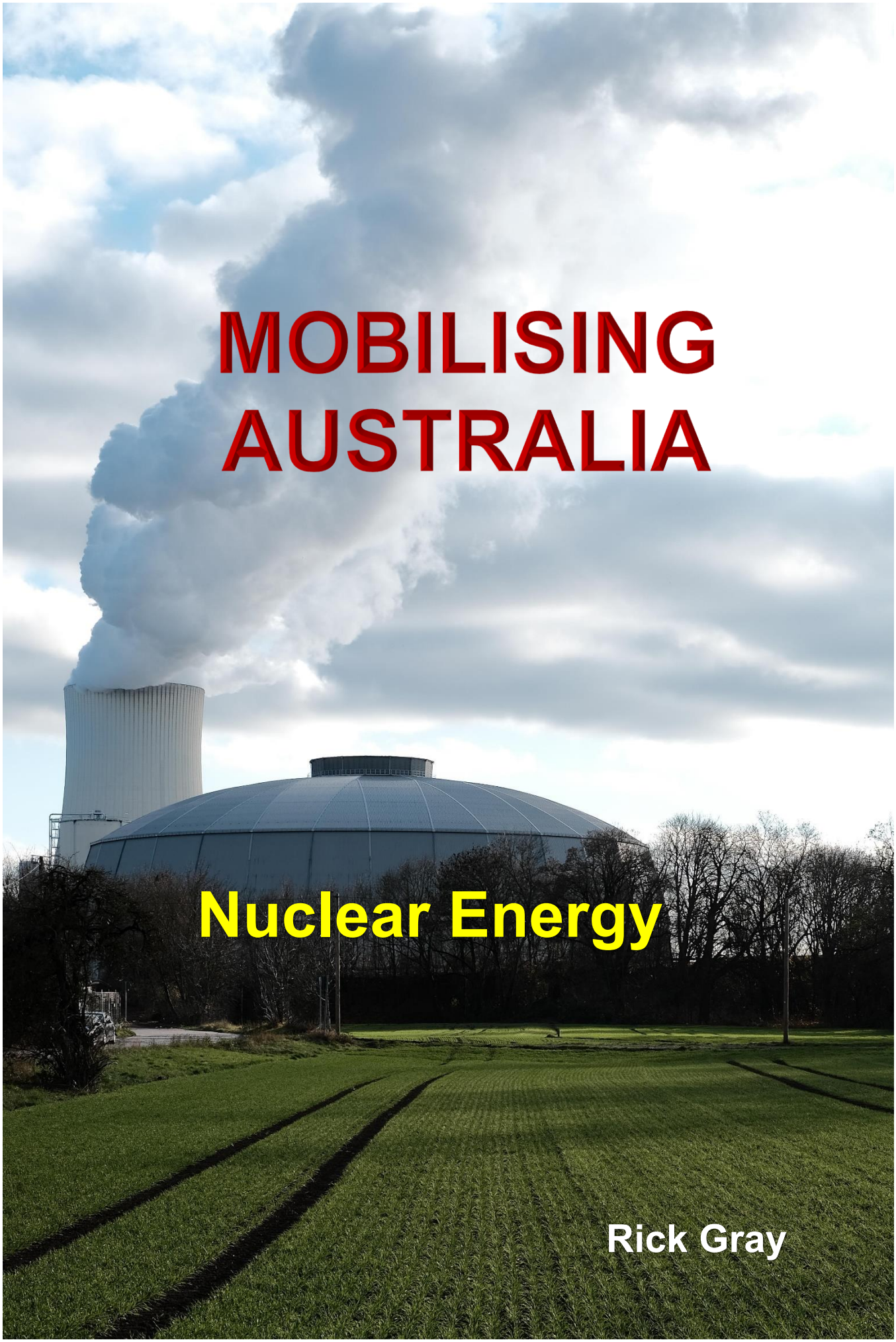
MOBILISING
AUSTRALIA
Nuclear Energy
Rick Gray

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NUCLEAR ENERGY

Photo: Nuclear Reactor

Nuclear power is the most reliable and lowest-cost source of non-carbon power. The rest of the world is accelerating the construction of nuclear power plants; however, Australia remains ideologically opposed and continues to demonise nuclear power, whilst being one of the world's largest exporters of uranium ore. Hypocrisy, thou art, Australia!

