it was argued that the Ranger Inquiry was a Whitlam Government initiative and, with its final report placed in the arena of public debate, those who favoured mining began to assert themselves more forcefully. Tonkin moved a motion in September 1978 to rescind the March 1977 moratorium stressing that his earlier support rested on waiting for the Ranger Inquiry and with it clearly supporting uranium mining, he argued that no substantial case could be made for refusing to support the Roxby Downs development. He also honed in on the question as to what constituted being ‘satisfied’ in respect of appropriate development of safeguards. He endeavoured to embarrass Dunstan over an ABC interview given on television where Dunstan conceded the difficulty defining just what constituted ‘satisfaction’ in relation to safeguards surrounding the nuclear fuel cycle. Tonkin maintained that this revealed that Dunstan was never going to lift the moratorium and, as a consequence, the job prospects, which he said were akin to those enjoyed by Queensladers involved in mining at Mt Isa, were denied to South Australians. Dunstan repudiated the ill motive attributed to him and, in a carefully articulated rebuttal, explained that his earlier support for uranium mining and enrichment was based upon him not being fully aware of the problems associated with waste disposal. He pointed out that initially he was in favour of supplying energy deficient Japan and had believed in economic benefits of an enrichment industry.

However, on examination of the position about high level atomic wastes, the evidence was very clear, that there were then, as there were now, no safe proven methods of high level atomic wastes in use…there were no international arrangements which would provide adequately for the thousands of years of guarding and monitoring of disposed high level atomic wastes.

20 SAPD 1 December 1977, p. 1,144.
21 The Advertiser ran a front page article by its senior columnist, Stewart Cockburn, accusing the Government of suppressing a report by the State’s industrial development chief that outlined the case for an enrichment plant at the head of Spencer Gulf. The article also suggested the proposed gas centrifuge method for enrichment would eliminate environmental hazards. The Advertiser, 3 August 1978.
In light of new scientific evidence he remained unconvinced by the Fraser Government’s belief that the vitrification of waste was a solution and doubted the capacity of governments to care adequately for such a deadly product given his experience ‘right here on our doorstep…dealing with atomic wastes’ from the Maralinga tests.

This assessment was, however, at odds with his Minister for Mines, Hugh Hudson, who, as noted above, found that waste disposal had not been identified in his study tour as the main concern for the French and the British. It appears Dunstan harboured some nagging doubts about the moratorium and in January 1979, notwithstanding suffering from ill health, embarked on a journey through the European winter to investigate the state of play among nuclear power using countries. He recounted that it was a grueling journey through England, Sweden, France, Holland and West Germany. While he learned that some progress had been made in relation to disposing of high grade waste, ‘it was still impossible to assure South Australian’s that it was safe to provide uranium to customer countries, and the existing policy on uranium mining must stand’.25

Accompanying him on this trip was the former Director of the Department of Mines, a consultant on enrichment studies, a mining consultant and the Head of the Policy Secretariat, Mr Guerin and his Press Secretary, Mr Rann. Rann, he informed the House, ‘has been a leading anti-nuclear campaigner for years… and is constantly in touch with people in the anti-nuclear movement’.26 Tiring of the Opposition’s constant taunts, Dunstan was keen to stress the group’s impartiality saying they could hardly be regarded as left-wing. Citing two recent British investigations of nuclear matters, the Flowers Commission, the Windscale Inquiry, and a U.S House of Representatives Committee report he said it was the group’s conclusion that there remained an absence of safe means for the disposal of waste.27 Running through Dunstan’s speeches and other Labor MP’s was constant moral questioning of whether it was right to supply a resource knowing that it created a grave problem for which there was no convincing solution. While there is no reason to doubt the earnestness of Dunstan’s investigations, it appears that Labor case for the moratorium lacked objectivity.

