Nuclear Power and the Public Interest: a Case Study in Public Leadership

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Preamble

Australians familiar with maritime matters know that Jervis Bay is integral to the nation’s naval defence. It has also been the focus of several important public interest debates that have influenced the evolution of the Royal Australian Navy (RAN). The first of these debates was in 1901, shortly after Federation, arising from concerns that the New South Wales Government would have excessive influence over national affairs because of its then unrivalled economic power. To give the newly established national government access to the seas and a greater role in coastal and international trade, Jervis Bay was declared the national port and nearly 68 square kilometres of land was transferred from New South Wales to the Commonwealth. This was a very early attempt to re-configure Commonwealth-state relations for the benefit of all Australians. The RAN College at Jervis Bay was opened in 1915 with subsequent construction of operationally significant amenities and facilities, including the Jervis Bay Airfield, the Beecroft Weapons Range and the Shallow Water Sound Range, to support major fleet activities.

The second public interest debate was prompted by the Gorton Government’s decision in September 1969 to consider construction of a 500-megawatt nuclear power plant at Murray’s Beach on the southern shore of Jervis Bay. The plan did not survive the replacement of John Gorton, a former Minister for the Navy, as prime minister by William McMahon in March 1971. Based on the conclusion that coal-fired power stations were cheaper to build and easier to operate, the project was deferred in June 1971 and eventually cancelled by the Whitlam Government in 1973. This remains the first and only proposal for nuclear power to have received close consideration in Australian history. Its practical legacy, a high-quality access road and a large cleared area of land in the south-east corner of Jervis Bay, is well-known to most graduates of the RAN College. Its political legacy, that nuclear power is expensive and potentially injurious to the natural environment, has continued for just as long.

Introduction

There are few areas in Australia’s national affairs that have suffered more from a lack of clear and consistent leadership than deliberations over the possible provision of nuclear power. There has been some political leadership but very little public leadership, if the two are differentiated by public leadership’s commitment to advancing the public interest. Political leaders have been consistently wary of raising the spectre of nuclear power. The reason is obvious. Atomic energy is a highly divisive issue within the community eliciting emotional responses with unpredictable electoral consequences. Those energetically supporting the exploitation of nuclear power are countered by those vigorously opposing every aspect of the nuclear industry. Whether this support and opposition can be mobilised to effect voting behaviour is uncertain, leaving governments wary of raising the subject for public comment.

The paucity of public leadership is the focus of this essay which has three parts. The first is an outline of what is meant by ‘public leadership’ and its relationship with the public interest. The second examines recent inquiries into nuclear power conducted by Federal and state governments, and the public interest considerations that have been nominated by both the proponents and opponents of nuclear power. The third identifies five factors that have complicated the application of a public interest test to nuclear power. I close by suggesting a two-stage process for a constructive discussion of whether Australia might consider the acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines in the medium future.

Part One – Public leadership and the public interest

A consistent refrain in Australian history is the lack of good leadership. In his widely quoted work The Lucky Country published in 1964, Donald Horne described Australia as ‘a lucky country run by second-rate people who share its luck’. Fifty years later, media commentators were lamenting debilitating instability within Australia’s political leadership as the tensions...
between Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull began to resemble the turmoil that enveloped the prime ministerships of Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard. Was Australia incapable of producing competent men and women worthy of national leadership and capable of dealing with existing challenges and emerging opportunities?

The ‘lack of good leadership’ refrain can be interpreted as either a complaint about the political class or a lament that the country is deeply divided. It is convenient, of course, to attribute everything that is wrong with society to a handful of people and to their inability or refusal to give everyone what they want, when they want it. Just as likely a cause for discontent is the population’s unwillingness to submit to leadership or their fickle reaction to the leaders producing compliance when it fulfils self-interest and defiance when it calls for personal sacrifice.

If asked for a brief description of what they seek in a leader or if invited to identify the essence of leadership, I doubt many Australians would have given their answers more than a second thought, let alone interrogated their own opinions for any bias or prejudice. Perhaps, leadership is like art: people know what they like and what they do not like but they cannot quite explain their likes or their dislikes. Consequently, potential national leaders come and go, including among them viceroys, parliamentarians, heads of institutions, entrepreneurs, lawyers, academics, media personalities and sport stars until one captures the public’s attention for reasons that may not be obvious. If their appeal is based on personality, as it often is, their influence might last a little longer before they say or do something effectively aligning them with an unpopular cause or an unfashionable mindset. Their standing then begins to decline.

