

## URANIUM MINING

### *Urgency Motion*

**THE PRESIDENT (Hon Nick Griffiths)** I am in receipt of a letter partly in these terms —

I give notice that pursuant to SO72 I intend to move that the House, as a matter of urgency, calls on the Government to recognise the unacceptable risk to the community and the environment posed by uranium mining and immediately re-instate the ban on uranium mining in Western Australia.

The letter is from Hon Giz Watson, MLC, member for the North Metropolitan Region.

The member will require the support of four members in order to move the motion.

[At least four members rose in their places.]

**HON GIZ WATSON (North Metropolitan)** [3.44 pm]: I move the motion.

I raise this as a matter of urgency because I think it is about time this Parliament had a full debate about the unacceptable risks to the community and the environment that uranium mining poses. In the 15 minutes that I have in which to speak to this motion, I intend to speak initially a little about what uranium is because I think there is a commonly held perception that uranium is just like any other mineral and, indeed, as members will find out, it is not. I want to talk specifically about some examples of uranium bodies in Western Australia. I want to talk about Olympic Dam, because we can learn a lot from the existing uranium mines in Australia, and particularly from what is happening in South Australia at Olympic Dam. I want to talk about the risks to workers and some recent accidents. Finally, I want to explain why in my view the Liberal government, which is a minority government formed by arrangement with the National Party, does not have a mandate to mine uranium in this state.

First of all, what is uranium? I commented to the media today that I think one reason that we have not had a good debate about uranium in this state is that a lot of people do not understand that it is quite different from any other material that is mined. Uranium is the heaviest naturally occurring element. Uranium consists of two principal isotopes—uranium-238, with 238 neutrons in its nucleus, and uranium-235, with 235 neutrons in its nucleus. The U-235 isotope is the desired isotope for nuclear reactors or nuclear weapons due to its ability to fission or split apart and release vast quantities of energy in the process. The various decay products from uranium have half-lives ranging from a fraction of a second to billions of years.

As uranium is mostly present in oxide form, it is commonly reported as either uranium or uranium oxide. The average concentration of uranium in typical soils and rocks is about three milligrams per kilogram or parts per million. This background uranium is partly responsible for natural background radiation, but in order to mine uranium economically using existing technology, the concentration must reach at least 300 parts per million, with most uranium mines historically ranging between 0.1 or 0.05 parts per million.

Uranium is mined using traditional techniques such as open-cut mining or underground mining. However, sandstone deposits can also be mined by in situ leaching, which is basically tipping acid down the ground and pumping uranium out. Once the ore is mined, it is finely ground and the uranium is chemically extracted through conventional processes involving leaching with acid or alkali into concentration and then purification of uranium oxide. Uranium ore is significantly radioactive—a property that is very uncommon across the mining industry. Some other mineral deposits also contain elevated uranium or thorium, which is also a radioactive element. However, these are generally very few.

The geological structure that holds uranium is relatively stable. The process of mining and milling uranium ore involves severe disturbance to this natural equilibrium, especially as crystalline rocks are broken up during mining. The rocks are ground for milling and are aggressively chemically treated to liberate the uranium. An ore grade of 0.3 per cent uranium oxide means that 99.7 per cent of the ore is left as soil waste known as tailings. The minor loss of uranium is easily made up by the amount of chemicals added during leaching. Uranium mill tailings retain about 85 per cent of the original radioactivity of the ore and must be managed so as to minimise the release of radioactive decay products such as radium and radon, as well as heavy metals. Members need to be aware that we have talked about the dangers of the high-level radioactive waste associated with spent fuel rods and the prospect that by allowing uranium mining in Western Australia, we open up Western Australia to a higher probability of ultimately being the recipient of a global high-level nuclear waste dump. However, members must also know that uranium mining in Western Australia would leave significantly large areas of the state with these tailing structures on them. The requirement to manage the radioactive tailings and all other soil waste to minimise both long-term environmental as well as radiological releases and impacts makes uranium mining fundamentally different from all other types of mining.

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The environmental impacts of uranium mining include the traditional impacts associated with gold or copper mining, as well as additional radiological impacts. In open-cut mining, large quantities of waste rock are excavated to access the ore, with much of this waste rock also containing low grade, uneconomic quantities of uranium. Additionally, this waste rock may also contain sulphide minerals such as pyrite. When undisturbed in situ this rock is stable. However, the process of mining increases the cracks present and allows water and oxygen to diffuse into the waste. The oxygen and water reacts with the sulphide to produce sulphuric acid. This in turn dissolves much of the heavy metals and radionuclides present in the waste, allowing it to leach out of the rock into the surrounding environment. This leachate, known as acid mine drainage—AMD—is extremely toxic to aquatic ecosystems and will cause major, long-lasting environmental impacts. AMD is a major problem in the mining of many metals, but presents an additional problem when combined with uranium mining. The long-term management of uranium mill tailings present a major environmental challenge. Given the tailings contain most of the original radioactivity of the ore, they must be isolated from the environment for periods of at least tens of thousands of years; I reiterate, tens of thousands of years, a time scale which is beyond collective human experience and certainly challenges engineering approaches for waste containment.

