Time to bin the nuke ban

Momentum is building to right the wrong of two decades ago which banned nuclear energy in Australia.

Removing this ban is long overdue and community support is building.

Consider the interest in the past few months alone.

During the election campaign the Prime Minister was asked about the potential for nuclear power in Australia.

Since the election, interest has grown in NSW with new MLC Mark Latham tabling a law to normalise the treatment of uranium mining and nuclear energy.

NSW Deputy Premier John Barilaro subsequently reconfirmed his support for nuclear power.

After attending a seminar in the US on advanced small modular reactors last year, he is convinced they are becoming cheaper and could play a role in providing affordable low emissions reliable power for NSW.

Mr Barilaro also inadvertently dispelled another myth about nuclear power – that it is unpopular.

He refused to rule out nuclear power in his seat of Monaro, saying that he was not going to quarantine his own electorate with a ‘not in my backyard’ attitude.

And in the 23 March state election he received a remarkable 11 per cent swing towards him.

Federal Coalition backbenchers are newly emboldened on nuclear power, with Nationals Queensland MP Keith Pitt and LNP Senator James McGrath delivering a pro-nuclear letter to the Prime Minister this week along with proposed terms of reference for an inquiry.

The letter will call for a review of advances in nuclear energy including small nuclear reactors and thorium technology, both of which could produce less radioactive waste than existing nuclear plants.

*The Australian* reported Mr Pitt as saying that the nuclear issue was “a debate we are ready to have” and that “In our view the technology has moved on and small modular reactors and thorium need to be investigated.”

He also noted “strong support coming from most people, surprisingly among young people. I think the culture today means people are better informed.”

This growing political momentum reflects recent online polls.

A survey reported this week from Essential found more Australians supported nuclear power plants than oppose them, with 44% in favour – up four points since the question was last asked in November 2015 – and 40% in opposition.

In October 2018, 61 per cent of respondents to an SBS Viceland poll were in favour of Australia lifting the ban on nuclear energy, and ABC Brisbane’s Facebook poll in March 2019 had 57 per cent in favour of Australia considering nuclear power as an energy source.

These sources are hardly traditional pro-nuclear audiences, so it’s clear that public opinion in this country is shifting in favour of this zero-emissions power source.

This should not surprise those who have followed the energy debate and the climate challenges of the 21st century.
Environmentalists and scientists are increasingly supporting fairer treatment of uranium mining and nuclear power, given the twin challenges of providing reliable power to a growing global population and the need to reduce carbon emissions.

In late 2014, 77 conservation scientists called for green groups to reconsider their historical opposition to nuclear power and consider how it can help meet the climate challenge, along with all other technologies and options.

In the US, 65 per cent of a representative sample of scientists connected to the American Association for the Advancement of Science are in favour of building more nuclear power plants.

Everywhere you turn, the evidence is overwhelming that it is long past time to bin the nuclear energy ban.

Yet even with this growing public support, there is now a new excuse for stalling this reform, with claims that there is no point removing the ban if nuclear power doesn’t stack up economically or financially.

Why should nuclear power be required to prove it is economic when it is used so extensively in similar advanced economies to Australia such as the United States and France?

And the economic case for nuclear power in Australia has already been made by the South Australian Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal Commission which investigated the feasibility of nuclear power in South Australia.

It found that modelling of nuclear power feasibility in Australia suggests it ‘might well be viable’.

It went on to recommend removal of the ban saying ‘In the event that fast and rapid action is required by Australia after 2030, nuclear power might play a useful role’.

So a Royal Commission has recommended it, the science is in and the public is ready.

Politicians ignore a shift in public opinion at their peril, especially on the vital issue of energy affordability and reliability.

Nuclear power should be legal in Australia and it’s time to get on with it to benefit families, businesses and the planet.

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