The rise of identity politics, the suspicion of institutions and the spread of postmodernist angst have made it difficult for leaders to exert influence beyond the communities in which they themselves were nurtured and from which they initially acquired an authority to speak publicly. Attempts by leaders to refashion the nation or to reshape popular culture are resisted, if not resented, with the usual litany of objections ranging from the leader’s failure to speak on behalf of every sub-group, to the leader’s inability to understand the struggles of people who are unlike them or who might seek different things from life. Leadership is difficult in a society which seems to have perennially low regard for those who are elected or appointed to leadership positions. As the nation potentially dis-integrates into tribes and factions that are not coincident with the geographic boundaries of a state or local government area, the notion of public leadership becomes increasingly more problematic as the things that divide gain greater prominence than the things that unite.

Unlike the current fixation with what I would call popular leadership, public leadership is differentiated from other forms of leadership in that its focus is pursuing the public interest, a concept similar to but distinct from the common good and social capital. Public leadership does not seek to preference or prejudice the needs or wants of any group at the expense of others nor does it advance personal or private aspirations and objectives to the detriment of the wellbeing of the whole population. Effective public leadership is indifferent to polemical agendas and partisan goals and transcends the practical preoccupations of administration and management. If the point and purpose of an activity is to further the interests (however these are understood) of private individuals or specific organisations rather than the entire nation, it should not be considered an exercise of public leadership.

Nuclear power involves a wide range of public interest issues whose balanced and conscientious consideration requires the exercise of firm public leadership to ensure the discussion of any proposal’s merits does not drift beyond what will serve the interests of the Australian people, individually and collectively. Articulating these interests and clarifying their relative importance and priority are public leadership tasks.

Part 2 – The public interest and nuclear power

In contrast to its principal friends and allies, Australia has never relied on nuclear power as a foundation for national prosperity nor depended upon nuclear weapons as a bulwark of national security. As a country with a small population and a limited industrial base, economic modelling of nuclear power’s benefits has proved a complicated exercise. As a well-connected medium power, there has been no pressing need for a locally developed nuclear weapons although the advantages flowing from their possession have been canvassed from time-to-time. Australian governments in the 1950s and the 1960s occasionally considered the possibility of nuclear power and nuclear weapons but neither was pursued to acquisition.

In the early 1970s, an anti-nuclear movement gained momentum in Australia with candidates from the Nuclear Disarmament Party (NDP) elected to several
parliaments in the 1980s, propelled by the Hawke Labor Government's support for uranium mining and endorsement of the United States' nuclear weapons program. Although the NDP was de-registered in 1992 and anti-nuclear rallies faded from view, it was not until the latter years of the Howard Government (2004-2007) that publicly declared attitudes toward nuclear power among legislators in Federal and state parliaments began to change.

Conscious that its electoral appeal was steadily declining throughout 2005, the Coalition needed to address the effects of climate change and the impact of rising energy costs. The 2006 report of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry and Resources, *Australia’s uranium – Greenhouse friendly fuel for an energy hungry world*, and the 2007 report of the Uranium Mining, Processing and Nuclear Energy Review Taskforce headed by former Telstra CEO, Ziggy Switkowski, provided impetus for a fresh consideration of nuclear energy in the context of mitigating Australia’s greenhouse gas emissions.

Both inquiries recognised two things: first, every country with an economy larger than Australia’s relied on nuclear energy; and second, Australia was the only country among the world’s 25 leading economies that had excluded nuclear energy from its baseload power supply. While the Standing Committee’s report could be dismissed as a partisan document reflecting the Coalition’s position on nuclear energy, the report of the Switkowski-led taskforce, consisting of well-regarded scientists and academics without political affiliations, was disparaged by some critics as little more than a ‘roadmap for Australia to go nuclear’. This was unfair and unjustified commentary. Precluded by its initial brief from making formal recommendations, the taskforce thought ‘nuclear should be on the table’ as it provided an important option for policymakers to consider. The Howard Government was emboldened to act by both the report and its reception.

