

# Australia: Opposition Coalition makes nuclear power central to election strategy

**Mike Head, Peter Symonds****30 June 2024**

In a fundamental shift in the country's energy policy, Australian federal opposition leader Peter Dutton has announced that his opposition Liberal-National Coalition would build nuclear power plants if it won the next election due by May.

In announcing the plan on June 19, Dutton declared that he was "very happy for the election to be a referendum on energy, on nuclear, on power prices, on lights going out, on who has a sustainable pathway for our country going forward."

The plan is a direct challenge to longstanding popular opposition to uranium mining, nuclear power and nuclear weapons. Australia has no nuclear industry, and legislation at the state and federal level bans the construction of nuclear power plants.

Dutton's proposal, which was short on detail, is for seven nuclear plants on the sites of former coal-fired power stations, thus taking advantage of existing transmission lines. He claimed that the first nuclear reactors could be operating as early as 2035 with the rest coming online by the 2040s. The Coalition later explained that each plant would house four nuclear reactors.

Dutton attacked the Labor government over its "renewables only" policy which he declared to be costly, unreliable and unviable. "No other country in the world can keep the lights on 24/7 with the renewables-only policy," he said.

Dutton pointed out that Labor would not achieve its legislated target of a 43 percent reduction in carbon emissions by 2030, saying the Coalition would overturn it. He claimed that by building nuclear plants emitting no greenhouse gases, Australia would reach zero emissions by 2050.

Coming from the right-wing, climate-change denier wing of the Liberal Party, Dutton's newfound concern for emissions reduction is utterly hypocritical. As Labor was quick to point out, with the nuclear plants not beginning operation for at least a decade, the Coalition energy plan is reliant on the continued operation of coal-fired power stations. Labor, however, for all its talk of renewables, is likewise continuing to rely on coal- and gas-fired power plants and has given the green light to four new coal mines.

Dutton dismissed concerns about nuclear safety and waste disposal by pointing out that Labor has already embraced nuclear power by agreeing to the acquisition of nuclear submarines under the AUKUS military pact with the US and UK. The high-level nuclear waste from the submarines is to be disposed of in Australia even though currently no waste site exists for such material. In reality, neither Labor nor the Coalition are taking the fraught issues of nuclear waste and safety seriously as they press ahead

with their nuclear agendas.

Dutton's nuclear proposal is a rather desperate pitch for electoral support under conditions where both Labor and the Coalition are widely distrusted and loathed. Amid a worsening economic and social crisis, support for Labor continues to wane, with few gains for the Coalition. Polling points to the possibility that neither party will gain a majority at the next election.

The Coalition claims its polling shows majority support for nuclear plants in the regional areas where the closure of coal-fired stations has led to job losses. Even if true, that hardly constitutes a winning electoral strategy—six of the seven affected seats are currently held by the Coalition, with just one held narrowly by Labor in the Hunter Valley. The Coalition has also declared that local communities will be consulted but have no veto over the building of nuclear plants in their areas.

More broadly, the Coalition is also seeking to exploit widespread discontent over skyrocketing household power bills that contribute substantially to cost-of-living pressures weighing on working people. Power costs rose by up to 6.5 percent last year alone despite Labor's 2022 election pledge that cheap renewables would cut household bills by \$275 a year.

Dutton's nuclear pitch is a political gamble aimed at distinguishing the Coalition from Labor and portraying himself as a decisive leader, when on every major issue—from the wars in Europe and the Middle East to the imposition of punishing austerity measures and reactionary anti-immigrant policies—there is not a shred of difference.

The nuclear proposal, however, does not stand up to close scrutiny. The Coalition has given few details and will only outline costings following the election. Dutton's claim that nuclear power will provide cheap, reliable energy at only "a fraction" of the cost of Labor's renewable energy plan is already subject to widespread criticism, as is his time frame for building a nuclear power industry in Australia from scratch.

The country's premier scientific agency, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), said the plan would cost \$387 billion. The Clean Energy Council, which advocates for the renewable energy industry, said it would cost \$600 billion. The huge costs point to a possible reason why Dutton, a fervent advocate of private enterprise, has declared the nuclear plants will be government-owned.

Dutton's assertion that the plan could include small modular nuclear reactors that could be built off-site and produce about a

third of the power of larger reactors further underscores its threadbare character. While such reactors are on the drawing boards in several countries, including the US and Britain, only two are actually in operation—in Russia and China.