I will now address Western Australia specifically. Due to the geological age of Western Australia, uranium is fairly prolific, although that does not necessarily translate into economically viable uranium deposits.

According to lodged Joint Ore Reserves Committee data held at the Department of Industry and Resources in WA, grades in this region range from a minuscule 0.067 kilograms a tonne to a top of around 1.5 kilograms a tonne. This means, in all cases, massive mining and tailing operations to acquire both uranium and economic return. The milling process extracts uranium oxide, comprising less than one per cent, from ore to form yellowcake; a yellow or brown powder containing around 90 per cent uranium oxide.

The greatest problem facing the north west goldfields and the Murchison region would be the huge number of radioactive tailing structures that would eventuate if a number of these small mines commenced mill operations. For every tonne of yellowcake produced, there would be at least 99 tonnes of radioactive fine-ground tailings waste. While the hazard per gram of mill tailings is relatively low compared with nuclear reactor waste, the large volumes of waste make them difficult to secure and contain. Moreover, the half-lives of the principal radioactive components of mill tailings, thorium-230 and radium-226, are long—about 75 000 years and 1 600 years respectively.

I will talk now about the uranium mine at Olympic Dam, which is, as members will be aware, in South Australia. I will give some examples about what we might be looking at in Western Australia if the current government has its way. Olympic Dam has generated 60 million tonnes of radioactive waste covering several hundred hectares. It is growing at the rate of eight million tonnes a year and will eventually cover 700 hectares to a height of 30 metres. This one mine in South Australia currently consumes 10 per cent of South Australia's electricity. So much for a greenhouse-friendly industry! The proposed expansion of Olympic Dam will result in it consuming 50 per cent of South Australia's electricity. Olympic Dam is, and will continue to be—if it continues to operate—the single largest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in South Australia. It is also a huge consumer of water, consuming 30 million litres of water a day. Therefore, when we are talking about uranium mines in Western Australia, we have to contemplate exactly how much water will be required to just do the basics of mining and milling uranium ore.

The uranium ore mined in South Australia currently is being exported to countries with nuclear weapons and countries using depleted uranium weapons. Of course, we have the prospect of exporting to India, which is not even a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

I now refer to the impact of radiation on workers. Unfortunately, there is no safe level of radiation exposure below which we have a zero risk. Even low-level medical exposure, such as chest X-rays, carries a quantifiable risk of harm. Over the years, medical studies have resulted in a reduction in the recommendation of the radiation dose that people can be exposed to. The set exposure for workers in the nuclear industry is at a much higher level of 20 millisieverts a year, averaged over two years. As most uranium workers receive more than 20 millisieverts of radiation a year, the workers' level is adjusted to 50 millisieverts a year by limiting the workers' time allowed at uranium mine sites to only two years in every five years. Workers in uranium-producing mine sites are exposed to 13 to 33 times the background radiation experienced by other Australians. Roxby underground miners have been receiving up to 30 millisieverts a year.

Given that I have only another three and a half minutes left, I will talk about some recent episodes, one reported on last Friday, 21 November. I quote from the *Northern Territory News* —

**MORE than a dozen workers were exposed to a “concerning” level of uranium during a clean-up operation at the Ranger mine near Jabiru.**

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The workers were not wearing their TLD monitoring devices at the time but urine tests showed they had been exposed to uranium oxide.

The incident is among 210 outstanding matters before the mine's safety committee, Australian Manufacturing Union state secretary Andrew Dettmer said.

Energy Resources of Australia business development manager ... said the workers probably ingested uranium through their mouths after licking their lips while cleaning out the yellowcake.

"Absolutely it's a concern," he said. "We'll be reviewing our procedures and taking all steps necessary to make sure it doesn't happen again."

The incident took place over three days in late October when workers were cleaning yellowcake out of a "hopper" where it was clogged after a rainstorm.

A colleague of mine in South Australia obtained some information under freedom of information. Subsequently, there was a media release dated 19 June 2008 entitled "Govt failing Roxby workers over radiation risk" —

Documents obtained under Freedom of Information show a poor level of monitoring of radioactive polonium airborne dust. Polonium, a particularly toxic and dangerous radioactive substance, was dramatically used to assassinate Russian defector Ivan Litvinenko in London in Nov 2006.

Despite the significant risk to workers of exposure to polonium, the Radiation Protection branch of the Environment Protection Authority agreed to reduce BHP Billiton's reporting requirements in 2006. Since then, the number of reports of workers exposed to unsafe levels of radiation has plummeted, despite no change occurring to production processes at the plant, raising serious questions about the level and type of testing currently undertaken by the company.

Companies are quite happy to change the goalposts in order to obscure the risks to workers.

I will finish my contribution in the short time left by touching on the fact that this government has claimed that it has a mandate to mine uranium in this state. This government won 24 seats; the Labor Party—which ran very strongly on an anti-uranium mining position—gained 28 seats. I understand that the National Party has a policy of supporting uranium mining, but it certainly did not run that during the election campaign.