In opening a new research reactor at Lucas Heights late in April 2007, Prime Minister Howard spoke of nuclear power as ‘a source of hope’ that ought to be ‘part of Australia’s future’.1 The Government declared its intention to launch a comprehensive nuclear power program with the prospect of more than 50 generation plants being built throughout the country. In response to the Howard Government’s newly acquired enthusiasm for nuclear power, the Tasmanian Labor Government led by Paul Lennon and the Queensland Labor Government led by Peter Beattie considered legislation to ban nuclear power generation. The aim was ending any discussion of nuclear power before a debate had even begun. A representative of the Queensland Nuclear Free Alliance, Robin Taubenfeld, was surprised by the Howard Government’s ‘highly irresponsible’ policy announcement which she described as ‘political suicide’. As there was a Labor government in every state and territory, the Federal Coalition explored a series of legal routes to override state objections should their governments stand in the way of Canberra’s plans. This was a less than satisfactory basis on which to conduct a discussion that required the goodwill of parliamentarians and the people throughout the country. In this context, discerning the public interest had already been displaced as the foremost consideration for legislators.

The Federal Labor Opposition led by Kevin Rudd campaigned strongly against nuclear power ahead of the 2007 election. Rudd described the Howard Government’s plans as being ‘too expensive, too dangerous, too slow, when it comes to impact on greenhouse gas emissions’.2 During the campaign a number of Liberal candidates sensed the electoral unpopularity of the Coalition’s support for nuclear power and distanced themselves from the policy. After nearly 12 years in power and the electorate eager for change, the Coalition was defeated at the November 2007 election with a large swing to Labor. But within 12 months of taking office, there were signs the Rudd Government was more open to nuclear power than the electorate had been led to believe. Switkowski thought Labor could be persuaded as to its merits and told a business forum:

> We will get there. I’m sure we will get there, whether it happens in the next term of government or the one after … The attitude in Australia, I think, will move from concern to grudging acceptance, to enormous relief that we have this very efficient technology and these vast reserves that will give us … the lowest cost, safest, cleanest form of base load electricity.

Despite Switkowski’s optimism, Federal Labor maintained its opposition to expanding the nuclear industry although the Gillard Government eventually agreed to sell Australian uranium to India and senior ministers, Martin Ferguson and Gary Gray, were known to support closer consideration of nuclear power. Elsewhere, Labor’s stance was inconsistent.

The Weatherill Government in South Australia announced it would hold a royal commission into the Nuclear Fuel Cycle in March 2015. The inquiry would be conducted by former state governor and retired naval officer, Rear Admiral Kevin Scarce. Despite being accused of personal bias towards the nuclear power industry when appointed,
Scarce asserted his openness to all points of view. This openness was implicit in the findings and recommendations of his report which was completed in May 2016. He supported establishment of a nuclear waste facility and expansion of mining and export activities. Although the processing of uranium and the generation of nuclear power were unlikely to be financially viable within South Australia, Scarce recommended repealing Federal and state prohibitions on expanding the nation’s nuclear industry. By the end of 2016, however, the Weatherill Government appeared to have lost interest in the report it had commissioned. A change of government following the March 2018 state election did not lead to a revival of interest in either the inquiry’s findings or recommendations. The new premier, Steve Marshall, said nuclear power was not on his ‘short term’ radar although it could ‘come back on the agenda down the track’ if needed to achieve cheaper electricity prices.

Disappointed his report was effectively ‘shelved’, Scarce remarked in July 2019 that:

we have to find a way to restart this discussion. Whether the answer ends up being for or against, you can trust the Australian people to have a mature discussion. At the moment we can’t even have the discussion because it’s not politically acceptable. The longer we go without having the debate, the less options we have for the future. We are not giving ourselves the options we need and we only have a limited time to do so.