While some polling indicates a weakening of public opposition to nuclear power, there is no guarantee that voters, already sceptical of the promises of both parties, will swallow Dutton's claims of lower power bills—a decade from now! In fact, polling following the nuclear policy announcement has shown a slump in support for the Coalition.

Moreover, while Dutton has dismissed concerns about nuclear safety and waste by referring to Labor's embrace of nuclear submarines, there is no reason why voters will necessarily do the same, given the scale of nuclear disasters such as Chernobyl in the Soviet Union in 1986 and Fukushima in Japan in 2011.

Whether or not the Coalition wins the next election, Dutton has squarely placed the question of nuclear power on the political agenda and has the backing of sections of big business as a result. The junior Coalition partner, the National Party, based in regional areas and representing mining and agribusiness, has long championed nuclear power.

Sections of the mining industry that have chafed at restrictions on uranium mining are keen to exploit growing global demand for yellowcake—refined uranium ore. The US in particular is looking for new sources after banning imports from Russia. Australia, with one third of the world's known uranium reserves, is potentially the world's largest source.

The Mining Council of Australia immediately backed Dutton's nuclear plan and called for a lifting of bans on nuclear power plants, declaring that it was "time to move beyond outdated anti-nuclear sentiments." The Business Council of Australia, which represents the largest Australian corporations, was more guarded but nevertheless called for nuclear power to be given the green light.

At the same time, the Coalition plan also fuelled opposition in some big business circles and even within the Liberal Party, particularly among those who are heavily invested in rolling out renewable energy. Not only does the proposal threaten the huge government subsidies to the highly profitable renewable industry, but government ownership of planned nuclear plants offers limited opportunities for private investment.

While condemning the Coalition for not releasing costings and other details, the Labor government has primarily accused it of endangering corporate investment in renewable energy. Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek said there was a "big danger" that the plan would divert investment from renewables. Major investors, including Macquarie Bank and Blackrock, have multi-billion dollar stakes in "clean energy" projects.

Amid the deluge of media commentary on Dutton's nuclear plan, one aspect has received scant attention—its potential military implications. The AUKUS agreement with the US and UK not only provides for the Australian military to acquire American Virginia-class nuclear attack submarines but for the future construction of British-Australian nuclear-powered submarines in South Australia.

Already, AUKUS allows for the de facto basing of US and

British nuclear submarines at the Stirling naval base in Western Australia and the operation of American strategic B-52 and B-2 bombers from bases in Australia's Northern Territory. Under the US military's "neither confirm nor deny" policy, there is no way of knowing if its submarines, warships and warplanes are armed with nuclear weapons.

In one of the few articles touching on the military implications of the nuclear power plan, the *Australian*'s right-wing foreign editor, Greg Sheridan, who is closely connected to military circles in Australia and the US, argued that a nuclear power industry was essential for AUKUS to succeed. He pointed out that it would assist in training the thousands of "nuclear engineers, technicians and workers who are masters of nuclear technology in all its stages and guises" necessary for AUKUS.

The US/NATO war against Russia in Ukraine has already raised the spectre of the use of nuclear weapons. Amid Washington's increasingly aggressive confrontation with Beijing, the AUKUS pact is squarely directed at preparing for war with nuclear-armed China, which US imperialism regards as the chief threat to its global hegemony.

These escalating geo-political tensions have revived the debate within strategic circles, behind the backs of the population, about the need for Australian imperialism to build its own nuclear weapons. While such an undertaking would be enormously expensive and complex, the vast expansion of nuclear expertise required for a nuclear power industry is an essential first premise.

An article published following Dutton's announcement by the Lowy Institute, a strategic think tank, hinted at the closed-door discussions taking place. Entitled "Nuclear subs, nuclear power ... could nuclear weapons be next?" its author, Daniel Flitton, pointed to the strong popular opposition that must be overcome.

Flitton suggested that a "major deterioration in regional security coupled with nationalist sentiment" could shift public opinion to accept what was previously "unthinkable." An open discussion about acquiring nuclear weapons, however, would also inevitably provoke opposition and further fuel the anti-war sentiment that has erupted over the genocidal Israeli war in Gaza, which is precisely what the political establishment fears.



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