I think it was only because I asked Brendon Grylls on radio his position on uranium mining that anybody knew what his position was. It is an utter nonsense that there is a mandate to mine uranium in Western Australia. I quote a Newspoll survey carried out on 8 September 2008, two days after the state went to the polls. The question was, "Thinking about uranium mining, are you in favour or against Mr Alan Carpenter's plan to introduce legislation to ban uranium mining in Western Australia?" The answer was: in favour, 48 per cent; against, 38 per cent; uncommitted, 14 per cent.

The majority of Western Australians want to maintain the ban on uranium mining in this state. This house can be sure that the Greens (WA) will continue to represent this view both in this place and in the public debate. If we do go down the path of mining uranium in this state, we are exposing current and future generations of Western Australians to unacceptable risks.

**HON NORMAN MOORE (Mining and Pastoral — Minister for Mines and Petroleum)** [3.59 pm]: If this government has a mandate to do anything, it has a mandate to introduce uranium mining. It was, I believe, one of the most significant issues in the last election campaign. Indeed, the Labor Party ran virtually on that issue and nothing else, as though it thought that, by frightening people to death by telling them that they would all glow in the dark, it would be returned to office. The facts of the matter are that it lost 10 seats in the Assembly and the Liberal Party is the government. We went to the election telling people that we would allow uranium mining in Western Australia. We also said, however, that there would be no nuclear power stations and no nuclear waste dump in Western Australia. Indeed, the previous Liberal government under Richard Court legislated to prevent a nuclear waste dump in Western Australia. The issue at the election was uranium mining, and we are sitting on this side of the house and the Labor Party, which ran a very strong campaign against uranium mining, is sitting on the opposition benches. Those are the facts of the matter.

On the issue of uranium mining, I will quote from an article in *The West Australian* of 19 November. It states —

... "Claims by the uranium mining industry's opponents, suggesting the Australian industry is unsafe for workers, risks supplying nuclear material to terrorists and obliges Australia to store the nuclear waste of other nations, are patently false and such scaremongering is irresponsible."

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Those are not my words or the words of Colin Barnett or anybody from the Liberal Party; they are the words of Martin Ferguson, the federal Labor Minister for Resources and Energy. I am relying on his advice today to tell the house the Labor Party's view nationally on this matter. The article begins —

Federal Resources Minister Martin Ferguson is demanding Eric Ripper drop his opposition to uranium mining, accusing the State Labor leader of “patently false” and irresponsible scaremongering.

This is the federal Labor Party talking about the Labor Party in Western Australia. It continues —

Mr Ferguson said Australia had the strictest uranium export rules in the world and only sold to countries that met all the safeguard requirements and which were signatories to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

“The Government is strongly committed to ensuring Australian uranium is only used for peaceful purposes by enforcing our strict safeguards policy,” ...

That is the view of federal Labor Party minister Martin Ferguson. That is what he has said about Mr Ripper's constant opposition to uranium mining.

We have heard a bit about the workers from Hon Giz Watson. I will quote the comments of the Australian Workers' Union as reported in the same article. It states —

The powerful Australian Workers Union also savaged WA Labor over its “ideological” opposition to uranium mining and urged it to fall into line with Federal ALP policy. National secretary Paul Howes said West Australians had shown in the State election they would not object to Mr Barnett lifting the ban. He said Federal Labor had abandoned the three-mines policy at its national conference last year in an important step for the party.

“I think that WA Labor should take heed of that decision by the Federal party and support Labor policy, which is that there is no need for ideological opposition to uranium mining,” Mr Howes said.

“Economically it makes no sense, politically it makes no sense because there was a very clear message from the electorate at the last State election that this is not a major issue for West Australians.”

**Hon Ken Travers:** We don't kowtow to Canberra like you, Mr Moore.

**Hon NORMAN MOORE:** This is the view of the Australian Workers' Union. I do not know which side Mr Travers is on, but I am sure that he is not on that side. None of us can understand how people opposite get endorsed and whose side they are on because that is their business.

The bottom line is that this article, headed “Ripper wrong on uranium: Ferguson”, indicates that the federal Labor government under Mr Rudd has said, through a minister, Mr Ferguson, who has a strong union background and is, as members know, a former president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, that the Labor Party in Western Australia has got it wrong. Mr Ferguson thinks that the Western Australian Labor Party is being irresponsible by taking this scaremongering approach. Mr Howes, from the Australian Workers' Union, has savaged the WA Labor Party's position on uranium mining because he believes that it would be in the interests of his members for there to be uranium mining in Western Australia. He has put to bed the notion that somehow or other this government does not have a mandate to allow uranium mining. As I have said, if we have a mandate to do anything, we have a mandate to do that. That was the fundamental issue for the Labor Party during the last election campaign.

