

Australia must join ‘nuclear renaissance’: Dutton

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Australia’s growing energy demands could be met cost-effectively by building small nuclear reactors on the site of ageing coal-fired power plants and using transmission systems already in place, Peter Dutton says.

[<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5ar76>]

The Opposition Leader will accuse federal Labor of being “mesmerised” by the glare of solar panels and wind turbines, and failing to seriously consider the opportunities of nuclear power, including to lower household energy bills, in a speech to the Institute of Public Affairs think tank on Friday.



Opposition Leader Peter Dutton will address the Institute of Public Affairs on Friday. **Alex Ellinghausen**

Calling for a major boost in lucrative uranium exports, Mr Dutton also disputes Climate Change and Energy Minister Chris Bowen’s criticism that nuclear is the most expensive form of new energy.

He says CSIRO research released last year has been disputed by energy experts and is based on outdated figures from 2018.

“If nuclear power is so prohibitively expensive, why are more than 50 countries investing in it, including those with smaller economies than Australia?,” Mr Dutton asks.

“Conveniently, the energy minister is reluctant to mention the costs of storage and transmission when he talks about renewables being cheaper.”

Following post-election positioning and his budget-in-reply speech, Friday’s comments represent Mr Dutton’s most significant pitch on the opportunities of nuclear energy. The comments reflect a growing debate within the Coalition as it looks to further differentiate from Labor on the politics of renewable energy and climate change.

On Thursday, Nationals leader David Littleproud took credit for highlighting nuclear power with his Liberal Coalition partners. He said nuclear could be more efficient for manufacturing and would reduce the need for transmission lines disrupting vegetation and agricultural land.

“Let the marketplace decide,” Mr Littleproud told ABC Radio. “There’s microgrids, three to four megawatt, and nuclear power burns at a higher heat.”

Labor is managing the transition for communities around coal-fired power plants, including in the NSW Hunter Valley and the Latrobe Valley in Victoria. Earlier this year, the government moved to establish a new Net Zero Authority, to support workers find new jobs and improve their training.

[The Hunter’s Liddell power station closed in April. \[https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5d429\]](https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5d429)

Mr Dutton will call for Australia to use nuclear to strengthen energy security amid a shifting and unpredictable global outlook, helping to secure clean, cost-effective and consistent power.

He notes that Australia is home to the world’s largest deposits of uranium, about one-third of global reserves. Demand is expected to almost double by 2040 and uranium prices are predicted to rise.

‘Burgeoning export opportunity’

“At present, Australia supplies just under 10 per cent of global demand, with all our production exported,” Mr Dutton says.

“So aside from a burgeoning export opportunity, our nation has an ability to be energy self-sufficient well into the future.”

With the CSIRO warning that nuclear energy is too expensive to help Australia reduce its carbon emissions, [<https://www.afr.com/link/follow-20180101-p5b0pd>] particularly in the next decade, Mr Dutton will call for it to be a companion, not a competitor, to renewable technology.

He will push for the consideration of small modular reactors, known as SMRs, and micro-reactors, sometimes referred to as nuclear batteries.

“Australia could have SMRs installed within a decade,” Mr Dutton says.

“A civil nuclear power industry cannot be started up overnight, but it has already started with AUKUS.

“We need to put in place laws and regulations, we need to develop our institutions, we need to train people, and much more besides.”

He says nuclear is the only proven, scalable, zero-emission energy source that is not weather dependent.

Mr Bowen and other Labor frontbenchers have ridiculed the Coalition’s growing calls for consideration of nuclear power. Mr Bowen says seeking to build a domestic industry from scratch makes no sense for Australia.

But Mr Dutton says the AUKUS nuclear submarine deal with the United States and Great Britain is a game changer, with nuclear able to support the resilience of the energy system.

“The sheer amount of money being invested in research and development in the next generation nuclear-powered submarines will surely see military advancements complement the development of civil nuclear power industries around the world,” he says.

CSIRO says economics don’t stack up

“With the ongoing development of zero emission, safe, small modular and micro-reactors, the time has come for a sensible and sober conversation on nuclear power in Australia.”

The CSIRO’s Gencost report, released in July last year, says the economics of large or small modular reactors do not stack up, compared with renewable energy such as wind or solar.

It found a small reactor typically costs as much as \$16,000 per kilowatt-hour, 50 to 100 per cent more than large-scale nuclear. By contrast, wind and solar come in under \$2000 per kilowatt-hour.

Former Energy Security Board chairwoman Kerry Schott says nuclear energy, like new coal-fired power plants, is not a viable option because it is too expensive.

Despite inflation and global supply issues, the CSIRO report says wind, solar and batteries will continue to get cheaper, even as the share of renewable energy in the grid heads towards 90 per cent.

Mr Dutton disagrees, arguing that the cost of raw materials and energy used in manufacturing is becoming more expensive.

He cites University of Queensland expert Professor Stephen Wilson, who says the term “nuclear waste” is misleading, and suggests that it should instead be described as “used fuel” because it can be reprocessed and used again.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese has called the nuclear power debate “a huge distraction from what we need to do”.



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