Australia's geographic neighbours are aggressively pursuing nuclear power, with Korea, Japan, India, and China already well established and increasing their reliance. In addition, Singapore, the Philippines, and Vietnam are close to committing to nuclear power. Australia will be the only developed country in the region without a nuclear industry and risks missing out on associated technological development, skills and training, and other industrial opportunities.

The nuclear renaissance bodes well for the uranium mining industry, as Australia holds about a third of the world's uranium deposits and is a major exporter of uranium ore. There is also a major opportunity for Australia to move beyond exporting uranium ore and develop an enrichment facility to supply the US and other countries with enriched uranium. However, this is illegal in Australia at present.

Australia must develop a civil nuclear industry - to support the AUKUS nuclear submarine fleet it has committed to building.

Data

Global:

- Nuclear power supplies about 10% of global electricity in 2026.
- In 2025, 416 nuclear reactors are operating in 38 countries, a further 66 plants are under construction, and 87 are planned (IAEA, 2025).
- China has 57 reactors in operation, another 29 under construction, and plans to build at least 64 more by 2035 (IAEA, 2025).

- At COP28 in Dubai, 22 countries pledged to triple nuclear capacity by 2050. Australia refused to endorse the initiative.
- The US and the UK are now aggressively pushing ahead with collaborative development of Small Modular Reactors as a major component of their commitment to meeting their nations' future power requirements.

Australia:

- Australia has 28% of global known recoverable uranium, but produces less than 10% of global supply.
- Australia is the only G20 country to maintain a nuclear ban, whilst exporting uranium ore.
- Australia accepts the need for nuclear-powered submarines but not for nuclear power generation.
- Renewables alone cannot achieve the net-zero target, as coal and gas must be retained to provide backup base-load power. If net zero is to be achieved without coal and gas, then nuclear is the only option.
- Australian uranium ore exports were about $700 million in 2025 - about 0.2% of total export income (GSA, 2024).

The Nuclear Debate

Nuclear energy in Australia is at a turning point. The long-standing federal ban is being dismantled, a conditional licensing regime has been introduced, and nuclear power has re-entered the national energy debate, but Australia remains many years away from any operational reactor.

Legislation

1998–1999: Federal prohibitions established.

- 1998: Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Act (ARPNS Act).
- 1999: Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (EPBC Act).

2000s–2010s: Reviews and inquiries, no legislative change.

- 2006: Uranium Mining Expansion (State Level).
- 2007: Switkowski Review (Howard Government).
- 2014–2016: South Australian Nuclear Fuel Cycle Royal Commission.
- 2019: Parliamentary Inquiry into Nuclear Energy.

2022: AUKUS shifts capability landscape.

2026: Federal prohibitions repealed.

- Nuclear Activities Licensing Scheme (NALS) established, allowing licensing of pilot SMRs, research reactors, and industrial nuclear applications.
- Does not enable full commercial nuclear deployment.

Post-2026: Commercial nuclear power still impossible due to state bans.

In 2026, the Labor government maintains its commitment to 82% renewable electricity by 2030 and excludes nuclear from the Integrated System Plan. It argues that nuclear

is too slow, too costly, and misaligned with near-term emissions targets. The AUKUS decision to acquire nuclear-powered submarines will shift public attitudes by normalising nuclear capability and workforce development.

Federal prohibitions are being lifted, but state bans remain. Any commercial reactor requires coordinated legislative change across multiple parliaments. Optimistic modelling places the first reactor no earlier than 2036–2040.

Strategic Implications

- Nuclear offers energy security with long-duration, dispatchable, low-carbon power — but only in the 2040s under current trajectories.
- AUKUS will be the catalyst to develop industrial capability. A civil nuclear industry is necessary to support nuclear submarines.
- Nuclear is strategically relevant but not operationally viable before the late 2030s.