Hon Giz Watson talked at some length about Olympic Dam. Olympic Dam happens to be in South Australia. The government of South Australia is a Labor government. The government of South Australia supports uranium mining. There is also uranium mining in the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory has a Labor government. Labor governments across Australia—in the Northern Territory and South Australia and federally—support uranium mining. I am beginning to think that the Labor Party in Western Australia is out of touch with its membership. It is certainly out of touch with its federal colleagues and those in other states. I suspect that the next time the Western Australian Labor Party has a conference—if it has one—it will change its mind, and then Mr Ripper can say that he always supported it. Mr Carpenter told everybody quietly behind the scenes that he supported uranium mining, but the party's policy was to oppose it. Then, during the election campaign, for some strange reason he said that not only would the Labor Party ban uranium mining by way of policy, but also it would legislate to ban it, and that was after it had refused to support the legislation introduced by Hon Giz Watson to do that very thing. Somebody told Mr Carpenter during the election campaign, along with a whole heap of other ridiculous notions, that if he ran against uranium mining, he would win the election. I do not know who made the decisions behind the scenes for the Labor Party at the last election campaign, but that was one of many significant blunders. That is why Labor members are the opposition. That is why uranium mining will go ahead under this government, provided that a company wants to do it. That is the proviso. We will take away the

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Labor Party's policy of not providing a mining lease for uranium. We will allow such a lease under the normal processes of the Mining Act and of the Environmental Protection Authority and other environmental agencies. Indeed, the state government, through the Department of Industry and Resources, has had meetings with Northern Territory, South Australian and commonwealth government officials to ensure that a proper regulatory regime is put in place in Western Australia in the event that a company wants to mine uranium in the future. That regulatory regime will relate to the mining of uranium and what should happen at the mine site, the transport of uranium and all other aspects of this industry. However, as I said earlier, we are also in line with Mr Ferguson on the matter of nuclear power stations and waste dumps in Western Australia—they will not happen while we are the government.

This motion has been moved by the Greens (WA), and I presume it will be supported by the Labor Party. Indeed, I gave my support for debating this motion in the event that the Labor Party could not make up its mind and did not support Hon Giz Watson's motion being debated, because I think it is a good motion to debate. I suggest to the member, and to anyone else who has a strong view on this matter, that they should not raise it in an urgency motion, when the mover of the motion gets only 15 minutes in which to speak and everybody else gets 10 minutes. If they want to have a serious debate about uranium mining, they should move a substantive motion so that we can have a full-scale go at it.

The bottom line is very simple: this government went to the last election saying that it would allow uranium mining. We did not hide from that or try to suggest that we would do anything else but allow it. The Labor Party went to the election strongly urging people to vote for the Labor Party to prevent uranium mining, and the Labor Party lost. Labor members, presumably, are again falling in line behind the Greens on environmental issues, until such time as they have a party conference and get in line with the rest of the Australian Labor Party—in the Northern Territory and South Australia and federally—and say that they got it wrong and will allow uranium mining in Western Australia. It can be done safely and properly in Western Australia, as it is being done in South Australia. If members think it is not being done properly in South Australia, they should get stuck into Mr Rann, but that is their business. We believe that it can be done safely and properly in Western Australia, as does Mr Ferguson, Mr Rann and the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory.

**Hon Ken Travers:** What are you going to do with the waste, Mr Moore?

**Hon NORMAN MOORE:** I do not know what that man over there uses for brains. Did he not hear me say that we will not accept waste in Australia and that those companies that use our uranium will be responsible for dealing with the waste?

**HON SALLY TALBOT (South West)** [4.09 pm]: I congratulate Hon Giz Watson for bringing this urgency motion to the house. I cannot believe that Hon Norman Moore spent the only 10 minutes he gets to contribute to this debate talking about internal Labor Party politics. I say to Hon Norman Moore that he should not worry about it; we will take care of that. We understand very well the position of the Western Australian Labor Party. We will continue to argue the position that we argued at our last national conference to enable Western Australia to continue its prohibition on uranium mining. I would like to have heard Hon Norman Moore's opinions about why we should go ahead with uranium mining. How can it be a good thing for Western Australia? How can it be good for the Western Australian lifestyle? How can it be good for the workers and the families of workers who will be involved in this industry? We have heard nothing about that, and Hon Norman Moore has no further opportunity to contribute to this debate. That is the first big disappointment.

I am very pleased to be able to support Hon Giz Watson's urgency motion, although I must say that another disappointment we are faced with on this side of the house is the very fact that we have to be talking about this at all. I can assure government members that those of us who have argued against uranium mining specifically, and the nuclear industry in general, will not stop now. Our case has only strengthened over the past 30 years. We will lose no opportunity in this house to bring the debate right to the government. I still believe that we can win this, and that we can keep Western Australia free of uranium mines. It is not what we need in Western Australia and not what we want. The fact that the Premier argues that he has a mandate to mine uranium is an act of gross hypocrisy and smacks of hubris. We all know what happens to people who succumb to that very unwholesome emotion.

I will talk more about the concept of this mandate. We know how Colin Barnett won 24 seats and cobbled together a coalition that is not a coalition to become Premier. He played the small target across a range of issues, including education. Hon Peter Collier, who was then in charge of education, could not really say what was going to happen.

