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To: a) The administrator of Senate Committees
 b) SECITARC: Review of Environmental Regulation of Uranium Mining

A Comment on the Structural Inadequacy of Inquiries

Through the example of the Review of the Environmental Regulation of Uranium Mining [ERUM].

PROBLEM STATEMENT

I write to a) bring to the ERUM committee's attention one of the most vexed questions when dealing with environmental and social problems viz.: the current structural inability to consider broad contexts, and
 b) to ask that it, and in general Senate Committees, begin to recognise that fact in their final reports.

The current issue begs a very large question viz. does uranium mining make sense? Most pointedly, does it make sense in its own terms? This is a question common to many social and environmental inquiries.

Ignoring in this instance the very small-scale specialised applications of uranium (e.g. for medical modalities), the "sense of uranium mining" is to generate electricity. To do this a very large amount of energy has to be spent up front, i.e. before, during and after the actual generation and there is a very good possibility that that amount actually exceeds the amount generated. Thus, uranium mining for electrical power generation doesn't actually make sense in its own terms; it is in other words a *non-sequitur* and can become an *oxymoron*.

The problem with this assertion is that it is difficult to quantify but much more, it is currently impossible to find the money to do so because it is not in any formal funding body's interest to pay for such a study. Briefly, the issue is multi-national, multi-governmental, multi-industrial etc. all putting it beyond existing regulations, legislation and indeed social contexts in general. I.e. one country (industry) mines the uranium according to its local and national procedures, another enriches it, another is home to the power stations, while they are built, owned and operated by still other bodies. And that's far from the end of the issue:

- At the end of the mine's, the enrichment plant's, the power station's etc. lives, comes the issue of dismantling and safe sequestering of the waste and the irradiated materials, buildings etc.
- The whole process is dangerous in a multidimensional sense and people and ecosystems in general must be protected from contact with it
- The process is supported by many other industries vital to its viability, not least the fossil fuel industry for construction, transport etc. all of which require secure supplies
- The process with its extensive energy and pollution demand wreak numerous biospheric changes which in principle could be "fixed" but only at further expenditure of energies.

The first three of these realities require a powerful standing defence facility, standing for 100,000 years or till we find a way of speeding the decay processes. The third is so mind-boggling that we ignore it and indeed for most people it is beyond their imagination and therefore does not have any political constituency at all.

Conventional thinking would have it that knowledge such as this benefits no-one. This is the environmental problem in a nutshell.

I attach a paper (from the Australian journal *Eureka St.*) and an exchange of letters to illustrate.

PROPOSAL

For all the difficulties associated with this issue, it seems to me that the Senate inquiry process would be the ideal place to permit and even encourage comments of this level of generality and indeed to see to it that they were published. The reason for this is that the Senate is a *house of review*. Review implies that it has an educational function in respect to the Australian community at large.

I propose therefore that each inquiry attempt to recognise the broad context of the issue raised, encourage the community to wrestle with these issues and recognise that responses are not in themselves dangerous (i.e. threatening) and in need of censoring. Indeed Senate reviews are an opportunity to canvass ideas, they are not in themselves particularly important in the *realpolitik* of decision-making but can be profoundly liberating for participants (and readers) and ultimately facilitative of social innovation which itself can be the source of profound and quite conventional riches (c.f. the Scandinavian experience).