Tonkin, with strong support from The Advertiser, made some headway when pointing to contrary assessments presented by the Premier and Minister Hugh Hudson. While there is some uncertainty it appears that Dunstan’s ill health, and his knowledge that Peter Duncan was orchestrating a campaign against any finding that might show support for lifting the moratorium, wore him down. Months later the incoming Tonkin Government’s Minister of Mines and Energy, Roger Goldsworthy, discovered reports by two members of the study tour that contradicted Dunstan’s report. Goldsworthy accused Dunstan of having misled Parliament at the time by suggesting that there was unanimity and quoted from the reports a view that waste disposal issues were resolved.28 The

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28 Goldsworthy cited the former Mines Department head and the consultant on enrichment matters as having both agreed to South Australia should proceed with uranium exports given that technical matters concerning waste disposal and ‘rigid international safeguard controls’ were now in place among prospective customer countries.
fairness of this accusation is difficult to determine but uncertainty surrounding, what in fact should constitute satisfactory safety levels, lies at the heart of Labor procrastination during the latter days of the ‘Dunstan Decade’. The image of his Government bowing to ‘left wing pressure’ was now credible. Dunstan later observed in his memoirs:

Unfortunately, during my absence, some members of the Party, led by Peter Duncan, had organised meetings to get various bodies of the Party pre-committed against any change in policy which might be recommended out of my investigations, and stories about this had carefully been leaked to the press, which could only give support to the press campaign against the honest intention of my investigations. I read the riot act at the Party Executive and the Caucus about this.29

The die was cast when The Advertiser said this represented a ‘resounding victory for the ALP’s anti-uranium forces.’30.

David Tonkin promptly moved a motion of no confidence in the Government, his second such motion in 14 months, stressing the employment opportunities foregone at a time when State unemployment hovered around 10 percent:

Using the Government’s own figures, the build-up of new employment possibilities could conservatively amount to 20,000 with the general impact on industry, transportation and community services amounting to employment benefits of many thousands more having an income or independent living based on a fully developed uranium production industry … The employment situation in South Australia is critical … it is the worse than the Australian average.31

Tonkin drew an analogy between Roxby Downs’s future prospects and the 30,000 strong mining city at Mt Isa and the estimated 80,000 Queenslanders who depended on its mining activities.32 He singled out Dunstan for failing to prevail over the factional divisions within his government, ‘The Premier has been placed in the most difficult position by extremists within his own party…because of the victory of the faction led by the Attorney General’.33 For the Opposition, the Government was no longer ‘responsible’ and unable to ‘govern this State for the common good’, following the result of Dunstan’s failure to stand up to his Party’s left wing’.34

Taking considerable umbrage at Tonkin’s assertion that his Government ‘has effectively condemned South Australia to a future of industrial stagnation and economic disaster’, Dunstan endeavoured to clarify his opposition to uranium exports:

The Leader of the Opposition supports those people in the community who say that, for commercial reasons, for the gaining of pelf, are prepared to dig up and sell uranium in circumstances where the danger to mankind is enormous, and where we can not only condemn mankind to global pollution

Goldsworthy’s statement on the matter is compelling given that he quotes from two reports written by both men; however, Mike Rann, is quoted in the Advertiser expressing the view that Goldsworthy ‘in no way undermined the mission’s findings’ and that questions concerning weapons proliferation was a concern for all members of the study group. SAPD, 30 October 1979 pp. 469-72 and The Advertiser, 31 October, 1979.

31 SAPD 6 February 1979, p 2,359 & 2,360.
33 SAPD 6 February 1979, p. 2,361.
34 SAPD 6 February 1979, p. 2,361.
that will bring cancer or leukemia to vast numbers of people throughout the world but also provide part of the process which may lead to the complete and ultimate destruction of mankind through the indiscriminate use of plutonium without proper controls...and no member of this Government apologises for the fact that we do not believe that we should be part of that process and that we cannot be in the uranium industry until we can say that it is safe.\textsuperscript{35}

One constancy in debates over whether or not Australia should develop our uranium resources is the charge made by the pro-mining position that, if we fail, others will take up the demand; this was a point Tonkin was at pains to make.