**Hon Ken Travers:** He had all his policies cancelled.

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** He had all his policies wiped out, as Hon Ken Travers says.

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The government played the small target on health. Do we know what is happening with the Reid report? Of course we do not. The government does not know. It played the small target on everything that was bowled up by not only the print media but also talkback radio. How many times did we hear the government do the old mirror trick? "Oh, we'll look into it. Oh, we'll have a review." This occurred across a range of issues, including privatisation, infrastructure programs, housing and fishing bans.

The government could not quite play the small target on uranium mining because the Premier is on record as being a very staunch supporter of the industry. Of course, he is also a very staunch supporter of having a nuclear waste storage facility in Western Australia. Hon Norman Moore can stand and bluster all he likes and say, "Didn't you hear? We said we wouldn't do it." I would like to remind Hon Norman Moore—he has been here a long time; much longer than I have—about when the member for Cottesloe announced that there would be no gold tax and no royalties; it was not part of the Liberal Party's program for raising money from mining. We all know what happened to that, so we should not let him try that.

Whenever this issue is raised, the accusation is always made against people on our side of the argument that we do not rely on facts and that we get too emotional. However, this is a very emotional issue. I am the first to concede that all mining is dangerous. Uranium mining is dangerous, but so is coalmining and any other sort of mining; one has only to look at the number of deaths in the mining industry over the past 12 months to understand that mineworkers cannot always assume that they will not die during the course of the working day. Uranium mining is particularly dangerous, as Hon Giz Watson has already pointed out. It entails what the insurance industry refers to as dread risks. This is not like the risk of going down a coalmine, where all sorts of things can happen, including roof collapses and fires. The dread risks associated with uranium mining are not confined only to the risks on any given day or to the people who are working in the mine. The risks of radioactive contamination affect not only the miners but the men and women driving the trucks that transport the material, the people working on the docks and the people who live and work in the vicinity of the tailings. Hon Giz Watson has already spoken about some of those issues, and some of the other speakers on our side will also take up some of those issues.

We are not talking about being killed during the course of the working day; we are talking about the effects of radiation poisoning, such as birth defects, chronic lung and skin conditions, damage to the reproductive system and high infant mortality rates. This is why it is such a frightening industry to introduce to Western Australia. I am not making this up; I did not just find this information on what the government might refer to as an extremist website. I draw members' attention to data from the World Health Organization on this dangerous, dirty industry.

During previous debates I have referred to the work of Professor John Veevers of Macquarie University, who sets out very succinctly four reasons that the mining and export of uranium is absolutely the wrong path to take. I will briefly enumerate them in the short time left. There is the cost factor. The economics of uranium mining and the nuclear power industry are wrong; they have it wrong. There are costs involved in getting the stuff out of the ground. We have data to show that we could actually incur a net negative cost to Australia through the mining of uranium. Further, Europe is currently spending billions of dollars to try to deal with its nuclear waste.

There is the fact of human incompetence. When we are dealing with energy sources that are potentially so dangerous, we may get to the stage at which we consider an incident such as that which occurred at Three Mile Island to be a relatively manageable situation in comparison with what might happen in a super reactor. The link between the proliferation of dangerous material and the nuclear industry is absolutely indisputable. The International Atomic Energy Agency is on record admitting that it has no idea what happens to some of the uranium that is produced in the world. I have already referred to the unsolved problem of nuclear waste storage. We are looking at by-products in the tailings of uranium, such as thorium-230, which has a half-life of 75 000 years. What on earth will the government's state agreements look like for the government to be able to persuade the house that they will still be effective in 75 000 years? That is only the half-life.

**Hon Ken Travers:** The Romans were there and gone in under 2 000 years.

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** Absolutely; the Romans would have something to say about it.

This is not only a matter of meeting environmental standards; it is a fundamental ethical issue. The government needs to show leadership and decide what sort of society it wants to live in.

**Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich:** That's not possible because there's not one leader amongst them.

**Hon SALLY TALBOT:** Sadly, I think Hon Ljiljanna Ravlich has hit the nail on the head. We are being governed by a group of people who do not have one leadership bone in their bodies. They played the small target all through the election campaign, they get in here and they have no legislation on the table for us to look at.

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Their cabinet meetings probably last all of 40 minutes. They have talked about GM and uranium. It is all too easy, and it cannot be that way.

