

Submission to Senate Inquiry, National Radioactive Waste Management Bill 2010

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For a brief period ending in the 1970s the Australian Army despatched out of date radioactive calibration sources from Bandiana, Victoria, to a private company in Melbourne. The radioactive sources were transported in sealed, shielded containers in the cargo area of a modified Ford Falcon utility. The Falcon was modified by the attachment of a small brass plate to its tail gate. This plate was inscribed with a warning that the vehicle was carrying a radioactive source. After emergency services had been advised, the Falcon would set off, unescorted, travelling to Melbourne along the Hume Highway. That then most dangerous of roads. The Ford Falcon in question had a charmed run. Nothing ever went wrong. The officer driving it wasn't even Irish.

Hopefully the luck will hold in regard to the transport of low level radioactive waste as it traverses the great distance **to The Waste Dump in the Apparently Least Significant Electorate in the Land** from *Everywhere Else with more actual access to Equity*. In fact more should be done. Much more, starting with listening the local objectors to the dump site proposal. Local democracy is at stake for the sake of nuclear dictates. Giving it to isolated and Aboriginal locals to favour political survival in more "important" electorates *is gutless in the extreme*.

Political expediency, not reality, not Australia's best interests, is determining this course of action. If government can't survive a basic nuclear issue such as this without turning against the wishes of distant, isolated communities, what does that say about the nature of the technology in question? A course of action which determines that radioactive waste will have to travel distances greater than that traversed by Burke and Wills on their epic fatal journey. Such a decision places the needs of politicians at the ballot box ahead of the national interest. Nationally regulated dumps should be located near point of waste creation. If that is impossible, then the technology should be viewed as unsustainable as it cannot be serviced. And the debate should be framed within those stakes. Then see what the *National* electorate decides.

It was in the context of distance that I first heard suitably trained senior soldiers discuss the need for a qualified, regulated, easy to reach facility for the storage of radioactive waste. That a Nationally regulated and operated waste facility was sorely needed to overcome the risks in travelling miles with a waste source in the ute. Mr Fergusson is talking the distance traversed from everywhere else to Muckaty in the NT.

We have not achieved much since 1971. Gone backwards big time.

Why should this be, when in my experience the concern among highly trained officers consisted of:

A. The danger of transporting radioactive waste along public transport routes for long distances.

B. The lack of surety of uniform training and lack of central regulatory oversight at facilities which either re-used or stored the substances. The facilities existed ad hoc, and were, in the example cited, privately operated, and widely dispersed. At the time, the public generally did not know such facilities existed.

C. The lack of uniformly secure storage facilities in regard to theft, fire, flood etc.

D. The chance that the waste would be forgotten about. People from all walks of life might over the years stumble across poorly stored waste and not recognise it for what it was and suffer the consequences, initially, in ignorance. Health Physics publications widely report the litany of such accidents.

Commonwealth Parliamentary Hansard records over the years various events in relation to radioactive “waste” which had the potential to cause harm to the health of innocent people. Relevant events occurred because of radioactive contamination and poor storage methods. Examples of Hansard entries include:

The backyards of some houses adjacent to the old Lucas Heights reactor were found to be contaminated with radioactive effluent from the reactor. The soil was removed. At first the soil was housed in drums and stored within the secure grounds of the reactor complex at Lucas Heights. More recently, that waste was transported by semi trailer into purpose built storage at Woomera. It is stored a little distance from the Missile range. This then is one of the first cases of the “Not In My Backyard (NIMBY) syndrome”.

When one reads Hansard in relation to these matters, one is struck by how easily politicians of the major parties mock their constituents. NIMBY became a term of abuse used by politicians against voters who objected to the spread of nuclear activity into their living space. The politicians forget that this particular case actually did consist literally of peoples’ backyards made unfit by radioactive contamination! Not only did the home owners not want the soil in their backyards, nobody else did either. In fact the contamination of the backyards was illegal. It was the Federal Government which said “Not in those Backyards.” Thus Federal Regulators, including relevant Ministers, are in fact the first NIMBYS. And reasonably so. Cheaper to move the dirt than the people. I guess. NIMBY is a term used by some politicians out of ignorance. Ignorance and denial that anything can go wrong. As the Backyards in the Barrels Case attests to, it can and does go wrong. This precedent by Federal politicians shows that they were the first NIMBYS. It seems strange then politicians should abuse voters who happen to also be NIMBYS.

Federal Hansard also records how people in a rural area of Queensland became “NIMBYS” when the establishment of the National Low Level Radioactive Waste Repository was mooted for their living and farming space by the Federal Government. In the face of determined opposition, Government decision makers retreated further down the coast. At one stage, a military firing range environment was mooted for the dump in Victoria or NSW. Apparently high ranking military people became NIMBYS

for the sake of their subordinates who would have to use the range. The idea fell through. Low level radioactive waste is safe isn't it after all? Apparently not. Not when the "emitters" have the chance to become "Internal Emitters".