The plain and brutal fact truth of the matter is that the South Australian Government’s ban has made no difference at all to the total world uranium situation...we must face the reality that a Government ban on uranium in South Australia has not affected and will not in any way affect or influence the development or imposition of safeguards in other countries...The U-ban has served only to isolate us, and to prevent us from exerting the influence on safety and disposal requirements which could otherwise have brought to bear if were an important supplier of uranium to the world market.\textsuperscript{36}

Tonkin’s political realism would, in time prevail and be championed by both sides. Shortly after this debate Dunstan resigned due to ill health in early February 1979 and shortly after that a special ALP State Convention reaffirmed the moratorium. The die was cast with \textit{The Advertiser} saying this represented a ‘resounding victory for the ALP’s anti-uranium forces.’\textsuperscript{37} New Labor Premier, Des Corcoran, battled for six months with the perception of leading a Party opposed to creating significant job opportunities at a time of growing unemployment and in the months that followed he lost control of the debate. \textit{The Advertiser} constantly pressured the Government and ran a four part series of investigative reports canvassing the gambit of issues confronting Parliament and this all served well the Opposition Leader’s prosecution of the matter.\textsuperscript{38} Corcoran called an early election believing that his slogan ‘Follow The Leader’ would triumph over a still divided Liberal Party; he was in error, as John Summers explains,\textsuperscript{39}

The Liberal party's policy for the election centred on economic matters in mining policy. They charged that the Labor government had mismanaged the economy and had, by governmental intrusion into the private sector, destroyed the confidence of overseas investors in mining development in South Australia. A Liberal government, it was promised, ‘would give top priority to the exploration and development of S.A.’s copper, uranium, gold, coal, iron, oil and gas deposits. Exploring and developing the enormous resources of Roxby Downs, as well as other resources would create thousands of jobs and bring in millions of dollars to S.A.\textsuperscript{39}

The Roxby indenture bill.

A six per cent first preference swing saw Tonkin take office in mid-September 1979 and it was not long before his Minister of Mines and Energy, Goldsworthy, explained to Parliament that the incoming government had a clear mandate to encourage uranium

\textsuperscript{35} SAPD 6 February 1979, p. 2,361 & 2,362.
\textsuperscript{36} SAPD 6 February 1979, p. 2,360.
\textsuperscript{37} \textit{The Advertiser}, 19 February, 1979.
mining through the State and, in particular, to approve the go ahead for the Roxby Downs mine.\footnote{Summers, J, \textit{The Australian Journal of Politics and History}, ‘Australian Political Chronicle – South Australia’, vol. 26, no. 3, 1980, p. 425.} For the incoming government a mining boom was the best hope to arrest South Australia from further falling behind other mainland States. The Fraser Government announced that it would relax the 75 per cent ownership requirement for new uranium projects to 51 per cent and, thereby, greatly increased interest in Roxby Downs. For its part the Labor Opposition, now led by John Bannon, joined with the United Trades and Labor Council and accused Tonkin of undue haste and being unwilling to deal with questions of nuclear waste disposal, workers' health and, moreover, was not taking into account falling international demand for uranium.\footnote{The Advertiser, 11, 13, 15, 16, 24 October 1979.}

In February 1980, Goldsworthy informed Parliament that the Government would proceed with granting applications for mining at Roxby Downs and stressed that the royalties would see a reduction in State taxes and the creation of up to 5,000 jobs. He was keen to stress that all environmental impact studies would be undertaken and, likewise, codes of practice to protect miners and transport workers from radioactive wastes associated with mining would be enacted. Goldsworthy published a booklet ‘SA's uranium resources - the government's decision’ and Bannon protested that this preempted the Upper House inquiry initiated by the Labor and Democrat MLCs. In the midst of this wrangling the Returned Services League formed the Atomic Veterans Association that claimed radiation had caused numerous health problems in the wake of a series of nuclear tests conducted by the British between 1952 and 1957. This issue gained considerable momentum with numerous reports in \textit{The Advertiser} highlighting the extent of radioactive fall-out. Many believed radioactive fall-out had drifted over settled areas causing some Aborigines living adjacent to Maralinga to suffer blindness and death shortly after being enveloped in what they described as a 'black mist'.\footnote{The Advertiser, 10 March 1980 and Summers, J, \textit{The Australian Journal of Politics and History}, ‘Australian Political Chronicle – South Australia’, vol. 26, no. 3, 1980, p. 426.}