**HON GEORGE CASH (North Metropolitan)** [4.19 pm]: I wish to speak on the motion moved by Hon Giz Watson today. The motion refers to the need to recognise what Hon Giz Watson says is the unacceptable risk to the community and the environment posed by uranium mining. The motion then goes on to suggest that there should be a reinstatement of the ban on uranium mining in Western Australia. It seems to me that the motion is all about risk, as Hon Giz Watson puts it, and that because of that, uranium mining is unacceptable. I assume that by “risk” she means danger or threat or hazard, and by “unacceptable” she is talking about matters such as an improper, undesirable or objectionable —

**Hon Paul Llewellyn:** Unprincipled!

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** I do not know whether one would go as far as unprincipled, because I think that is different. I am happy to talk about those particular matters because the mining industry, as such, poses a risk to those engaged in the industry, and in fact to those outside the industry who are responsible for the transportation of mining products. Risk is inherent in the mining industry; I think all members would have to agree with that. But the other thing that I think members should agree with is that, to date, most countries have been able to manage risk within their mining industries, because there is such a thing as risk management. If mining companies apply themselves in a reasonable manner, they can overcome some of the objectionable qualities, or some of the dangerous or hazardous elements or constituent parts of that industry. I think that on the issue of risk it is not a case of just scaremongering. I am not suggesting that Hon Giz Watson was scaremongering because she stated her case the way she saw it. However, I will talk later about Hon Eric Ripper’s comments on uranium mining in Western Australia.

**Hon Paul Llewellyn:** How do you manage a 75 000-year risk?

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** I do not want to get sidetracked into running down Hon Paul Llewellyn’s burrows because he will have his opportunity in a moment, but, globally, people believe that the risk can be managed. We are a very modern society and we can do things that we could not do 100 years, 200 years or 300 years ago. The mere fact that the risk is managed in a particular way might not suit Hon Paul Llewellyn, but that does not mean —

**Hon Paul Llewellyn:** For the planet —

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** I beg your pardon?

**Hon Paul Llewellyn:** For the planet and the rest of the population.

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** That is in Hon Paul Llewellyn’s view. It might not suit Hon Paul Llewellyn, but the fact is it can be managed. Society today demands, through governments around the world, that uranium be used for various matters.

**Hon Paul Llewellyn:** Prove it!

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** Prove it?

**Hon Paul Llewellyn:** Yes.

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** How many nuclear power stations does Hon Paul Llewellyn think there are in the world today?

**Hon Kim Chance:** Less than there were three or four years ago.

**Hon Giz Watson:** Yes.

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** Not true.

**Hon Giz Watson:** It’s true!

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** Not true. China is building nuclear power stations at a record rate. I have not stood to talk about nuclear power stations.

**Hon Ken Travers** interjected.

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** I have stood to talk about uranium mining. If Hon Ken Travers wants to enter into it, let us talk about leadership and the federal Australian Labor Party. I will digress to do that if he wants me to, because was it leadership when Mr Rudd decided last year to change the policy and make uranium mining part of federal Labor policy across Australia?

Several members interjected.

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**Hon GEORGE CASH:** Why did Mr Rann, Premier of South Australia—he is a pretty good Labor Premier—on the day the federal Labor Party changed its policy say that the —

**Hon Ken Travers:** Sometimes the wise men from the east aren't that wise!

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** Mr Travers can join them, because sometimes he is not that wise, and he comes from the east, originally, does he not?

Several members interjected.

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** On the day the federal government changed its uranium policy, Mr Rann, Premier of South Australia, declared that his state was set up to become the Saudi Arabia of uranium if the old policy was dropped. Premier Rann, the Labor Premier of South Australia, announced on the day the policy was changed that he would fast-track applications for another 100 uranium exploration licences, recognising that there were already 60 companies with 160 licences exploring for uranium in South Australia. The huge Beverley uranium mine is in South Australia; the Honeymoon Well mine is in South Australia. South Australia does not seem to see a massive problem with uranium mining —

**Hon Ken Travers:** So are poker machines. Do you support poker machines?

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** No, I do not support poker machines.

**Hon Ken Travers:** Good on you!

**The PRESIDENT:** If Hon Ken Travers is going to interject, at least interject on a point of relevance. Hon George Cash has the call.

**Hon Ken Travers:** It is very relevant.

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** I want to deal with this issue in a responsible manner and I will continue to try to deal with it in a responsible manner, but when people like Hon Ken Travers make silly, inane, irresponsible statements because they have not got the guts to get up and speak and defend their own Labor policy, then I am required to digress slightly. Perhaps Hon Ken Travers does not recognise that there are 31 countries around the world that mine uranium. Canada, for instance, produces 23 per cent of all the uranium mined in the world today; Australia follows with 21 per cent; and Kazakhstan mines about 15 per cent. Uranium mining is a reality and we must face the reality. The risk must be managed so that it is a safe industry, or as safe as it can be made.

Fossil fuels are creating an environmental problem throughout the world. Lots of countries have now recognised there is a green alternative. Is it not interesting that it should be called the “green alternative”, because to some countries the green alternative is nuclear power —

**Hon Giz Watson:** They're wrong!

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** Maybe Hon Giz Watson's view is that they are wrong —

**Hon Giz Watson:** They are wrong.

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** — and she is entitled to that view. As my former colleague Hon Bob Pike used to say when he was a member of this place, he would defend a member's right to state their views and maintain their principles until his dying day. That is what this place is all about. Hon Giz Watson is entitled to have a view, even if it is a misinformed or ill-judged view. That is what democracy is all about.