Safety

Modern nuclear reactors are extremely safe, with the lowest fatality rate of any major energy source, robust passive safety systems, strict international oversight, and a strong global operating record. Nuclear power has:

- The lowest fatalities per unit of electricity generated of any major energy source (lower than coal, oil, gas, hydro, and comparable to wind/solar).
- Extremely low accident frequency, with only three major historical events over 70+ years. These events shaped today's safety standards.
    - Three Mile Island (1979) - no deaths.
    - Chornobyl (1986) - design and governance failure.
    - Fukushima (2011) - tsunami-driven external event.
- No deaths from commercial nuclear power in OECD countries for 40+ years.
- Nuclear workers receive less radiation annually than airline pilots or medical imaging staff.
- Public exposure near nuclear plants is far below natural background radiation.
- Waste volume is small: all Australian nuclear medicine waste fits in one building.
- High-level waste is stored in engineered facilities; long-term geological repositories are operating (Finland) or under construction (Sweden, France).

Cost

The cost of developing nuclear power is high and is often raised as a barrier to adopting the technology.

Large Gigawatt-Scale Reactors are the standard 1,000–1,600 MW reactors used in the US, France, China, and Korea. The capital cost range is:

- **US:** USD $6,000–$10,000 per kW. A 1,100 MW reactor costs $7–11 billion.
- **Europe**: USD $10,000–$12,000 per kW.
- **China/Korea:** USD $3,000–$5,000 per kW. Typically, $3–5 billion per reactor.

- **Total System Cost** (including grid, financing, waste, decommissioning): USD $12–20 billion. Financing often doubles the overnight cost. Decommissioning: **$1–2 billion** per reactor. Waste management: small share of total cost (<5%).

Small Modular Reactors (SMRs) are 50–470 MW units, still mostly pre-commercial. SMRs are not cheaper per kW than large reactors. Their advantages are modularity, lower upfront costs, and shorter build times.

Australia has no nuclear supply chain, no trained workforce, and no regulatory framework for commercial reactors. This means costs would be at the high end of global ranges.

Construction times

A modern nuclear power plant typically takes 8–15 years from decision to operation. The actual construction time (from first concrete to grid connection) is usually 5–10 years, depending on the country, design, and supply chain maturity. A nuclear project has four major phases:

- **Policy, legislation, site selection (2–5 years).** This includes the regulatory framework, environmental approvals, community consultation, grid planning and financing structure. Countries with existing nuclear industries complete this faster; first-of-a-kind nations (like Australia) take longer.
- **Licensing and design finalisation (2–3 years).** This includes the safety case, reactor design certification, procurement contracts and workforce mobilisation.
- **Construction (5–10 years).** This is the "first concrete to fuel load" period.
- **Commissioning and testing (1–2 years).** This includes fuel loading, testing, grid synchronisation and ramp-up to full power.

Actual construction times around the globe vary according to regulatory environments and experience**.**

- South Korea (APR-1400): 4–6 years
- China (Hualong-1, CPR-1000): 5–7 years
- UAE (Barakah): 6–7 years
- US (Vogtle-3/4): 10–14 years
- France (Flamanville-3): 12–15 years
- Finland (Olkiluoto-3): 12–16 years

Australia would be starting from scratch. There is no political will, no regulatory base, no trained workforce, no supply chain, and no licensed sites. This means:

- Political decision, policy + regulatory setup: 5–7 years
- Licensing + design: 3–4 years
- Construction: (first-of-a-kind penalty) 8–12 years
- Commissioning: 1–2 years

Total realistic timeline: 17–25 years from decision to operation for Australia's first reactor. If there is bipartisan agreement, a national sense of urgency, and no bureaucratic red, green, or black tape resistance, then the timeline could be dramatically slashed. It would be possible to bring a project timeline to about **10 years.**

Nuclear power has been described as an expensive way to make cheap electricity – and renewable energy as a cheap way to make expensive electricity.

Uranium mining

Australia's uranium mines are concentrated in SA, with historic or inactive sites in the NT and WA. The only currently operating mines in 2026 are Olympic Dam, Four Mile, and Honeymoon, all in SA. Operating mines are:

- Olympic Dam: Roxby Downs, SA. An underground mine, it is the world's largest known uranium orebody; uranium is a by-product of copper.
- Four Mile: Beverley, SA. One of Australia's biggest ISR uranium operations.
- Honeymoon: North-East SA. Returned from care-and-maintenance; now Australia's third active uranium producer.