In August 1980 Premier Tonkin released the Uranium Enrichment Committee’s report which canvassed a joint Government private sector plant, together with plans to grant licences to mine uranium at Honeymoon. During this period Goldsworthy continued talks with BP Australia and Western Mining on developing the Roxby deposit and visited Europe to study enrichmen in the UK and Holland and the waste disposal issue in Sweden and France.\footnote{The Advertiser, 27 September, 1980.} On his return he said that there was ‘a strong consensus’ view that nuclear power would continue to develop for the rest of the century and, given that South Australian uranium was of ‘potential world significance’, there was clearly a ‘moral as well as economic reasons why they must be developed.’\footnote{The Advertiser, 20 October, 1980.} Opposition leader, John Bannon, commented that the Minister’s assessment was unrealistic because there were no suitable technologies that could guarantee safe disposal of high-grade wastes.\footnote{The Advertiser, 5 November, 1980.}
Work on the Roxby Downs indenture bill was slow and, throughout 1981, as the national economy slumped, the Government struggled to keep this, its most important story, alive in the public eye. In June the Premier tried to buoy up sentiment when announcing a $0.5 million feasibility study on a uranium enrichment plant at Port Pirie but this, too would take time because its report was not due until late 1982 just prior to the State election.\textsuperscript{46} Minister Goldsworthy introduced the \textit{Roxby Downs Indenture Bill} to the Parliament on 5 March 1982 and postulated that it would become one of world’s largest uranium and copper mines. He explained that the joint partners, BP Australia and Western Mining, were committed to outlay $100 million for their feasibility study and, should the mine go ahead, he believed the joint partners would spend ‘well in excess of $1 billion, with 2,000 to 3,000 employed at the mine’ and a township of 9,000 would grow to support the mine.\textsuperscript{47} The Bill was complex with considerable detail surrounding the royalty and infrastructure arrangements and mine safety procedures.\textsuperscript{48} The likelihood of it passing the Upper House was uncertain with Labor and the Democrats arguing for a series of amendments that the Government, with the miners, refused to entertain.

Bannon argued that the Government had persistently presented the public with a ‘barrage of grossly inflated claims, and a crazy auction of predictions, particularly about employment and royalty income’ and concluded that this was so because from the day of being elected Premier Tonkin’s only thinking on the State economy related to the development of the Roxby project.\textsuperscript{49} He questioned the need for the Indenture Bill prior to the resource evaluation being complete or any projected date for the commencement of mining. Most galling for Bannon was Tonkin’s ‘cynical and dishonest’ touting of employment likely to be generated which ‘immediately after the election had increased to about 50,000, both directly and indirectly’ but now ranged somewhere between 2,000 to 3,000.\textsuperscript{50} He suspected the Government’s haste with the Bill, and its boasts for employment, derived from it having no other positive story to tell the people of South Australia. Deeming much of the Bill ‘vague and imprecise’ the Opposition reiterated the platform of its moratorium on uranium mining namely ‘that it is incumbent on any State or nation with responsibility which seeks to mine and sell uranium to be absolutely certain that it is safe to provide uranium to customer countries.’\textsuperscript{51} Concern focused on the perennial question of waste disposal but, also, on whether or not our prospective customers sought to reprocess spent fuel rods, a venture which might result in weapons proliferation. While prepared to support the companies in their pre-production assessments, Bannon called for a ‘Select Committee’ to examine leasing arrangements, radiological health issues relating to mining, special workers’ compensation provisions,

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{b} \textit{SAPD} 4 March 1982, p. 3,338.
\bibitem{c} \textit{SAPD} 4 March 1982, p. 3,339-41.
\bibitem{d} \textit{SAPD} 23 March 1982, p. 3,407-8.
\bibitem{e} \textit{SAPD} 23 March 1982, p. 3,409 also see \textit{The Advertiser}, 24 March 1982.
\bibitem{f} \textit{SAPD} 23 March 1982, p. 3,409.
\end{thebibliography}
clarification on the disposal of tailings together with a public inquiry into all these matters.  

