

FUKUSHIMA & NUTTY NUCLEAR CONSPIRACY THEORIES

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What nuclear conspiracy theories?

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Conspiracy theories conjured up by nuclear advocates are mostly harmless fun. But not when they involve trivialising the suffering of victims of the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

Political demagogue Lyndon LaRouche is the most colourful of the conspiracy theorists. Here's his take on the anti-nuclear movement: "This utterly depraved, dionysian cult-formation found its echoed, more violent expression in late 1980s Germany, where the anti-nuclear, fascist rioting reached near to the level of outright civil war ..."

Australia's Leslie Kemeny (think Lord Monckton) agrees: "Radical green activism and global terrorism can form dangerous, even deadly, alliances. The 'coercive utopianism' of radical greens, their avid desire for media publicity and their hidden socio-political agendas can produce societal outcomes that are sometimes violent and ugly."

Kemeny believes the anti-nuclear movement is "supported by immense funds from affluent right-wing interests" and is also tied to the "political left". Go figure. With such a grab-bag of extreme – and extremely contradictory – views, Kemeny might be considered a good candidate for Bob Katter's political party ... but he's already joined Fred Nile's.

A recent convert to nuclear conspiracy theories is Adelaide-based nuclear advocate Geoff Russell. Russell has no time for the euphemisms of 'dionysian cult-formation' or 'coercive utopianism'. He gets straight to the point: nuclear critics are responsible for all of the death and suffering resulting from the Fukushima nuclear disaster and much else besides.

How does he arrive at those conclusions? One part of the intellectual contortion concerns the role of environmental groups such as Friends of the Earth. To the limited extent that environment groups influence

energy policy around the world, the result is a greater role for renewables, less nuclear power and less fossil fuel usage. But for Russell, being anti-nuclear means an implicit endorsement and acceptance of fossil fuels and responsibility for everything wrong with fossil fuel burning. That contorted logic will come as a surprise to Friends of the Earth campaigners risking life, limb and heavy penalties in their efforts to shut down coal mines and ports; and to everyone else engaged in the fossil fuel and climate problems in many different ways.

A second intellectual contortion concerns the cancer risks associated with radiation exposure. Russell's view is that long-term exposure to low levels of radiation "does sweet fa". In a submission to a South Australian Parliamentary Committee, he writes: "Let's suppose that if 1000 people drink a glass of wine a day then eventually 10 will get cancer due to that wine. I just made those numbers up, they are to illustrate the method ... So how many people will get cancer if a million people drink 1/1000 of a glass per day? The anti-nuclear logic ... estimates 10,000 cancers. The population is consuming 1000 times the alcohol that produced 10 cancers, therefore there will be 10,000 cancers."

Russell gets his simple calculations wrong by three orders of magnitude – three more than you'd expect from a self-described mathematician. In any case the link between wine and cancer tells us precisely nothing about radiation. Russell and science are at odds on the question of the cancer risks associated with low-level radiation exposure. The 2006 report of the Committee on the Biological Effects of Ionising Radiation of the US National Academy of Sciences states that "the risk of cancer proceeds in a linear fashion at lower doses without a threshold and ... the smallest dose has the potential to cause a small increase in risk to humans."

It's a big step, but once you've convinced yourself that radiation is harmless, a world of possibilities present themselves. Scientific estimates of the Chernobyl death toll range from 9,000 to 93,000, but Russell claims the Chernobyl death toll was "three tenths of a half of a sixth of bugger all" or "a few dozen deaths". Another step gets you to this: "It is far worse than flippant to risk the destabilisation of the unusually benign climate of the past 10,000 years because of a few dozen deaths. That's nutter stuff."

Likewise, Russell says Fukushima was "deathless". Yet the World Health Organisation predicts an increase in the number of all solid cancers, breast cancer, leukaemia and thyroid cancer as a result of radioactive Fukushima fallout. UK radiation biologist Ian Fairlie, basing his calculations on UNSCEAR collective dose figures, estimates ~5,000 long-term cancer deaths from Fukushima radiation exposure.

Russell claims the performance of the Fukushima nuclear power plants in the face of the 3/11 earthquake and tsunami was "a spectacular success and one of the biggest unreported good news stories of the decade." And it was indeed a spectacular success except for the explosions, meltdowns and fires.

Russell wants us to contrast the Fukushima nuclear accident with "actual suffering" from the 3/11 earthquake and tsunami. Tell that to the family and friends of the Fukushima farmer whose suicide note read: "I wish there wasn't a nuclear plant."

The Fukushima disaster has caused an immense amount of suffering, particularly for the 160,000 evacuees. The Nuclear Accident Independent Investigation Commission (NAIIC) – established by an Act of Parliament – notes that evacuees "continue to face grave concerns, including the health effects of radiation exposure, displacement, the dissolution of families, disruption of their lives and lifestyles and the contamination of vast areas of the environment." The nuclear disaster is also responsible for nearly half of the estimated 1,632 indirect deaths associated with the evacuation from the 3/11 triple-disaster.

Importantly, the NAIIC report – along with every other report into the Fukushima disaster – is clear that whereas the 3/11 earthquake and tsunami were Acts of God, Fukushima was an Act of TEPCO. Russell and like-minded apologists fudge or ignore the distinction.

The NAIIC report states that the Fukushima disaster was "a profoundly man-made disaster that could and should have been foreseen and prevented" if not for "a multitude of errors and wilful negligence that left the Fukushima plant unprepared for the events of March 11."

That wilful negligence is responsible for all the suffering and deaths associated with the evacuation and ongoing dislocation; radiation exposure likely to lead to a cancer death toll in the thousands; and economic costs of US\$500 billion or more according to a report by the American Society of Mechanical Engineers.

Russell has another intellectual contortion to perform. If radiation is harmless, there is no need for an exclusion zone to be maintained around Fukushima. Sometimes he goes so far as to say the initial evacuation was "unnecessary" – though of course he never said any such thing in the immediate aftermath of the nuclear disaster.

So why is the evacuation zone still in place four years after the nuclear accidents? Russell argues: "The panic whipped up by the anti-nuclear movement completed the devastation began by the tsunami and prompted an unnecessary evacuation that killed people." And still more bizarrely, "the people who are still living in temporary housing in Japan should be running a class action against the anti-nuclear movement for its role in the wasting of so much money when there are serious needs to be met."

Russell never explains how NGO views (which he misrepresents) translate into government policy. As best as one can work it out, environment groups pump "radiophobia" into the ether and governments (and radiation scientists) absorb it by osmosis – hence the "unnecessary" Fukushima exclusion zone. Either that or shamanic transmutation.

Russell's attacks on environmentalists place him alongside LaRouche, Kemeny and other comedians and demagogues. But there's nothing funny about his distinction between the easily-preventable Fukushima nuclear disaster and "real problems", or his distinction between the suffering of Fukushima evacuees and "actual suffering", or his description of the Fukushima disaster as "benign".

Those statements are disgusting and disgraceful.