Rum Jungle was Australia's first uranium mine, supplying Cold War nuclear programs, and is now one of the nation's most expensive and instructive environmental rehabilitation projects.

There are a number of major advanced projects that are not yet operating. These are significant deposits with potential future development located in the NT and WA.

Restraints on Uranium Mining

Australia does not ban uranium mining federally, but several Commonwealth laws impose strict constraints. Uranium mining in Australia is constrained by federal nuclear-action laws, state-level bans, Indigenous land rights, strict environmental regulation, and international safeguards that limit market access.

Most of the constraints are ideologically motivated and driven by perceived electoral advantages, particularly the Labor Party and the Greens. The major legislative barriers are:

- Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999 (EPBC Act)
- Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency (ARPANSA)
- Safeguards under IAEA & Australian Safeguards and Non-Proliferation Office (ASNO)
- The Native Title Act 1993.
- Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976

Indigenous land rights and cultural heritage

This is one of the strongest practical constraints. The Native Title Act 1993 and the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976 give Traditional Owners veto power over mining on certain lands. The proposed Jabiluka and Koongarra projects in the NT are prime examples. They are world-class deposits that remain undeveloped due to opposition from Traditional Owners. Cultural heritage protections (state and federal) add further constraints.

Environmental & Water-Use

Uranium mining faces greater scrutiny than other minerals. This includes risks of groundwater contamination, tailings management requirements, and strict rehabilitation obligations. Projects near national parks or sensitive ecosystems face near-insurmountable approval barriers.

Export Market & International Safeguards

Even if mined, uranium can only be exported under bilateral nuclear cooperation agreements, IAEA safeguards and ASNO tracking and reporting requirements. This limits customers and increases compliance costs.

Mining Potential

Australia's uranium export potential far exceeds current revenue (about $700 million per year). If Australia developed its major undeveloped deposits and expanded production, export earnings could rise to $3–5 billion per year, and under a global nuclear-expansion scenario, to $6–9 billion per year.

If Australia simply expands current operations and restarts paused projects, near-term export revenue potential at current uranium prices is $1-2 billion per year.

In the medium term, if the WA and NT deposits currently under consideration are developed, export potential becomes significant, at about $3–4 billion per year.

In the longer term, global uranium demand could double by 2050. Prices could rise significantly, and Australia's resource base positions it as the Saudi Arabia of uranium. If Australia mined at Kazakhstan-scale output (~20,000 tonnes per year), long-term export revenue potential would surge to $6–9 billion per year. This is 10-15 times current revenue.

Key constraints on achieving this potential are ideological and political. They are:

- State policy bans (QLD) and stalled approvals (WA, NT).
- Indigenous land rights.
- Environmental approvals under EPBC Act.
- Market access limited to countries with safeguards agreements.
- Political sensitivity around nuclear issues.

Beyond uranium mining

Nuclear waste storage

Australia is already committed to storing all domestic radioactive waste, including future AUKUS submarine waste, within Australia. This is explicit in the AUKUS framework. The Australian Radioactive Waste Agency (ARWA) is the national authority responsible for developing long-term disposal pathways for Australia's radioactive waste. Australia is not debating whether to store nuclear waste; it is debating where and how.

Existing Waste Storage facilities demonstrate proven capability for low-level waste (LLW) disposal, and emerging capability for intermediate-level waste (ILW) storage.

There is no current capability for high-level waste (HLW) or spent fuel disposal. The facilities are located at:

- Sandy Ridge LLW repository (WA): This is a commercial facility using kaolin clay and granite geology.
- Mt Walton East Intractable Waste Facility (WA): LLW disposal since 1992.
- ANSTO interim ILW storage (Lucas Heights) until 2029.

Australia has excellent geological prospects for long-term nuclear waste isolation in highly suitable formations at arid inland basins with extremely low water tables and salt formations, if pragmatic politics supported it. The constraints to the expansion of long-term storage are not geographic or geological but ideological and political.