Decidedly unimpressed by the Opposition’s desire to stall the project, Western Mining’s Director, Hugh Morgan, said the partners would withdraw if the Bill was defeated, ‘we are not prepared to spend the additional money on a promise that somebody might review it at a later date’. Public debate and protest by anti-nuclear groups intensified while the SA Chamber of Commerce and Industry, with thirteen other SA employer groups, conducted a campaign in support of the Bill taking out full page advertisements saying 'Roxby Downs must go ahead if SA is to remain on the map!' The prospect for the Bill passage through the Legislative Council looked unlikely with Labor and the Democrats opposed but at the June 1982 ALP State Convention the ground shifted under Labor MLC, Norman Foster and this produced some, as Andrew Parkin observed, some ‘delicious ironies’.

**How Norm Foster MLC ‘saved’ Labor**

With the Indenture Bill facing defeat in the Upper House, Premier Tonkin could look forward to the uranium issue being centre stage at the election due later in the year. Labor equivocations on nuclear matters had served him well in opposition and, with the recession tightening its grip, the idea of campaigning for jobs was something the Government relished. A member of the Legislative Council since 1973, the Labor Party’s Norm Foster was a forceful and independently minded character who informed Convention delegates that he would retire at the next election. An important point given what he was to convey in his speech. In recent times he fell out with his colleagues after some letters he wrote critical of the Party’s leadership team were leaked to the media. He was not in a happy mood and said;

> Uranium mining is a fact of life. Why should we want to send ourselves to political oblivion for another 10 years for our stand against it…I’ll be honest with this convention and say that I’ll be thinking hard and I’ll be under great trauma to cast a vote that is going to accidently give an advantage in the near term, the next three to six months, to the Government.

He opined that the uranium moratorium was tantamount to handing Tonkin victory ‘on a plate’ and told the *Australian* newspaper that some delegates, ‘had even congratulated him’. He noted that federal Labor had changed its policy to allow for both the phasing

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52 *SAPD* 23 March 1982, p. 3,408 and 3,410.
out of uranium mining, while at the same time opening the way for the Roxby Mines. The so-called ‘three mines policy’ was illogical to any observer unaware of the dilemma Bannon confronted, namely, the moratorium had become electoral suicide.\(^ {58} \) A few days later, in a rather long and rambling speech he presented a very mixed message to the Legislative Council on how he might vote on the Bill. He stated that he ‘had a pioneering attitude in the Labor Party’ for seeking to put an ‘individual view’ on a matter he’d ‘thought profoundly’ about and for some time.\(^ {59} \) His equivocation on the matter angered his colleagues who constantly interjected during the speech.

Torn between supporting the Party line and doing what he thought was right for the State and, incidentally, electorally prudent for Labor, Foster walked into the mire of a campaign that brooked no dissent. In the rush to vilify and label him a traitor his colleagues appeared either appalled by his heretical disposition or, perhaps, governed by more Machiavellian considerations. Irritated by what he perceived to be wilful misinterpretation of his position and the perception that, ‘some members of my own Party did not in anyway, shape or form, in the Gallery and corridors of this place, accord me manners becoming to persons with normal and decent principles’, he shifted ground. He was upset by newspaper reports that said ‘bets were being taken, and placed on the marble mantelpiece in the Leader’s office about the way I would vote, when the Leader knew perfectly well how I would cast my vote last night’. On this latter point he told Parliament that he’d informed the Leader that it was not his intention to vote against Party policy.\(^ {60} \) What drove Foster to end his ties with the Labor Party by supporting the Bill? Perhaps it was the threats to his family, which he was convinced came from within the Party, and were part of some sort of ‘set up’? The question arises in relation to his sensing a ‘set-up’ as it appears that the more pragmatic members of the Labor caucus purposely sought to irritate Foster into an act of disloyalty. Labor shadow minister, John Cornwall, said in his memoirs that he played the role of ‘agent provocateur’;

