

A high-level nuclear waste dump for SA

What is our moral obligation?

The argument goes: surely SA has a moral obligation to import nuclear waste...

...because we mine uranium?

Uranium mining is only the first of many stages in the nuclear fuel chain. Mined uranium is converted, then enriched, then made into fuel and then used in nuclear power plants. All through this process, there are companies and other countries generating income and profits.

Why is it that companies are very happy to take the profits from their activities, but always try to push the costs (financial, environmental and social) back on to the public? For years, tobacco companies tried to dodge their disastrous impact on the health system until governments forced them to be held to account.

Surely the nuclear industry should be required to use some of its profits to invest in processing its waste into cleaner forms before it is placed in permanent storage? If it can't do that, what is our moral obligation to continue to supply uranium to an industry that is not willing to take responsibility for its own waste?

And if we accept the logic that we are ultimately responsible for the waste products associated with our exports, shouldn't we apply it to all our export products, like copper or steel? And shouldn't other countries be held similarly accountable for the waste produced from their exports?

...because we are more geologically and politically stable than other places?

High-level nuclear waste stays dangerous to humans for tens of thousands of years. To put that into context, the Crusades happened 700

years ago, and the pyramids in Egypt were built around 4,500 years ago. To claim that SA will be politically stable based on just the last 200 years of parliamentary democracy is ridiculous.

Equally, SA is not the only region in the world with these characteristics and our geological stability is not all that is claimed. According to experts like Dr Mike Sandiford from the University of Melbourne, Australia is less tectonically stable than a number of other continental regions. The melting of ice sheets as a result of global warming is predicted to increase earthquakes and other seismic activity.

The US has regions that are just as stable as SA, and, unlike us, they produce high-level nuclear waste. So, using this logic, don't they have a greater moral obligation to create a solution?

...because we benefit from x-rays?

The proposed high-level waste dump has nothing to do with waste from nuclear medicine. That is part of a separate (Federal) process to develop a dump for Australia's domestic low and intermediate-level waste.

If we want this decision to include moral considerations (as it should), we might ask ourselves about the ethics of burdening thousands of generations of future South Australians with the cost and risk of managing highly radioactive waste, when any economic benefits are long gone.