

Uranium uncertainty

THOSE on either side of the nuclear power debate who were hoping for a clear 'stop' or 'go' for uranium mining in Australia and uranium export have been left disappointed by the second report of the Ranger Uranium Inquiry. The report, prepared by Mr Justice Fox of the Australian Capital Territory Supreme Court and his two fellow commissioners, was published on 25 May by the Australian Government Publishing Service.

It included several surprises for the speculators, as indicated by the wild fluctuations in the share market for uranium mines immediately after the report's much publicised release. On the specific problems of mining uranium in the Northern Territory, the report, like its predecessor handed down in October 1976 which dealt more with the global issues of safeguards and controls, has left the ball firmly in the government's court.

- There is something in it for the uranium lobby. The Ranger mine is given a cautious go-ahead, though under much stricter and very specific (hence more expensive) conditions regarding environmental control.

- There is something in it for the environmentalists. It is recommended that "as proposed, and in the land setting which was proposed, the Ranger project not be allowed to proceed". Further and larger mines nearby in the uranium-rich Alligator Rivers province, the development of which was also halted pending the Ranger report, are recommended

"not to proceed, at least for the time being". The main mines delayed by the proposed sequential development are the Noranda and Jabiluka mines.

- There is even more in it for the aborigines whose claims to land in the area cover most of the uranium province. The report is strongest of all on this matter, recommending a trebling of the Kakadu National Park to cover the entire Alligator Rivers region, yet warning that the greatest threat to the environment and particularly to the welfare, well-being and culture of the Aboriginal people, might prove to be the large white population which the mining ventures might bring.

The Prime Minister, Mr Fraser, left for overseas on the day after the report's release. He has signalled that his discussions with President Carter and other leaders have uranium policy high on the agendas, especially since Mr Carter's staff have been saying, somewhat paradoxically for the layman, that the new US policy for containment of nuclear proliferation relies heavily on the export of Australian uranium.

While the Australian government has made no formal decision and has announced that a full debate will not occur in Parliament until the Budget session in August, few people doubt that mining will be allowed to proceed. The only real question is which mines will start and when. Meanwhile, the public relations and political lobbying of the pro- and anti-nuclear

forces will intensify, each side claiming to summarise accurately in a few words that the highly complex and voluminous Fox report supports their side.

On a wider front, however, Australia has joined the political bandwagon that is energy more by reason of following the leader (that is the USA and Europe) than of any urgency felt imperative locally. Australia is blessed with vast black and brown coal deposits, there are some modest oil wells and reasonable gas fields, and there has been a government policy of keeping down the prices of petroleum products. Despite the need to import increasing quantities of crude oil, few Australians have felt the effect of a genuine scarcity of energy. Politically, energy has not yet equated with votes.

Nonetheless, the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr Doug Anthony, has seized on the energy question as his rightful responsibility under his role as Minister for National Resources. His views on the matter are now accorded respectful space in the press, a good start to making energy a real issue. But, while there is much talk of "moving towards an energy policy", nobody is really saying what it is likely to be.

Mr Anthony has shown willingness to listen to expert opinion, and has set up an 18-person National Energy Advisory Committee chaired by top metallurgist, Dr Howard Worner. It is charged with advising on Australia's energy reserves, supply and demand, future costs, economy of use, research and technology.

In a welcome move, Mr Anthony has decided to release the Committee's advice for public information and debate. The first advice, released in May, commented with fulsome praise on President Carter's message to Congress on energy. It said that, despite obvious differences arising from the levels of consumption, "the basic conservation principles expressed in President Carter's statement are, in the Committee's view, directly applicable to the Australian situation". It advocates, for Australia, smaller cars, more effective use of public transportation, reduction of wastage, use of surface rather than air transport, rail rather than road transport where appropriate, and lowering speed limits on open roads. As with the Fox report, the government has given no indication of action to follow this advice.

Peter Pockley



Mary Kathleen uranium mine, circa 1961