> With John Bannon’s knowledge and support, we had resolved to goad Foster wherever possible. The plan was clever and cruel. Ostensibly our “anger” was because of our contempt for a colleague who was wavering…In fact, we had carefully calculated that the more public scorn and ridicule we heaped on Foster, the more we would reinforce the chance of his defection. We reasoned that it would be easier for him to repudiate enemies than friends.\(^ {61} \)


\(^{59}\) *SAPD* 17 June 1982, p. 4,719.

\(^{60}\) Foster explained to the Council, ‘Yesterday was a critical day, I informed the Leader of my Party, John Bannon, in his office of what I would do, so before I entered this debate I informed the Leader of my Party of what my intention was – that I would not vote away from the Party line on this matter. I was, therefore, astounded last night when, during the debate, I was told by way of interjection by my colleagues – apparently, the Leader is indicating he did not know that… I was surprised and amazed that during the course of my speech last night interjections were made by members of my own Party to the effect that I was not wanted in Caucus. I was surprised because I thought that they knew my attitude’. *SAPD*, 17 June, 1982.

Thus, robbing Tonkin of a key electoral plank certainly entertained Labor MPs who, perhaps, felt their electoral fortunes were waning. As for Foster he stood by his party and opposed the Bill when it came to a vote and he promptly resigned from the party the next day. Tonkin blundered by not calling a snap election preferring instead to resubmit the Bill knowing that Foster, no longer a Labor Party member, would support its passage.

On June the 18th 1982 the Indenture Bill passed the Legislative Council and five months later the Tonkin Government narrowly lost office. During the election campaign Bannon committed an incoming Labor Government to the Bill, but envisaged some amendments. His position was helped by the fact that Labor changed its national policy to support uranium exports, albeit restricted to a maximum of three mines.

In early 1983 the incoming Bannon Government committed to the development of the Roxby mine but noted that falling demand for uranium meant that there would be no open mandate for its mining in the State. Premier Bannon made this point in reply to Opposition Leader, John Olsen’s motion of no confidence over the Government’s refusal to grant a mining licence at the Honeymoon uranium deposit.

The debate returned to similar themes with Labor committed to the moratorium but now working within ALP national policy which allowed for three uranium mines. The Liberal Party touted the jobs dimension and the loss of opportunities fostered by the moratorium. By the turn of the century SA Labor had come to see the virtues of uranium mining. But they steadfastly refused to consider the moral question that so troubled Dunstan, namely the exporter’s responsibility to help customers who struggled with the disposal question. Premier Rann mused on this matter by drawing an analogy Dunstan would hardly have shared, ‘Suggestions in recent times that South Australia should take back the nuclear waste generated from the uranium we export to countries around the world is just not going to happen. This would be as silly as the state agreeing to take back every used bottle and every empty cask of wine that we sell overseas.’

Conclusion

A number of nagging questions arise from any examination of this debate of the 1970s. The first concerns how the State missed the opportunity to add value to a raw mineral resource via the processes of enrichment. Having looked initially rather benignly at the prospect of developing a uranium enrichment plant in the State’s mid-north it transpired

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63 Marr, D, ‘Run-up in the shrinking State’, The National Times, 31 October – 6 November 1982. Rank and file members of the Party, Duncan told the National Times, ‘are spewing’ over the decision. For his part Duncan said that while he remained opposed to the Bill, he accepted the decision of the party. According to the Journal of Politics and History chronicler, ‘the Liberals used the statement to argue that the election of an ALP government would jeopardize Roxby Downs, and the statement was used in anti-Labor ‘independent’ advertisements’, The Australian Journal of Politics and History, ‘Australian Political Chronicle – South Australia’, vol. 29, no 3, 1982.

