

Submission

to

Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Legislation Committee

Inquiry into the Commonwealth Radioactive Waste Management Bill 2005

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**The Uniting Church in Australia
Synod of Victoria and Tasmania
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Justice and International Mission Unit**

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**Submission of the
Synod of Victoria and Tasmania
Uniting Church in Australia
to**

**The Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education
Committee Inquiry into**

The Commonwealth Radioactive Waste Management Bill 2005

Thursday, 17 November 2005



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The Chair - Senator Judith Troeth
Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee
Inquiry into Commonwealth Radioactive Waste Management Bill 2005
E-mail: cet.sen@aph.gov.au

Thursday, 17 November 2005

Dear Senator,

The Justice and International Mission Unit would like to thank the Committee for this opportunity to make a submission relating to Senate Employment, Workplace Relations and Education Committee Inquiry into the Commonwealth Radioactive Waste Management Bill 2005 and Commonwealth Radioactive Waste Management (Related Amendment) Bill 2005.

This submission begins by stating the position of the Uniting Church in Australia in relation to the use of Australia's uranium resources followed by some general introductory comments (a brief summary of main points) and then addresses certain areas being considered by the Committee.

Due to time constraints, this short submission substantially draws from the previous Justice and International Mission Unit submission relating to *The Strategic Importance of Australia's Uranium Resources: Inquiry into developing Australia's non-fossil fuel energy industry* held by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry and Resources in May 2005.

The Uniting Church in Australia has been committed to the debate and discussion concerning uranium for over two decades and has issued repeated statements on the matter in the history of the church. In 1977 the inaugural meeting of the representatives of the Uniting Church in Australia, Victorian Synod, passed a resolution which stated that:

- "We do not share a popular belief in the inevitability of the use of uranium as a source of energy. ... We do believe that Australia and the world need a thorough study of the energy problem in its totality in connection with our standards of life; and the glaring differences in the use of energy in the wealthier and poorer parts of the world. ...
- "We do not share the optimistic belief in man as a being who could overcome all the risks connected with the use of nuclear energy if he only set his mind to it. ... There are no absolute safeguards against the use of uranium and its waste products for destructive purposes. ...
- "We share the widely held anxiety in regard to the dangers of waste products ... present-day generations have no right at all to impose on future ones the enormous cost of human resources to care for the wastes and obsolete installations they leave behind them, to say nothing of the continuous risks this involves.
- "The 20th century is already, in many respects, bearing the burden of guilty decisions and attitudes of former periods of history. ...
- "The life-style of the wealthier parts of the world would only be prolonged [through the use of nuclear power generation] for a very small period of time, without helping the under-developed nations to have the bare necessities of life.
- "The uranium issue is a matter of life and death. It must not become a matter of party-politics; the nation as a whole is responsible"¹

¹ *Statement on the mining and export of uranium*, resolution 77.4.12, 1977, Synod of Victoria, Uniting Church in Australia, [online], available from: <http://vic.uca.org.au/jim/Resolutions/JusticeResolutionsData.htm> [9 May 2005]

The Justice and International Mission Unit is concerned about the considerable dangers posed by the nuclear fuel cycle. *The* reality of nuclear waste constitutes a long-term problem - there is currently no universally accepted safe storage method for nuclear waste. In addition:

- There is increasing awareness of the real costs of the use of nuclear technology as a power source – due to such costs as decommissioning and waste management, the cost of nuclear energy for electricity production can actually increase over time.
- Nuclear power is neither safe nor clean and can contribute to significant health problems for people.

With regard to *whole of life cycle waste management*, the use of uranium for electricity generation is not an effective option due to problems with waste by-products. Nuclear waste materials remain radioactive for hundreds, or even thousands of years and integrity of storage options could not possibly be guaranteed for this length of time, "... there is no answer in sight on how or where to safeguard nuclear wastes that remain hazardous for longer than recorded civilisation"².

The Uniting Church has a "moral responsibility to respect the rights of future generations"³ in this matter. Future generations have a right "not to be confronted with products and wastes of earlier generations that threaten their health or require excessive expense for protection and control"⁴.

Voices from all parts of the community, the Northern Territory Government and traditional Indigenous Australian landowners should be taken into serious consideration by decision-makers in such an important area. There must be full participation of Indigenous Australians in decision-making and harm minimisation with regard to their traditional lands, concerning all aspects of the nuclear fuel cycle⁵.

We hope that your Senate Committee, which is investigating these matters, will take our general concerns into account before making final recommendations about the appropriateness of overriding or restricting the application of laws to extinguish rights and interests related to land on which Commonwealth radioactive waste management facilities may be located.

Yours faithfully,

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² Henry, D., *Unclean industry is no white knight*, Australian Financial Review, 22 February 2005

³ World Council of Churches, *Affirmation VII*, 1990, cited in Palmer, M., 2003, Introduction to Christian Environmental Initiatives, [online], available from: <http://www.goarch.org/print/en/ourfaith/article8051.asp> [5 May 2005]

⁴ *Rights of Nature and Rights of Future Generations*, Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, 1991

⁵ *Nuclear Fuel Cycle Policy* resolution 00.22, 2000, Assembly Standing Committee, Uniting Church in Australia