Australian election leaves uranium issue confused

LAST weeks' general election in Australia scarcely changed the massive majority held by the Liberal and National Country Party coalition government. Nor has it changed the odds on whether or when Australia is to become a major exporter of uranium.

At first sight this observation may seem paradoxical—even perverse. Surely such a total victory must have fortified Mr Fraser and his government in their confrontation with the opponents of uranium mining? This certainly seemed to be the view of the uranium mining companies expressed through their lobby organisation, the Australian Uranium Producer's Forum. Within hours of the election result being known the forum's chairman declared that the Fraser government now had a mandate for its uranium export policy. Unfortunately even if one accepts the dubious mandate the mining companies' view is without foundation.

While the government parties polled about 48% of the national vote, the combined vote of the two main parties advocating a moratorium on uranium mining, the Australian Labor Party and the Australian Democrats, was almost 50%. Furthermore, it would be hard to argue that the uranium issue was at the forefront of most voters' minds as they went to the polls. Although it had been seen, before the event, as a crucial issue in a December general election, in the event uranium received relatively little attention during the campaign. The government parties, in particular, seemed to go almost out of their way to avoid discussing uranium and nuclear power. In an opinion poll conducted eight days before the election, one of the more respected polling organisations found that only 5% of voters considered uranium export to be the most important election issue. Thus the election result is in no sense a positive endorsement by the majority of Australians of the government's policy on uranium.

Government undeterred

This fact is unlikely to deter the government from attempting to claim a mandate for its policy. And the election result is certain to increase its confidence in seeking a confrontation with those who oppose it, which means, principally, individual unions or the trade union movement as a whole. There has been considerable speculation about when and how such a confrontation may occur. In the transport

of yellowcake, unions have already taken industrial action on uranium.

The most crucial of the unions are almost certainly those in the building and engineering industries, whose members will have to be involved in constructing the mine and mill. These unions are mostly large, well organised, and strongly opposed to the mining and export of uranium. They seem certain to be in the vanguard of any confrontation with the government. While it is obvious that a great many factors will determine the outcome of a confrontation, should it occur, the support which the unions receive from the labour movement as a whole and from the general community will clearly be of great political importance.

There is now a large and articulate opposition to uranium export, co-ordinated nationally through the movement against uranium mining. While not yet as large as the movement opposing the Vietnam war was at its peak, the opposition to uranium mining appears to be both better organised and politically more sophisticated.

Up till now Mr Fraser has treated the uranium issue with great circumspection. His failure to use it as an election issue could be taken to indicate uncertainty about the popularity of his policy. In explaining the policy, he emphasised that following the reports of the Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry (otherwise known as the Fox reports) he has demonstrated in both word and action the importance he attached to improving safeguards against nuclear weapons proliferation. All these moves may have been effective in reassuring uncommitted opinion on the uranium issue; though if Mr Fraser was hoping that he would also placate his opponents, he must have been disappointed.

However, there are now signs that the government is being less cautious in pursuing its uranium export objectives. For example, it has so far failed to provide the necessary finance and administrative support for the team appointed to carry out environmental research and supervision in the Alligator Rivers region of the Northern Territory, where the major uranium deposits are located. While the hold-up may simply be the result of bureaucratic inertia or parliamentary delay, the opponents of uranium mining are inclined to see it as presaging the breaking of promises on environmental protection.

Much more important, at least in the international context, was the state-

ment in the last week of the election campaign by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for National Resources, responsible for uranium in Mr Fraser's pre-election government, Mr Anthony. He announced that the government was reconsidering its policy of prohibiting the reprocessing of spent reactor fuel made from Australian uranium, and does not wish to rule out reprocessing by 'acceptable' countries. This change in policy would make it difficult for the government to continue to argue that by exporting uranium it was furthering President Carter's policy of preventing reprocessing and the plutonium economy by providing ready access to supplies of nuclear fuel.

Mr Anthony has consistently been far more blunt than Mr Fraser in his support for uranium mining and his statement may not have the support of Mr Fraser. In the immediate aftermath of the election it is not certain that Mr Anthony will retain responsibility for uranium development in Mr Fraser's new government. However, his statement undoubtedly reflects the problem the government is having with its policy on proliferation. President Carter's policy on nuclear fuel reprocessing is clearly in some difficulty, and may be abandoned. More important from the Australian government's point of view will be the firm commitment to reprocessing by its major potential uranium customers: Japan, West Germany, and the UK.

Economic question

Finally, there is the question of the economics of uranium mining. Canadian officials involved in making decisions on the development of the new uranium prospects in Saskatchewan recently expressed amazement at what they considered to be highly optimistic expectations of both sales volume and price of uranium held by the Australian government and mining companies. The uranium debate in Australia does not so far appear to have comprehended the considerable down-turn in uranium market prospects over the next ten years or so, which has taken place recently. When the Australian people realise that an immediate start to uranium mining may not bring the great economic benefits they have been led to expect, they may be less willing to support the government in any confrontation that may occur. It is noteworthy that one of the few seats to record a significant swing against the government was Northern Territory, where much publicity has been given to the possible economic benefits of uranium mining. There is still a very long way to go before Australia becomes a major uranium producer.

Hugh Sadler