His judgment that the Australian people could be trusted to participate in a mature debate curiously overlooked the ‘verdict’ of the ‘citizens’ jury’ convened by the Weatherill Government to consider his recommendations. Although this form of ‘deliberative democracy’ was widely criticised as a flawed approach for assessing complex public interest claims, earlier expressions of bi-partisan support rapidly evaporated when the jury rejected Scarce’s recommendations citing a ‘lack of trust’ in regulators and regulations. Lamenting that ‘the citizens’ jury cut the legs out from under [his report]’, Scarce wanted discussion to continue. Had it continued, he remarked, ‘we would have had an answer one way or another, and at the moment we don’t’. He pointed to Australia’s ‘terrific nuclear record’ and the capacity to ‘develop a regulatory system that would be the best in the world’. Plainly, he was in favour of expanding Australia’s nuclear industry. There remained, however, a requirement for ‘the social will to do it, and that’s the thing that worries the politicians’. In essence, could the public overcome its anxiety if a policy were shown to serve their interests?

The challenge for those who were undecided within the parliament and among the people was sifting the available evidence and evaluating competing claims when discussion of nuclear power was highly emotive and obviously polarised. Those in favour of nuclear power characterised their opponents as ‘primitivists’ living in the distant past and ‘alarmists’ who exploited ignorance to exaggerate community fear of catastrophic accidents resembling the system failures at Three Mile Island in 1979 and Chernobyl in 1986, and following a natural disaster, such as at Fukushima in 2011.

Some anti-nuclear activists portrayed their opponents as people ‘so far to the right of the political spectrum that right-wing ideologues think they are right wing ideologues’. In an article claiming the nuclear power debate had become the new frontline in the nation’s culture wars, a spokesman for Friends of the Earth Australia, Jim Green, claimed the ‘far-right supports nuclear power if only because the ‘green left’ opposes it’. Green asserted that ‘support for nuclear power is increasingly marginalised to the far-right. Indeed support for nuclear power has become a sign of tribal loyalty: you support nuclear power (and coal) or you’re a cultural Marxist, and you oppose renewables and climate change action or you’re a cultural Marxist’. In portraying supporters of nuclear power as an ‘extremist’ cabal, Green included the Minerals Council of Australia, the Institute of Public Affairs and The Australian newspaper as part of a concerted attempt to ‘wedge’ the Labor Party and the Green Left. He quoted Greens Senator Sarah Hanson-Young:

Talk of overturning the ban on nuclear power in Australia is crackpot stuff. Aside from being a dangerous technology, nuclear power is wildly expensive and would take a decade or more to build. It would be a funny joke if it wasn’t so embarrassing to have the Nationals, who are in government and who sit around the cabinet table, pushing for this. These people are meant to be in charge, and they’re running around like a bunch of lunatic cowboys.

Intentionally polarising the debate was not restricted to activists and politicians. In January 2019, the Climate Council, which consisted of academics and administrators, issued a media release contending that nuclear power plants:

are not appropriate for Australia – and probably never will be. Nuclear power stations are highly controversial, can’t be built under existing law in any Australian state or territory, are a more expensive source of power than renewable energy, and present...
significant challenges in terms of the storage and transport of nuclear waste, and use of water.

There were two notable things in the statement. The first was the word ‘appropriate’. It was a curious choice implying conflicting values rather than objective calculations of cost and benefit. The second was the observation that nuclear power plants were ‘controversial’, implying that being controversial made them inadvisable.

The Climate Council was formed by members of the Climate Commission, a body established and funded by the Gillard Government but later disbanded by the Abbott Government on the grounds of administrative efficiency (the Council’s functions were transferred to the Department of Environment). The Council has been accused of polemical bias but stands by its independence and autonomy as a not-for-profit organisation funded by community donations. Perhaps unwisely given its apolitical aspirations, its CEO lamented the re-election of the Morrison Government in May 2019 and applauded the failure of Tony Abbott, the Coalition’s foremost climate change sceptic, to retain his seat in the House of Representatives. Comments of this kind cast the Coalition parties as adversaries to be defeated rather than public leaders to be persuaded.