If the dwellers of the coastal strip (including me), busy as they are with all their economic activity, fear for their health, the value of their houses and the reputation of their produce on the local and world markets, where do we put the low level waste? Move it to where there aren't many votes to lose, move it to where there is less economic activity, move it to where the local people don't have much of a voice in national affairs. This is beginning to sound very much like the rationale of people such as Lord Penney or Prof Titterton isn't it? Can't do it near anywhere deemed "valuable" or "worthwhile". Let's go somewhere out of sight, isolated. Where the inhabitants are relatively and easily kept separate from everyone else. Easier to intervene and control them. Colour it how you will. This current Federal government and every previous one has been and is gutless. It's not safe to place the dump among the relatively wealthy and powerful. Not safe at election time. The government might not survive if a half way rational approach is taken. Easy answer instead: Let's give it to the least powerful, the most isolated, the least resourced. I am ashamed of these Australian governments and their actions. The actions are discriminatory, unsafe and inefficient.

Of course State authorities have much to answer for. Federal Hansard also records the storage of radioactive waste in the basement offices of a building in Melbourne. The waste was stored in paint tins. Office workers sat at their desks and worked in an environment shared with a number of these paint tins.

Somewhere, off site, someone knew what was in the tins. There was a story of discovery. A pregnant woman was working near some of these tins, a number of which had loose, ill fitting lids. There was a complaint. Impacts on employment. Unknown health effects (as usual). All perfectly safe in theory. Or not.

What if there had been a flood or a fire and nobody was told?
What if the workers in those offices had inhaled the dust of the stuff? Did they or didn't they? Who knows? Who cares?

The IAEA reports on radiation accidents and ignorance is generally the cause. Accidents in any field are routine. The false assumption is that under all circumstances a pile of radioactive matter is safe. It has to be made safe and kept safe. It's not naturally in an unqualified setting "safe" in any sense. "Low Level" is a label. It does not of itself, as a term, convey anything much about safety. In some inappropriate circumstances the material for a single adult "barium meal" (an innocuous routine medical diagnostic method) is decidedly unsafe. For example, where will out of date barium doses be stored? Where is such material stored now?

What is the comparative socio-economic and racial make up of the population adjacent to the latest dump site proposal relative to the first sites chosen? I suspect the latest proposed site is less wealthy than the early sites proposed on the Eastern seaboard. I suspect that the current site has a lower proportion of white voters. A higher proportion of Aboriginal Australian voters.

Successive Federal governments have agreed with local voters and have ceased and desisted with EVERY OTHER previously proposed waste dump site. (The last proposed site proposed by Howard, socio-economically similar to the Fergusson Solution, was halted via legal decision.)

Marie Curie is a bit long in the tooth by now. So how come this issue wasn't solved at the time the Rum Jungle mine was opened? Are politicians short sighted?

History contradicts most of the things Mr Fergusson has recently said on the issue of radioactivity. Having spent a few years extracting substances from a form of uranium ore, Marie Curie discovered polonium and radium. Radium became the first tool of nuclear medicine. Its use as a cancer treatment in the form of removable radium needles commenced, at the suggestion of Alexander Graham Bell, around the year 1908. If this treatment gains a resurgence in use, (As seems very likely) where are the spent needles going to go? Marie Curie died prematurely of leukaemia. Would such used radium needles be deemed "low level" waste?

In summary, the rules of conventional geometry dictate to Mr Fergusson and Mr Rudd that the further they move the waste away from one place - a place where votes apparently count, the closer they move it to somewhere else - a place where apparently votes don't matter quite so much. Colour it how you will, such electoral expediency is inequitable and adds risk to the storage of radioactive waste. Because such a decision adds transport miles. If the waste site as proposed was in place in 1971, the army Ford Falcon I opened this submission writing about would be travelling not to Melbourne via the Hume Highway from Bandiana Victoria but to basically, all the way to Australia's Red Centre. On roads that are of a lower standard than the Hume Highway, circa 1971. A journey longer than that of even Burke and Wills. Nuts.

Has any government done anything yet about getting those Aboriginal Australians who suffered death and injury, including injury via beta burn to skin, an open and honest diagnosis?

A "handful of Natives" (to quote the British government in relation to its "dumping" of its bombs - all "perfectly safe"- in Australia.*) aren't going to stand in the Rudd government's way any more than they were allowed to in relation to the goals of Prof Penney and British authorities. Are we supposed to actually learn from history or not?

*See McClelland Royal Commission. In 1985 the **Australian Government told Aboriginal Australians correctly that they have increased vulnerability to radioactivity added to their environment.** They were told, correctly, that they had a "**special vulnerability**" to ionising radiation. (McClelland). This is part of the human-medical-social matrix into which Mr Rudd and Mr Fergusson now seek to impose a nuclear waste dump. If the Federal thinks that adding to the "built environment" by way of imposing a Nuclear Waste Dump on such people as these is beneficial, they are very wrong. Rudd/Fergusson are patently in breach of International Protocols relating to Public Health Management, including Harm Minimisation, to which Australia is a signatory.

When will the Apology for this be given? 2120?

International regulatory organizations may intervene against the Federal government in this matter given an organised approach.

I resent very much the very limited time the Federal Government allowed for submissions from the public in this matter. It is unfair and anti democratic.

Mr Fergusson, if I were arrogant enough to consider myself your teacher, I'd say "You fail Martin. You copied off of poor John Howard. Think for yourself and do the right thing for once in your life."

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