When Australia identifies an acceptable location for long-term waste, it must also consider accepting international nuclear waste. Storing international waste would represent a major revenue stream for Australia. Logically, if there are suitable sites for the long-term storage of our own waste, they would also be suitable for international waste.

Australia will inevitably adopt nuclear power and is trending towards political acceptance of the prospect. It must also consider the economics of international nuclear waste storage. There is potential for a major new industry for Australia and a revenue stream that would likely match the value of uranium ore exports.

Enrichment

Should Australia opt to process its own uranium ore into products suitable for use in a nuclear reactor, then enrichment is the industrial process of increasing the proportion of the fissile isotope U-235 in natural uranium so it can be used as nuclear reactor fuel or, at very high levels, in weapons.

Australia has no uranium enrichment plants and no operational nuclear fuel-cycle industry beyond mining and milling. Commonwealth and state laws currently ban enrichment and most nuclear fuel-cycle activities. Domestic enrichment would reduce dependence on foreign suppliers and geopolitical risk. It would build industrial capability to support civil reactors and to support AUKUS submarines.

Australia should prepare for the option of uranium enrichment, but only pursue actual facilities if a future decision commits to nuclear power and a broader fuel-cycle strategy.

Reprocessing

If Australia had a reactor fleet, reprocessing would be an extension of the uranium cycle. It is the chemical process that takes spent nuclear fuel from a reactor and separates its usable materials (uranium and plutonium) from the high-level radioactive waste. It is one of the most sensitive and technically complex steps in the nuclear fuel cycle. It has the advantage of reducing long-term waste volume by up to 75%.

The nuclear economic hub

A nuclear industry would be a key element in developing the Australian industrial base. It would provide Australia with energy security, industrial capability, high-value jobs, export growth, and strategic autonomy. It aligns with AUKUS and strengthens sovereign resilience. It is one of the few sectors that simultaneously advances economic, industrial, scientific, and national-security objectives.

A key driver for the nuclear sector is the AUKUS agreement, which will require a domestic nuclear infrastructure to provide technical and scientific support, skilled labour, training facilities and extensive logistics organisations. Most of this must come from the private sector and will require extensive bilateral partnership arrangements to foster long-term support. Support bases and facilities to provide maintenance, logistics, and resupply for AUKUS partner submarines are already under development.

The nuclear power industry is the foundation of AUKUS's domestic backup. The synergy between the two sectors is apparent and will lay the foundation for the nation's industrial vision and economic growth. Some of the economic benefits would be:

- Energy security and low-emissions baseload power.
- Cheap power for heavy industries.
- Reduces fuel supply chain vulnerabilities.
- Provides employment for a high-tech skills base.
- Forces capability growth in advanced engineering and manufacturing, defence, medical, mining, aerospace and ship building sectors.
- Enables value-adding to uranium mining and exports.
- Accelerates scientific, technological and medical research sectors.
- Boosts regional development.
- Drives infrastructure development and investment opportunities.
- Strengthens Australia’s diplomatic and economic influence.

The economic potential of the Australian uranium sector is significant. Current export value is about $0.7 billion per year. With policy reform and the development of known major deposits in WA and the NT, export earnings could rise to $3–5 billion per year, and under a global nuclear expansion scenario, to $6–9 billion per year. Coupled with the development of a domestic nuclear power industry, reprocessing and international storage capabilities, and the AUKUS project, revenue from the nuclear industry could reach $20+ billion per year.

The only limiting factor is the national will to accept the challenge.

Case Study: France

The 1970s oil crisis was a pivotal moment in France's energy history. Triggered by geopolitical tensions in the Middle East, the oil shock led to a fourfold increase in France's oil bill within two years (1972-74). The crisis exposed France's vulnerability to external energy shocks. The French Government recognised the need for energy security, which became the driver for nuclear power.

Since the mid-1980s, nuclear power has been France's largest source of electricity. In 2025, about 70% of electricity is generated by nuclear power, the highest share in the world.

