

NUCLEAR REACTOR BATTLE

By Jim Green

The battle continues over the federal government's plan to build a 20-megawatt nuclear reactor in the southern Sydney suburb of Lucas Heights. If built, the reactor will replace the only operating reactor in Australia, the 10-megawatt HIFAR reactor currently operated by the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO) at Lucas Heights.

The decision to build a new reactor was announced in September 1997 without any public consultation let alone a public inquiry. The government ignored the recommendation of the 1993 Research Reactor Review for an independent public inquiry to investigate any future proposal for a new reactor. The government has also ignored the recommendations of two Senate inquiries, in 1999 and again in May this year, for an independent public inquiry into the reactor proposal. Calls from the Sutherland Shire Council, the Australian Local Government Association and others, for a Royal Commission to investigate the various controversies and scandals surrounding the project have been ignored.

All parties involved in the recent Senate Select Committee - Liberal, Labor, Nationals, Democrats - criticised ANSTO for its secrecy. Tony Wood, former head of Engineering and Reactors at ANSTO, told the most recent Senate inquiry that, "If I had to sum up my concerns in one sentence, it would

be that for the first time in my long association with ANSTO I do not feel comfortable with what the organisation is telling the public and its own staff." Another ex-ANSTO scientist and now President of the Australian Nuclear Association, Dr. Clarence Hardy, has complained about the "culture of secrecy" at ANSTO. Another ex-ANSTO scientist has complained that it is an "unfortunate state of affairs that dear old ANSTO, which lives off taxpayer's money, is feeding us all this propaganda and very little objective information."

Last year, the Sydney Morning Herald and Greenpeace were told that to acquire two and 22 pages of information respectively under Freedom of Information requests, they would be charged \$7099 and \$6809.

Those involved in the push for a reactor can scarcely be bothered concealing their contempt for public opinion and public accountability. A Canberra-based bureaucrat involved in the reactor push told ABC Radio National (29/3/98) that, "The government decided to starve the opponents of oxygen ... catch them totally unawares, catch them completely off-guard and starve them of oxygen until then. No leaks, don't write letters arguing the point, just keep them in the dark completely". A Department of Industry, Science and Tourism briefing paper, written in April 1998 and obtained under Freedom of Information legislation, says, "Be careful in terms of health impacts - don't really want a detailed study done of the health of Sutherland residents."

Medical rhetoric

The government has gone to great lengths to stress the "need" for a new reactor to produce "life-saving" medical isotopes. Yet the senior Canberra bureaucrat interviewed on ABC radio in 1998 admitted to a beat-up: "The government decided to push the whole health line, and that included appealing to the emotion of people. ... So it was reduced to one point, and an emotional one at that."

When Dr. Geoff Bower, President of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Physicians in Nuclear Medicine (ANZAPNM), was asked on JJJ radio in 1999 if it would be a "life threatening" situation if Australia did not produce medical isotopes locally, he said, "Probably not life threatening. I think that's over-dramatising it and that's what people have done to win an argument. I resist that."

When the current President of the ANZAPNM, Dr. Barry Ellison, was asked in July last year how doctors coped during the shutdown of the HIFAR reactor from February to May for maintenance, he denied that the reactor had been shut down, insisting that he would surely have known about it. But in fact the reactor *was* shut down for three months - and Barry Ellison wasn't the only doctor who failed to notice. ANSTO staff members noted in a letter to Sutherland Shire Council that "radioisotope production has suffered no dislocation as a result of the shutdown".

The former head of a nuclear medicine department in a capital city teaching hospital recently wrote, "I do not know exactly why the strategic thinkers within ANSTO pushed the radiopharmaceutical line [to justify a new reactor]. They would have been aware that the case was not entirely solid." Dr. Barry Allen, former Chief Research Scientist at ANSTO, wrote in the October 1997 edition of the science journal *Search*, "(The new) reactor will be a step into the past ... (It) will comprise mostly imported technology and it may well be the last of its kind ever built. Certainly the \$300 million reactor will have little impact on cancer prognosis, the major killer of Australians today. In fact, the cost of replacing the reactor is comparable to the whole wish list that arguably could be written for research facilities by the Australian Science, Technology and Engineering Council (ASTEC)."

ASTEC was not asked for its opinion before the 1997 announcement of the government's plan for a new reactor. Nor was the CSIRO, which said in 1993 that "more productive research could be funded for the cost of a reactor." Nor was the Office of the Chief Scientist consulted. The largest single investment in science infrastructure in Australia's history yet the government did not consult any of its science advisers!

INVAP

A number of nuclear scientists and engineers question whether the successful tenderer for the reactor project, INVAP from Argentina, has the experience and expertise to successfully and safely manage the project. For example, Tony Wood told the Senate Select Committee, "... the literature does not support the minister's [Nick Minchin] claim that INVAP has a 'solid track record'. It is not that it has a poor track record. It has no track record on the reactor of significance - that is, a 20-megawatt reactor."