The unexpected Coalition election victory in May 2019 revealed that opinion polling had become a fraught activity producing unreliable ‘results’. Most pollsters had tipped a substantial swing against the Coalition and the election of a majority Labor government citing environmental concerns as an important vote-driver. Among the lessons to be learned from the polls’ failure to depict the electorate’s mood accurately, it became clear that what an individual voter thinks about a particular issue considered in isolation will not necessarily determine how he or she will cast their vote at the ballot box. There are many and diverse reasons shaping a voter’s decision to preference one party or one candidate above and before another. There are also far fewer ‘rusted on’ voters. The once predictable tribal loyalties associated with Australian politics are rapidly dissolving. With more ‘undecided’ voters than ever before, the major parties are experiencing rapid and substantial swings for and against both their candidates and their policies. It also seems that growing concerns about climate change and energy security have made voters less likely to punish parties willing to put all options ‘on the table’, including the nuclear option, to contain energy costs and guarantee energy supply.

Evidence of greater community openness to considering nuclear power is behind the inquiry into the nuclear fuel cycle established in August 2019 to be conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on the Environment and Energy. It is addressing a number of issues: waste management and storage; health and safety; environmental impacts; energy affordability and reliability; economic feasibility; community engagement; workforce capability; security implications; and, national consensus. Openness to considering nuclear power should not, of course, be mistaken for endorsing the construction of reactors.

Considering is not deciding. Nonetheless, the inquiry chair, Liberal member for Fairfax, Ted O’Brien, thought concerns about climate change and advances in nuclear technology were ‘game changers’: ‘you can’t contend there’s an existential threat to life as we know it due to climate change and then oppose the cleanest form of industrial-scale energy generation the world has seen’. He was optimistic that ‘we have a national debate ahead of us on a major energy issue – nuclear, no less – without the hysterics and hyperbole that has dogged energy policy in this country for far too long’. O’Brien’s words were echoed by the New South Wales Treasurer, Dominic Perrottet, who deemed energy security ‘the biggest challenge of our time’. He thinks Federal legislators should consider nuclear power ‘and not just putting it off the table for ideological reasons from the past’. The state’s One Nation leader, Mark Latham, echoed Perrottet’s concern that the economy rested precariously on energy security. But this concern does not mean the public will, or necessarily should, support nuclear power.

Residual anxieties about the expense and safety of nuclear power continue to fuel political opposition to its introduction in Australia with claims of distortion and even deceit on the part of nuclear advocates. My UNSW Canberra colleague, Associate Professor Heiko Timmers, is an experimental physicist. He thinks the cost of replacing coal-generated electricity with renewables ‘could be huge. These costs may possibly exceed those of building nuclear power stations’. While the business case for nuclear power was ‘shaky’, he thinks ‘a much stronger argument can be made for the back end of the nuclear fuel cycle: storing nuclear waste’. In reply, Paul Richards, an American seismologist, claims that storing nuclear waste was a ‘trojan horse’ that obscured a desire to introduce nuclear power and nuclear weapons. In essence, Richards argues, any expansion of the nuclear industry will increase the possibility of nuclear weapons proliferation. Is this a reasonable observation or an objectionable tactic?
Notably, 30 years after his government looked seriously at nuclear power, John Gorton told a Sydney newspaper that ‘we were interested in this thing because it could provide electricity to everybody and ... if you decided later on, it could make an atomic bomb’. The Gorton Government signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty the following year (1970) but the prime minister had no intention of ratifying it, a task which was left to the Whitlam Government. Gorton’s foremost advisor on nuclear policy was the first Vice-Chancellor of the University of New South Wales, Professor Sir Philip Baxter. A chemical engineer and a vigorous advocate of nuclear power, Baxter chaired the Australian Atomic Energy Commission from 1957 until 1972. He also believed the advent of nuclear power had military applications, declaring in 1975:

‘... if you decided later on, it could make an atomic bomb’. The Gorton Government signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty the following year (1970) but the prime minister had no intention of ratifying it, a task which was left to the Whitlam Government. Gorton’s foremost advisor on nuclear policy was the first Vice-Chancellor of the University of New South Wales, Professor Sir Philip Baxter. A chemical engineer and a vigorous advocate of nuclear power, Baxter chaired the Australian Atomic Energy Commission from 1957 until 1972. He also believed the advent of nuclear power had military applications, declaring in 1975:

Over the years I have initially advocated that we should create the necessary technology and industrial background to enable us to move into a nuclear armament quickly. More recently things have changed internationally. I’m now of the opinion that we should begin actively to create nuclear weapons for the defence of Australia.