It is important to consider some of the issues raised by Hon Sally Talbot. I paraphrase, but she talked about not being able to trust the decision making of some governments. I remind members about the federal Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts, Peter Garrett. Remember when he was the lead singer of Midnight Oil? Remember that 30 years ago he was a member of the Nuclear Disarmament Party and staged a massive concert in the eastern states, from which all the money went towards trying to generate comment about his and other people's opposition to the nuclear industry? What is he doing now? He was the federal minister who agreed to an extension of both the Beverley mine and the Honeymoon well mine in South Australia. How do we justify that? He is the same minister that said 12 months ago that he would be sending ships down into the Antarctic to watch what the Japanese were doing regarding whaling, only to find out today that that is not happening at all. So I just wonder.

**Hon Sally Talbot:** So you agree with me that Hon Norman Moore's promise of there being no nuclear waste is something we shouldn't believe?

**Hon GEORGE CASH:** No. Hon Norman Moore can only promise what he can promise, but in the end it is the Parliament that decides. Western Australia has legislation on that matter. It is people like Hon Sally Talbot who, in the future—if they see fit—can change that law, but that is up to her. That will not be something that I will have to worry a lot about.



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We talked about Martin Ferguson and his criticism of Hon Eric Ripper. Of course, do not forget that Martin Ferguson was a union representative for the Miscellaneous Workers Union. He was responsible for the uranium workers in the Northern Territory. I mean, the federal ALP is opposed, yet the next minute it is for it. Now Martin Ferguson is saying—it was quoted in *The West Australian* the other day—that the federal minister, meaning Martin Ferguson, had —

... accused Mr Ripper of irresponsible and “patently false” scaremongering.

That is what this debate comes down to. Hon Giz Watson, I agree with Hon Norman Moore that we need more time to mount a rational argument for or against this issue. It cannot be achieved in 10 minutes.

**HON JON FORD (Mining and Pastoral)** [4.29 pm]: I will try to set out an economic argument for why uranium mining is not required in Western Australia. Interestingly, the South Australian government tells us that nobody in South Australia opposes uranium mining because it is the only real income for the state and, although its environmental minister is against uranium mining, the same can be said about the Northern Territory.

**Hon Simon O'Brien:** They grow cannabis there! You got your uranium policy from there as well.

**Hon JON FORD:** The other reason is the significant waste management problems in South Australia. The waste management arguments that I hear in this chamber and in the media focus on nuclear waste. Everybody is missing the point about tailings waste: in fact, the whole country has missed the point. It has been only in recent years that governments—in dealing with the fairly significant tailings issues—have realised the problem that they now have. Some governments have been successful, but now they have large quantities of waste in areas where uranium mining should never have been allowed because of the tailings waste issues.

Governments have approved uranium mines without any thought to the ongoing cost to the taxpayer base of maintaining these mines. An article in *The Australian* of Tuesday, 18 November reads —

The Australian Uranium Association estimates uranium production in the west could generate an extra \$460 million in state revenue, including \$200 million in royalties, over the next 20 years.

We all know that that is not what will be produced, and that not all of that \$200 million in royalties will come to Western Australia. In any case, it is not a very great amount of money to achieve over 20 years; in fact, in mining terms, it is quite a poor return. If we assume a return of \$660 million over 20 years, it represents only \$31 million per annum. The Department of Industry and Resources' annual report for 2007-08 discloses that the administrative income to the state from royalties includes close to \$52 million from petroleum resources; \$1.13 billion from iron ore; \$39 million from diamonds; and, nearly \$80 million for alumina resources. Only mineral sands fall under the uranium reporting line and we know how minor an operation the mining of mineral sands is—interestingly enough, it also involves isotopes. Uranium does not represent a lot of money to the state, but it does expose the state to a huge and costly legacy; that is, the management of waste over time. The unfortunate fact is that nobody really knows how much that legacy will be—it is based on the rule of thumb. For a relatively small income, this government will expose the state to a long and costly waste legacy. Why would the state government do that? Why would it announce that it will allow uranium mining to go ahead without providing the people of Western Australia with a proper cost analysis? The analogy I draw is to the previously unsuccessful Liberal Party election campaign about a canal, when the costings and the cost benefit were rejected by the people of Western Australia. I agree with my colleagues; we need to have a full-blown debate in which this can be talked about at length, because 10 minutes for each speaker is very unsatisfactory.

I refer to a paper written for the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency in Victoria. It was written by Philip Crouch, Richard S. O'Brien and Geoffrey A. Williams—to give the authors their due—and is called “Rehabilitation of Uranium Mine Waste Sites in Australia”. It deals with most mine sites. It is a nine-page article and I commend it to everybody. It is a very useful article to read. To give members an idea of what this entails —

The main historical operation in SA was at **Radium Hill** in a remote, arid area in the east of the State. It operated from 1954 to 1961 ...

The wastes that remain at Radium Hill are some 800,000 t of heavy media tailings.