Dr Robert Turtle, a fellow of the Institution of Engineers Australia and a member of the Australian Nuclear Association, wrote in a submission to the Senate Select Committee that the ANSTO contract is the biggest ever undertaken by INVAP and that "this violates financial and management criteria of prudential and sustainable development."

Dr. Turtle said it is not considered sound financial or management practice for an organisation to undertake work greater than

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25-30% of its normal annual turnover, that it is additionally imprudent to advance the scale and scope of work by large increments, and that INVAP fails on both counts.

ANSTO is subject to similar concerns. ANSTO staff members wrote to Sutherland Shire Council on April 3, 2000, saying, "Although it will be strongly denied by ANSTO, it is well known by those in the field that the new reactor project is having difficulty finding sufficient nuclear literate staff to address the tender process. It is understood that the current full-time staff on the program ... are up for retirement. Inept management, no succession planning? Who is going to safely operate a new reactor in Sutherland Shire?"

No reactor, no waste!

Yet another problem with the plan for a new reactor is the failure to address the issue of radioactive waste management. The government and ANSTO hope to dump low-level radioactive wastes in northern South Australia, but with several polls indicating that up to 93% of South Australians are opposed to the planned dump, it remains doubtful whether the dump will ever be built.

Maintaining Lucas Heights as a nuclear dump site is illegal, but illegal waste storage is nothing new for ANSTO. In the early 1990s, the NSW Land and Environment Court ruled that ANSTO was illegally storing certain nuclear wastes on-site. The federal Labor government's response was to legislate to make ANSTO immune from state government environmental and public health laws.

Plans to manage high-level wastes, including spent reactor fuel and reprocessing wastes, are still more problematic. The current 'solution' is to send spent fuel overseas for reprocessing. This

will not reduce the radioactivity one iota, and reprocessing wastes will be returned to Australia in 10-20 years for storage at a (non-existent) store and eventual disposal in a (non-existent) deep geological repository. The federal government's plans to build a high-level waste store in South Australia provoked such fierce opposition that the South Australian parliament passed legislation banning such a facility.

In the words of the senior Canberra bureaucrat quoted on ABC radio in 1998, waste management is "an issue for another generation" and "someone else can worry about it".

These half-baked, politically-expedient waste management plans fly in the face of the 1993 Research Reactor Review's statement that, "A crucial issue is final disposal of high-level wastes, which depends upon identification of a site and investigation of its characteristics. A solution to this problem is essential and necessary well prior to any future decision about a new reactor. ... It would be utterly wrong to decide on a new reactor before progress is made on identification of a high level waste repository site."

There are numerous other problems with the plan for a new reactor: emergency planning procedures are inadequate; several opponents of the reactor plan have been threatened with defamation suits by Liberal MP Danna Vale; a plethora of economic issues remain unanswered and unresolved; the executive director of ANSTO was directly involved in the selection and appointment of the CEO of the supposedly 'independent' regulatory agency; the government claims to have evaluated alternative sites to Lucas Heights but refuses to release the site selection study report; progress on a 'Community Right to Know Charter' has been stalled by ANSTO; ANSTO has refused to publicly release the reactor contract or the spent fuel reprocessing contract; and several accidents in February 1999 were covered up by ANSTO management.

Wollongong Uni links

The links between ANSTO and Wollongong Uni are pervasive. An article in the *Illawarra Mercury* March 2, 1999 quoted an ANSTO officer describing ANSTO as

"almost an extension of the Wollongong University campus". The links go right to the top: the executive director of ANSTO, Helen Garnett, is an emeritus professor from Wollongong Uni. Michael Codd, Chancellor of Wollongong Uni, is also on the Board of ANSTO - and must therefore take some responsibility for the endless stream of misinformation promulgated by ANSTO. According to the 2/3/99 *Illawarra Mercury* article, Wollongong Uni's Vice-Chancellor Gerard Sutton used to work at the Lucas Heights nuclear plant. Sutton has ignored numerous requests to confirm or deny that point.

The reactor plan has lurched from one scandal to another in recent years and there's a good chance that the government can be forced to cancel the reactor project and to invest instead in cleaner, safer technologies such as particle accelerators.

In the Sutherland Shire, People Against a Nuclear Reactor is the campaign group to contact to get involved - phone Tim O'Connor on 0415 536 463, email <reactorboy@yap.com.au>. A number of Sydney People Against a New Nuclear Reactor (SPANNR) groups are campaigning throughout the Sydney basin - email Leah Mason <spannr@ihug.com.au>.

[Jim Green's 1998 PhD thesis on the reactor debates, and more recent research, are on the internet at <www.geocities.com/jimgreen3>.]