64 SAPD, 22 March 1983, p. 495-506 and The Advertiser, 23 March, 1983

that the Dunstan Government’s equivocation saw the State miss an opportunity to value add. This must be seen as an unfortunate legacy of the period for, at the time, South Australia led other States but by the time Tonkin Indenture Bill passed the Parliament enthusiasm for enrichment had waned. Certainly, by the early 1980s it appeared the world had sufficient supplies of enriched uranium and today and the Australian company, Silex, has sold it patents to develop advanced laser enrichment technology to General Electric.66 The unfortunate irony is that nuclear power’s relatively carbon free capacity for power generation now finds the industry undergoing a renaissance and, in time, there will be a huge demand for enriched uranium.67 And, should Australia decide to develop nuclear power in coming decades, in all likelihood we will import fuel rods derived from our uranium exports.

Dunstan’s moratorium on all but exploration for uranium, supported by Bannon during his time as Opposition leader, rested heavily upon a moral assessment of the relationship between supplier and customer. That is, if customers could not solve the question of waste disposal it was deemed incumbent on uranium rich States to refuse supply. Today, we await the lifting of the three mines policy at the April 2007 ALP National Conference, a policy made redundant by the massive expansion of the Roxby Mine and the growing demand for nuclear power as a greenhouse friendly source of energy. How the Rann Labor Government reconciles the State ALP’s historic concern for customers incapacity to find suitable means for disposing of high grade nuclear wastes, with being one of the world’s largest uranium suppliers, is a question worth asking.

South Australia offers some of the world’s most suitable geological formations for the long term storage of nuclear waste. It is interesting to ponder whether recent strident opposition to the storage of low to intermediate range nuclear waste at a facility in the north of South Australia simply entrenches further the NIMBY phenomenon (Not-In-My-Backyard). As South Australia weds itself further to the so-called ‘front end’ of the nuclear fuel cycle, the steadfast refusal to deal with issues arising at the so-called back end of the cycle, namely the disposal of high grade waste, remains debatable. While major and very expensive steps toward resolving waste disposal are taking place in Sweden, most of our customers still struggle to find suitable answers. It is clear that if Australia was to host nuclear waste facilities for our customers (which now include China) a great service, indeed an exceptionally profitable and moral one, would be addressed. Equivocation on this matter over the next decade is likely to see Russia and possibly Argentina, filling the void. When it comes to dealing with matters nuclear, lost opportunities bedevil the legislators and, if the current temper of debate over the prospect of domestic nuclear power is any guide, it is difficult to see an end to the fear mongering

66 During one of his heated exchanges with Tonkin, Dunstan explained that his overseas investigations indicated that “We are now faced with the fact that uranium enrichment capacity in the world from 1985 will be enormous...The leader of the Opposition suggests that our ban caused that. Obviously the Leader of the Opposition does not know terribly much about the technology involved. The lead time for the decisions on the erection of the Tricastin plant [in France] was such that the decision was taken long before May 1977 and has absolutely nothing to do with the situation in South Australia”. SAPD 6 February 1979, p. 2,362. Notwithstanding Dunstan’s summation when in Government Premier Tonkin continued pursuit of an enrichment plant having interested British consortium, Urenco-Centec, in developing a site at Port Pirie or Whyalla, see SAPD 6 August 1980, p. 94-95 and The Advertiser 7 August 1980.

that accompanies most anti-nuclear arguments. They foster the myopic disposition of NIMBYism and, when articulated by leaders who support uranium exports, a certain absurdity transpires. The populism of the anti-nuclear case, at this point in our history, is unlikely to see an Opposition crave this as an issue with which to challenge the incumbent, even if it bespeaks of logical and moral consistency.