The article refers to the waste being contained in a very unsatisfactory area that is covered with local clay soil that is, unfortunately, subject to flooding at extreme high tides. I continue —

No significant rehabilitation work was carried out until the 1980's, when the tailings were covered by about 1.5 m thickness of granulated smelter slag ... Subsequently a large quantity of slag was placed on the seaward side of the tailings dams, effectively eliminating the risk of flooding (under current conditions).

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Additional work needs to be done. It does not say who is paying for that work to be done, but it does say that for the Ranger project that the government has secured —

... some A\$31 million in a trust fund administered by the Commonwealth Government; an amount which covers all existing liabilities.

However, there is nothing mentioned that will cover the ongoing liability of maintaining the slag waste sites. That \$31 million is for existing liabilities. The report then turns to the Olympic Dam site —

Approaches to decommissioning and rehabilitation being considered include the implementation of long-term closure measures, necessitating sufficient expenditure to relinquish the lease and leave the community no on-going liability —

From my perspective, this is the nub of the issue —

(a “sustainable” solution that does not bequeath a problem to future generations), or to allow for indefinite on-going maintenance. The difficulty with the latter is how to ensure that any future maintenance organisation, and its funding, could endure for as long as maintenance is reasonably required.

It does not take much research to understand that the commonwealth has not promulgated a risk management plan or a code for risk management and waste management practices. Here we are, debating opening new mines when the commonwealth does not have its act together and South Australia, the successful uranium mining state, is now starting to deal with a legacy that its people will have to cop in a poor economy when the mining runs out and the tailings are left behind—the Northern Territory will be in the same position. Ultimately, the commonwealth will have to pay the price, and, ultimately, Western Australians will have to pay the price, and for what? For \$33 million a year on current estimated reserves in Western Australia. It is nonsense. This government should not be out there talking up uranium; it should be talking about how we can “de-bottleneck” existing reserves, how we can make sure the FMG operations stay viable in the ongoing environment and what assistance can be given to the junior players to ensure that current revenues are maintained. The government should not be wasting time on this matter. The amount of effort surrounding the totally inefficient mines approval process was disclosed in conversations between the minister and DOIR. The government intends to take resources from that process to deal with an issue that none of the commonwealth, South Australian or the Northern Territory governments has dealt with satisfactorily. That will leave a great legacy for the people of Western Australia and I am glad that the Labor Party will play no part in that process. In years to come, people will refer to the unfortunate time in 2008-09 when this Liberal government gave the go-ahead for uranium mining. We do not know what the cost is that will have to be borne by the state, but people will talk about the dollars required to manage groundwater problems and rid the state of uranium tailings. There is no financial justification for this government to do what it is now doing.

**HON PAUL LLEWELLYN (South West) [4.40 pm]:** If we absolutely needed to go down the nuclear power pathway, we could debate this motion with a clear conscience, but we do not have that need. The idea that the world needs to be wedded to a nuclear future is a total and utter fallacy. Nuclear is not the clean, green new deal. It is a technology of the past that has failed; it is a technology that has proved to be enormously expensive; it is a technology that has proved to be clumsy in the way in which it connects into the electricity grids; it is a technology that has proved to be a danger to the environment and to people; and it is a technology that has proved to be fundamentally unclean and unnecessary.

The only possible reason for Western Australia and Australia as a whole to be involved in uranium mining is to make a short-term grab for profits from uranium mining. That is the only logical answer to allowing uranium mining in this country. There are no technical, moral or intellectual reasons for allowing uranium mining other than to profit from the sale of a highly toxic and highly dubious product on a very unstable global market.

I am glad that Hon George Cash has returned to the chamber, because he missed my opening statement.

**Hon George Cash:** Please start again.

**Hon PAUL LLEWELLYN:** I will not do that, but Hon George Cash should have been here.

**The PRESIDENT:** Order! Hon Paul Llewellyn should know standing orders by now.

**Hon PAUL LLEWELLYN:** Thank you, Mr President.

The Liberal government comes down hard on drugs. It has a prohibition policy on drugs that has been adopted by society. Uranium and the nuclear industry are the hard drugs of mining and the energy industry. Therefore, we should say no to going down this completely blind alley. It is a blind alley from an energy point of view and it is a blind alley from an economics point of view. We should say yes to a genuinely clean, green energy future.

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An argument that the nuclear industry will save us from climate change cannot be put forward. I am left thinking that we have made an unprincipled decision to mine uranium. Next we will make an unprincipled decision to accept the waste and then we will make an unprincipled decision to become involved in the nuclear industry.

I would love to hear the National Party members in this place tell us which ports they would allow the yellowcake to be exported from.

**Hon Giz Watson:** Esperance.

**Hon PAUL LLEWELLYN:** Yes, Esperance. We should be accountable. I will ask members of the National Party through which ports they would allow the nuclear waste to come back into Australia and in which regional communities it would allow the waste to be dumped. This decision is the thin edge of the wedge.

The clean-up bill for the nuclear industry has been astronomical. In the United Kingdom it is in the order of £80 billion to £90 billion. If that money had been invested in wind energy, the entire British Isles could have been provided with that form of energy.

Debate lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.