Today, it has 57 operating reactors and has committed to building 6 new reactors, with a further 8 under consideration. It has also shut down 14 reactors over the years, either because technology has been upgraded or for safety reasons.

Nuclear power is currently France's third-largest industrial sector. In addition, France has significant investment in nuclear propulsion for naval surface vessels and submarines, as well as in nuclear weapons.

The sector employs 200,000 skilled workers across 2,600 companies. The economic hub it fosters supports 400,000 jobs and contributes $12 billion annually. It is estimated to save about $20 billion annually in imported fossil fuels, particularly oil. France has been very active in developing nuclear technology and reactors, and nuclear technology is now one of France's major exports. About 17% of France's electricity is generated from reprocessing nuclear fuel.

France is the world's largest net exporter of electricity, thanks to its very low generation costs. It earns considerable income from electricity exports to the EU, particularly to Spain, Portugal, the UK, and Germany, all of which have invested heavily in renewable power that has not proven sufficient to provide reliable power 24/7 for their own nations.

Many other countries are now following France's example. Australia should take note.

Case Study: A Latrobe Valley Reactor

For Victoria, the Latrobe Valley is probably the best site for a nuclear power reactor. It could be co-located with existing brown-coal baseload facilities and could deliver long-duration, zero-emissions baseload power for Victoria. The site would use existing transmission infrastructure, industrial zoning, and a skilled energy workforce, positioning the Valley as Australia's first nuclear deployment zone.

The strategic rationale is that it would replace coal generation as existing capacity retires: Hazelwood (closed 2017), Yallourn (closing 2028), and Loy Yang A/B due for retirement in the 20240s. If renewable energy becomes an economic option, it would still require long-duration backup beyond batteries and gas.

Concept design features are:

- **Location: Latrobe Valley Victoria**
  - Existing 500 kV transmission infrastructure.
  - Industrial zoning and community familiarity with energy assets.
  - Cooling water access.
  - Known geotechnical conditions.
  - Rail and road logistics already established.
- **Technology:** A large reactor (1-1.6GW).
- **Timeline:**
  - Feasibility (2–3 years): Studies, grid modelling, planning.
  - Approvals (3–5 years): Legislation, vendor selection.
  - Construction (5–10 years): 3,000–6,000 jobs at peak.
  - Operations (60+ years): 600-1,000 long-term jobs, stable baseload supply.
- **Risks & Constraints**
  - High upfront capital cost; requires federal–state partnership.
  - Waste management must align with national strategy.
- **Government Actions**
  - Feasibility Studies.
  - Regulatory pathway.
  - Transition Taskforce.
  - Strategic partners.

The project would fit perfectly into a long-term reindustrialisation vision for the nation and for Victoria. Nuclear power is inevitable for Australia. The nation is starting from a long way behind the many nations now benefiting from nuclear power and the industrial hub it cultivates.

It is beyond time that we make a start.

Case Study: Lucas Heights Reactor

Photo: Lucas Heights Reactor.

Australia's only nuclear reactor opened in 1958 at Lucas Heights, about 40km south of Sydney's CBD. With nuclear energy production banned, what is it used for? The Lucas Heights reactor was originally built as a research laboratory, testing different materials for a future nuclear power program. It has evolved into a research facility crucial to the medical community.

Lucas Heights is a radioactive medicine factory that uses its OPAL (Open-pool Australian Lightwater) nuclear reactor to crash atoms into uranium plates to produce different substances. This includes vials of radioactive Molybdenum-99, which decays to form Technetium-99m. The product can be used as a radioactive dye, with doctors injecting it to monitor organs such as the heart, kidney, lungs, and brain. It is key to diagnosing cancers. In addition to medical dyes, it is a hub for nuclear science and technology.

A 2018 independent report found that, due to the site's age, it failed to meet modern nuclear safety standards, and it is now to be replaced with a new facility expected to be operational by the mid-2030s.

In 1997, a Howard-led government proposed building a new reactor at the site to produce nuclear medicine. The site was estimated to cost roughly $300 million. To pass the legislation, the Coalition agreed to a Greens amendment to the National Radiation and Nuclear Safety Act in 1998, which specified no more nuclear facilities could be built in Australia. Some states, including Queensland and NSW, have since legislated their own nuclear bans.

