



RADIO ACTIVE WASTE
27 March 2003

The Hon. I.F. EVANS (Davenport) I move:

That this house calls on the Federal Leader of the Opposition to explain why, as the former Federal Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, he wrote to the former Bannon Government in 1991 about the pressing need for national disposal facilities for radio-active wastes produced in Australia.

Mrs PENFOLD (Flinders): I also rise to support this motion. We are constantly being told by Labor that 90 per cent of people do not want a national radioactive waste repository built, yet at no time does Labor state the obvious, that nuclear waste deposited in specially built storage is safer than the current practice of leaving it around the place chiefly in hospitals and the universities.

The state Labor government, led by the Premier (Hon. Mike Rann), recently loudly proclaimed that it does not want South Australia made a dumping ground for nuclear waste, yet the member for Ramsay is somewhat slow in making up his mind. It has taken him close to a decade to decide his position. He was a member of the state government when the federal Labor government, without investigation or consultation, decided to move 2 000 cubic metres of radioactive waste to Woomera. This arrived in 1994, where it was placed in an old hangar. This made South Australia a dump for nuclear waste, since it was indeed dumped and not deposited in a repository.

The South Australian public has a right to know what the federal Labor Party intends to do about this material, since its opposition to a national approach has been inconsistent and contradictory. Federal Labor members have given little, if any, public support to the extensive research undertaken to determine a geologically safe storage area, even though that research was initiated in 1992 when the current federal Labor leader, Simon Crean, was Minister for Primary Industries and Energy. At that time, Mr Crean reiterated the commonwealth government's commitment to establishing a national radioactive waste repository, and he announced the start of an Australia-wide site selection study to identify a suitable site—right back in 1992. Had there been greater public cooperation from the Labor Party and its members instead of opposition, his material would now be presumably housed in a safe place. This applies to all radioactive waste.

Incidentally, we are all subjected continually to radioactivity, which is a natural component of the environment. The level varies in different localities, but it is still there. Parliamentarians—indeed, every man, woman and child—need reminding that radioactivity is an ever-present component of our environment. The Hon. Mr Rann, ingests as we all do, on average 1 microsievert per day in his food intake, which is roughly one sixth of his total dose from all sources except medical exposure. A person's annual dose is around 2 millisieverts in Australia, while the rest of the world is receiving 3 millisieverts annually.

In May 2003, it will be 19 years since the Australian Science and Technology Council (ASTEC) released its 1984 report on Australia's role in the nuclear fuel cycle to Prime Minister Bob Hawke, who is touted as one of the Labor Party's greats. One paragraph of the report states:

We consider that, as an exporter of uranium, Australia has a responsibility to participate in and assist the development of all aspects of radioactive waste management.

The state Labor Party—in fact, all who supported the ban on a repository in this state—have ignored one of the most basic and

essential factors in maintaining a clean, green environment, and that is the handling of waste materials. Responsible waste management is the vital last stage, not only in industry but also in community life generally. Former Prime Minister Bob Hawke certainly realised that. The report also states:

ASTEC recommends that Australia proceed as quickly as possible to complete a code of practice for the disposal of radioactive waste arising from medical, industrial and research use of radionuclides to identify sites suitable for disposal of low level radioactive waste and to the development of facilities for interim storage and disposal of low and intermediate level radioactive waste.

We have a nuclear industry. No thinking person would propose that we do away with our nuclear industry and with all its uses in health and medicine. Therefore, a nuclear industry will always be with us. It follows that there will be waste from that industry, whether it be surgical gowns and gloves, defunct smoke alarms, broken exit signs or more highly active material. The waste has to go somewhere. I repeat that most Australians benefit directly or indirectly from the medical, industrial and scientific use of radioactive materials. This produces a small amount of radioactive waste such as lightly contaminated soil, paper, plastics, laboratory equipment and so on. This waste is stored at more than 100 locations around Australia in research institutes, hospitals, governments and industry stores, mostly in ad hoc facilities.

Nineteen years down the track, we in Australia are still dithering and arguing what to do about it. One may well suspect that the Labor Party hopes the coalition government will take action so that it can grandstand that it was not involved. Maybe Simon Crean hopes that 19 years is long enough for people to forget his previous actions in generating the search for a national nuclear waste repository.

Two significant aspects emerge from the federal Liberal government's careful approach to a national waste repository. One is the extensive consultation that has occurred with the owners of native title to possible storage sites. There has been a great deal of cooperation and support from the indigenous people. Agreement has not been 100 per cent and, therefore, those who disagree are featured, while the majority who agree are pushed aside.

The second aspect is a detailed environmental assessment that is ongoing. The public has had the opportunity to contribute, and many have done so. An intelligent person who has the best interests of South Australia at stake would doubtless consider that the best outcome for this state would be to get the federal government to build a waste repository which would be at no cost to South Australia but which this state could use. It would appear that the state Labor government does not have the best interests of this state as its priority, or perhaps the best interests of the state do not figure with the state Labor government at all. The whole nuclear debate, especially Labor's contribution, has demonstrated a distinct lack of common sense, a refusal to accept reality, an absence of vision and a lack of initiative.

Turning to the comment that the majority of people do not want a national repository, the first thing that needs to be asked is: what question was used to elicit that response and what information, if any, was included on which to form the response? I believe that 100 per cent no response could be achieved by asking the question: 'Do you want to use nuclear medicine, including investigative isotopes and radiotherapy, or do you want them banned?'

It seems that a majority of members of this house and in another place have been unable or unwilling to sort fact from fiction. This parliament has given credibility to the public's selective fear of items and words that have 'radioactive' and 'nuclear' attached. Yet no-one throws away their glow-in-the-dark watch, because they do not connect such an ordinary, everyday, useful item with their fear of anything nuclear.

Many years ago the commonwealth was able to get all states and territories to agree in principle to national nuclear repositories. One wonders whether the Labor Party has any principle. It is time for the Labor Party and Labor Government to drop its double standards and purely ideologically based hypocrisy on the nuclear issue, which is aimed at getting the green vote. Its policy has wasted money, time and effort that could have been directed towards health and education or the many other urgent issues over the past 19 years since the ASTEC report. As that seems to be too difficult for the state Labor government, I support this appeal by the house directly to the federal leader of the federal Labor Party to publicly state where his party intends to store in excess of 2 000 cubic metres of radioactive waste in 10 000 drums taken to Woomera in 1994 by the former federal Labor government. I understand that Professor Paul Davis said that the most dangerous thing in shifting the nuclear waste in 1994 was the smoke coming from the exhausts of the diesel trucks carrying it to Woomera.