Baxter was an unashamed intellectual elitist. He argued that in the provision of energy, ‘only experts understand the problems and can advise governments on what they should do’. He cited the analogy of aircraft pilots: because public safety depends on them being experts, only those who understand the possibilities and potential of nuclear power can advise governments on energy policy and provision.

He was largely unconcerned with the political, economic, social and ethical issues associated with nuclear power. Baxter fully supported the Gorton Government’s Jervis Bay proposal but was ill-equipped to consider the environmental objections to its location which would only have increased with time. The site’s most significant virtue, that it was owned by the Commonwealth, meant state government approval to proceed with the project was not required. Baxter knew that developing nuclear weapons was far more problematic politically than providing nuclear power. He was ultimately unable to present a politically acceptable case for either.

To counteract continuing suspicion that the advent of nuclear power will increase the likelihood of Australia developing nuclear weapons, the case for nuclear power, and nuclear-powered submarines in particular, will need to assure the electorate that nuclear weapons are not, and will not, be part of an expanded nuclear industry in Australia.

Part 3 – A way ahead

There are five factors that could complicate the application of a public interest consideration of the issues associated with nuclear power. They can be briefly summarised: a short-term electoral cycle; a fractured political system; conflicted Commonwealth-State relations; a partisan media; and, a self-interested electorate.

Recent Australian governments have tended to be in permanent campaigning mode. With the period between elections being no more than three years, the party winning office has a window of between 24 and 30 months to implement its policies before facing the people. As Australian electorates usually give first-term governments a second term (the last one-term administration was the Scullin Labor Government which was elected in 1929 and defeated in 1931), the party forming government can usually rely on five to six years in power although few seem to have an agenda extending beyond one term (noting that only three administrations since Federation have actually complete their entitlement to a full three-year term). As any decision on nuclear power will require substantial investment capital and will not produce any community benefit for at least 15 years, the party making the decision to proceed with nuclear power will absorb all the political pain without experiencing any political gain during its term in office. Such a decision would need to be politically selfless.

Australia’s adversarial political system, which sets a government against an opposition, can obscure rather than clarify the public interest. The two-party system has a role in testing and tempering the assumptions and claims associated with government policy development and decision-making. It can also divert attention from close consideration of the public interest when an opposition deliberately takes a contrary view – irrespective of whether it can be reconciled with a fair-minded assessment of the public interest – for the purposes of denying the government supremacy in parliament and credibility in the electorate. As all parties are committed to broadening their support base and neutralising their opposition, the government is also susceptible to choosing the politically most palatable policy option and the least confrontational administrative action rather than committing itself to the policy and the decision that most effectively and efficiently advances the public interest. While politics is essentially a contest of ideas, willingness to engage in compromise for political purposes might assist the ruling party to make a decision but comes at the expense of a single-minded pursuit of the public’s interests.
The evolution of Commonwealth-State relations also works against an even-handed consideration of nuclear power. Since Federation in 1901, the Commonwealth has expanded its capacity to govern because of its enlarged revenue raising capacity. After 1910 when the Commonwealth was no longer obliged to return three-quarters of customs revenues to the states and 1942 when the High Court ruled that the states could not tax income, the Commonwealth has regularly used its economic power to impose its political will on the states. The limits of the Commonwealth’s legal powers and the states’ rights to resist the exercise of those powers has been the subject of several High Court cases concerning the Commonwealth’s desire to act in what it considers the national interest and the determination of a state government to oppose such action within its territory. In several instances, a state government has opposed the exercise of Commonwealth power to demonstrate its commitment in defending the rights the state and the interests of its people. Conversely, the Commonwealth has opposed the decision of a state government which it deems contrary to the national interest or a violation of Australia’s international obligations. A Commonwealth decision relating to nuclear power would require action on the part of a state government, action which could be thwarted by a power struggle between one or more jurisdictions especially in circumstances in which a decisive electoral advantage was apparent.