Conclusions

Nuclear power is Australia's future. Under AUKUS, nuclear submarines are now in planning, and the conversation has begun about nuclear energy for electricity. The expansion of uranium mining is also under review, driven by economic imperatives.

In a renewables world, if emissions reductions are the primary criterion for a power system, nuclear energy is the best option. It would provide reliable, long-life, low-emissions baseload power with a minimal land footprint. It would also capitalise on Australia's abundant uranium resources. Nuclear is slow to start, but once built, it provides 60+ years of firm, low-emissions power. The capital costs are high; however, if regulatory barriers are removed and proven technology and construction techniques are adopted, a long lifespan and high reliability can be achieved.

Australia has 28% of the world's known uranium reserves and earns roughly $700 million per year from uranium exports, which account for about 0.2% of national export revenue. Export revenue is smaller than its potential because:

- Only three mines operate (Olympic Dam, Four Mile, Honeymoon).
- Olympic Dam treats uranium as a by-product of copper.
- NT and WA deposits are undeveloped due to land rights, environmental approvals, and state policy constraints.
- Export markets are limited to countries with IAEA-compliant bilateral safeguards.
- Uranium mining is politically contentious, and state governments change policy frequently based upon no more than the prevailing political winds.
- Public opposition and red, green, and black tape have developed into art forms carefully orchestrated to delay or block projects.
- Anti-nuclear sentiment is historically strong, though shifting due to net-zero debates.

Australia's uranium export potential is 5-10 times current levels. With policy reform and the development of major deposits in WA and the NT, export earnings could rise from $0.7 billion to $3-5 billion per year, and under a global nuclear expansion scenario, to $6-9 billion per year.

Australia is already committed to storing all domestic radioactive waste, including future AUKUS submarine waste, within its borders. Beyond this, there is significant potential for highly lucrative international waste storage in Australia. The constraints to such a scenario are not geographic or geological but ideological and political, reflected in community and activist opposition, indigenous land rights, and state prohibitions on nuclear facilities. Beyond mining, uranium enrichment and reprocessing of nuclear waste are the natural progressions.

The potential of a nuclear economic hub is enormous. A nuclear economic sector is one of the few national projects that could simultaneously strengthen energy security, industrial capability, scientific leadership, export potential, and national defence resilience. Nuclear power plants would foster high-skill, high-income, long-term jobs in the regions where existing coal-fired plants are located. It would prove to be a nation-

building industry with multi-decade strategic benefits and promises to be a cornerstone of the industrial revival.

Nuclear energy is a sovereign capability that Australia cannot afford to ignore. All it would take is the political will to grasp the challenge.

Proposals

Government: The vision for the nuclear industry over the next 10 years is to:

- Agree a bipartisan approach on a nuclear future.
- Create a 10-year plan for the nuclear sector.
- Remove all legislative barriers to nuclear energy and uranium mining.
- Minimise the red, green, and black tape barriers to nuclear development.
- Establish a government department to foster the sector.
- Set taxation and policy to incentivise the sector.
- Seek international strategic partnerships for development.

Mining:

- Fast-track the expansion of existing mines and new projects.
- Australian-owned companies to be prioritised.

Strategic Industry:

- The nuclear sector to be declared a Strategic Industry, and national resources mobilised to support it.
- Enact policies, financial and tax incentives, to support the industry.

