

# Canberra Times

## 'Nuclear fantasy,' Dutton's power plant policy unclear and under attack

The Canberra Times 5 March 2024 Karen Barlow

Peter Dutton's ambitious energy "solution" of moving Australia toward large and small nuclear reactors has been derided as a "nuclear fantasy" and a distracting delay while the nation transitions to other, cheaper forms of renewable energy.

The opposition leader on Tuesday taunted Anthony Albanese as not "having the guts" to make the big decisions Australia needs as he outlined a draft of the Coalition's proposal to build up to potentially six nuclear power stations at the sites of retired or retiring coal-fired power stations. Using old station sites would allow for their transmission infrastructure to be used.

Mr Dutton has not named specific sites for the future reactors, should the Coalition be elected, but the criteria put in play power stations nearing the end-of-life in the Hunter Valley and Victoria's Latrobe Valley.

The Coalition policy is not yet fully formed or passed through shadow cabinet and it is potentially decades away from being realised, but it is proposed as a "stable solution" to "firm", or back up, energy sources such as solar and wind while Australia transitions from fossil fuels.



*David Littleproud, Angus Taylor and Peter Dutton*

"The Prime Minister has had an opportunity to put forward a plan. He doesn't have the guts to stand up and make the decisions that our country needs made and we do need to look at the best technology [with] zero emissions," Mr Dutton told reporters. "I think it's the only credible pathway we have to our international commitments to net zero by 2050."

It is expected that further details will emerge ahead of the opposition leader's budget reply in early May. It was last year's budget response which saw Mr Dutton outline a keenness for small modular nuclear reactors (SMRs). The policy which now includes bigger modular reactors has been driven by the Nationals which had to be dragged last term to a Coalition position on net zero. Leader David Littleproud has described Mr Dutton as having "taken our hand".

Australia's moratorium on nuclear energy would have to be lifted before anything could proceed.

Tim Buckley, the director of the independent think tank [Climate Energy Finance](#), said the opposition's nuclear energy solution is about delay, which he views as the "new denialism." "We've got this pure hypothetical political spin about waiting for 20 years for SMRs. We can't afford to wait," he told *The Canberra Times*. "We have a climate crisis. We have a cost-of-living crisis now. What this is all about is sowing disinformation and delay. It's climate science denialism."

"Small-scale nuclear reactors are totally hypothetical outside of Russia and China. I think the whole SMR technology deployment in Australia is a total red herring, but even large-scale nuclear is cost-prohibitive. So what effectively Dutton is suggesting is a \$50 billion subsidy program by the federal government to underwrite nuclear power."

It is now for the Coalition a matter of where and at what cost, while it points to community concern about using agricultural land and offshore sites for renewable energy infrastructure.

"We've said that we're only interested in looking at sites where you've got an end-of-life coal-fired generation asset. So that means that you can use the existing distribution network," Mr Dutton said. "I believe that we can deliver stable, base-load power to firm up renewables. We can do it at a lower cost. And I don't understand why Anthony Albanese won't even have the debate."

Treasurer Jim Chalmers said the policy was a "nuclear fantasy" that would cost hundreds of billions of dollars, take decades to build and set the nation back as it pursues renewable energy opportunities. "It's no surprise to anyone that Peter Dutton has gone for the most expensive option, the most divisive option and longest to build," he said on Tuesday.

Mr Albanese regards nuclear power as not for Australia as it "can work overseas and does work", so focused on where the location of reactors would

be and how much taxpayers would subsidise them. He also said Mr Dutton appears to be backing away from a technology that does not exist, in small modular reactors. "He is now speaking about large nuclear reactors. They need to be near populations, they need to be near water," he told reporters.



***Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said nuclear power in Australia "does not stack up"***

"We know that that's the case. And every 10 years, there are these proposals. We've seen the Switkowski Report come and go. What never comes is any investment because it simply doesn't stack up commercially."

Mr Dutton is also pushing back at technologies that do not exist. "We just can't pretend that solar panels work of a night time and we can't pretend that wind turbines, 260 metres out of the seabed, are environmentally conscious and we can't pretend that that is a baseline energy. It's just not," he said. "Hopefully, the battery technology is about to be discovered but not yet."

Mr Buckley said the technology is available and the market is deciding. "He's contradicting the fact that Rio Tinto, Australia's second largest company, our second largest mining company, just signed two multi-billion dollar contracts for the supply of really low-cost solar energy into Gladstone to power their aluminium refinery and their bauxite refineries," he said. "It's the largest solar project in Australian history. "And two weeks ago, February 2024, they signed an 80% take of the largest wind farm development in Australian history. It's a 1.4 gigawatt wind farm. "So maybe Peter Dutton might want to have a chat to the second largest company in Australia. Gladstone now will be producing green aluminium for export."

Modelling by the [CSIRO and the Australian Energy Market Operator](#) on the future cost of electricity generation has found that small modular nuclear reactors (SMRs) will be, by 2030, the highest-cost energy technology at between \$200 and \$350 per megawatt hour. This is compared to solar and

wind which the GenCost report found would be between about \$60 and \$100 per MWh by 2030.

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