The media are vital to the flow of public information and crucial to interpretations of its significance. Aside from organisations and publications that represent a particular segment of the electorate or appeal to a certain body of opinion, the mainstream media – television, radio and newspapers – continue to ‘frame’ conversations about matters of public interest. Aside from concerns about the influence of media ownership on editorial policy, the narrowing of opinion and the increase in polemical commentary is likely to shape public discussion of nuclear power and the potential exploitation of this issue for partisan purposes that may not serve to elucidate the relevant public interests.

Finally, a popular culture that emphasises individual wants ahead of collective needs can distort the consideration of the public interest by elected and appointed officials. Long-term investments frequently have long-term consequences. The decision to expand Australia’s nuclear industry will require investment in infrastructure and impose a continuing burden on the nation’s finances. One generation may be unwilling to fund benefits accruing to the next. Future generations may lament the debts left by their forebears. Conversely, the cost of research into renewable energy development might ultimately exceed expenditure on nuclear power but ultimately prove better for the natural environment. In such circumstances, electricity prices might continue to rise but the nation is freed from the burden of nuclear waste management. Decisions about public investment in energy sector research and development involve more than economic imperatives although a self-interested electorate might be drawn to a solution that serves individual financial interests narrowly conceived rather than public social interests broadly considered.

Given the existence of so many complex issues, a two-stage process would assist a public interest consideration of nuclear power. The first stage is identifying all of the relevant considerations that bear upon the public interest and determining, on the basis of those considerations, whether the public’s interests are advanced by nuclear power. The current inquiry has identified some but not all of the relevant public interest considerations. The second is contingent on the first. If a public interest case can be made for nuclear power, as much of the public as possible need to be convinced that nuclear power indeed serves their interests and that consensus is needed to support the immediate costs incurred to pursue long-term benefits.

If the case for nuclear power cannot survive a rigorous public interest examination, the matter is settled. But if a case can be made, the government will need to embark on a journey with the Australian people. Their support is contingent on gaining and maintaining their trust, an important point made by Michael Angwin, former chief executive of the Australian Uranium Association. He argued that trust is indispensable to the establishment of an Australian nuclear industry and building trust rather than reactors is the foremost task for its advocates. Angwin thinks that fears of nuclear power are rational but that trust is the ‘antidote to fear’. Such trust is not the outcome of promises but actions. He suggests that ‘bipartisan political support is one of the starting points for building trust’. Such trust would be built on a series of commitments which he suggests might include:

We will not create the conditions for a nuclear industry unless Australians trust it and support it.

We will not proceed from one stage to another unless there is trust and support.

We will not force any nuclear facility on any community.
Any nuclear development must not foreclose on any other community, industry, economic or infrastructure development.

Such an approach will enable people to make up their own minds. Clearly, this approach anticipates that people may well make up their minds to oppose nuclear power. Those with a strong belief in the energy and climate change benefits of nuclear power may find this a challenging possibility. But unless the trust-building task is approached in that way, it will likely fail. The overarching demeanour of the government that embarks upon this path should be sceptical, disinterested and open-minded.

Angwin’s contention is built on broad agreement that nuclear power advances the public interest. It assumes the exercise of public leadership.

The challenge of public leadership in this context is two-fold. The first is creating an environment in which individuals are encouraged to overcome their own self-interest in the expectation that the public of which they are members will be enriched by the collective pursuit of interests that are common to all. The second is building public confidence in the handling of evidence and the sifting of argument to identify the most efficient and effective means of fulfilling a shared aspiration – cheaper and more reliable energy. Both of these tasks transcend the formal remit of parliamentarians and administrators. Organisations like the Submarine Institute of Australia are essential to hosting a wide-ranging discussion and encouraging a genuine contest of ideas. In the absence of community goodwill and consensus that the public interest is being served, any policy is liable to provoke resentment and resistance. Without individuals in the community believing their destiny is better served by working with rather than against others, the public interest will be little more than an empty political slogan. Leaders are key players and their leadership is decisive.

Endnotes
5 https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/nuclear-debate-without-hysterics/news-story/d8c0fb92c54697b1aa439ca8f3dc34bb
7 https://theconversation.com/australia-should-explore-nuclear-waste-before-we-try-domestic-nuclear-power-121361
8 See https://antinuclear.net/2019/08/06/paul-richards-refutes-heiko-timmers-push-for-australia-to-import-nuclear-wastes/
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