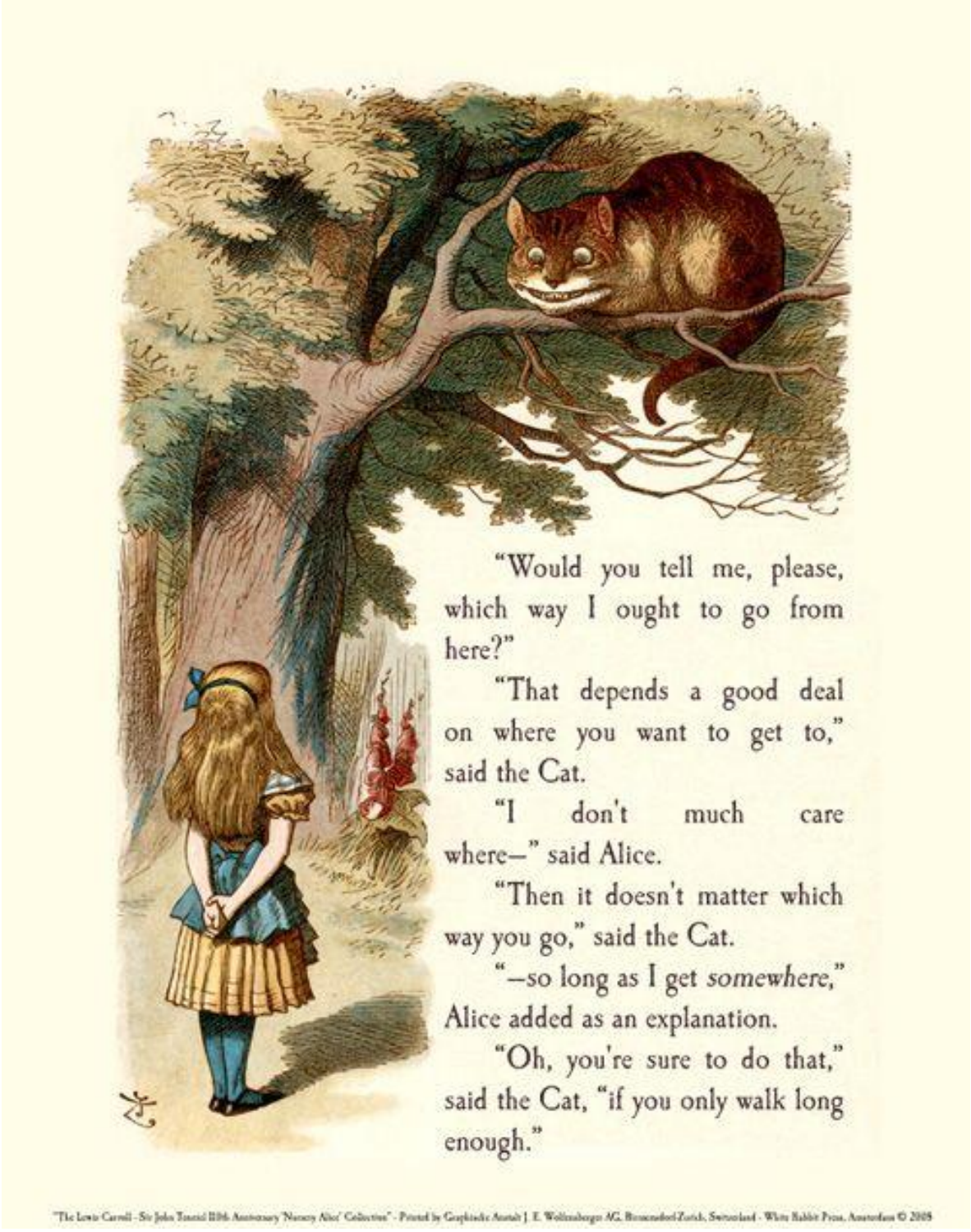
Strategic Partnerships: Seek collaborative arrangements through AUKUS or QUAD, or with other allies to develop the sector.

Beyond mining:

- Investigate and decide upon a location for Australian nuclear waste.
- Examine the economic potential for the storage of international waste.
- Plan for an extension of the nuclear cycle beyond mining to include uranium enrichment and reprocessing in due course.

THE LAST WORD

The last word belongs to Lewis Carroll and his “Alice in Wonderland” - Alice is lost in the forest, meets the Cheshire Cat and asks for directions. It is a perfect analogy for Australia’s present lack of a national vision, strategic planning and purposeful direction. We are indeed at a crossroads in Australian history.



The only difference between where we are today and what could have been - or what is possible in the future - is a question of national will.

Tomorrows History Starts today.

Photo Credits

Front Cover: Nuclear Reactor
The Final Word, Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland.
France: Nuclear Reactor
Lucas Heights Nuclear Reactor

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