

Les Echos

Australia reopens the nuclear energy debate with a bang

The debate on nuclear power has been reopened in Australia, the only industrialised country without reactors. To replace coal-fired power stations, the conservative opposition is promising to build seven power stations over the next few decades if it returns to power next year.

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Published on 5 August 2024



Since the end of the last century, there have been various moratoria in place in Australia on the construction of nuclear power plants, despite the fact that the country has a third of the world's uranium reserves. Last month, however, the debate on nuclear energy was reignited by a proposal from the Liberal Party, the country's second largest party, to build seven reactors on the sites of coal-fired power stations at the end of their useful lives.

The leader of the Australian Liberal Party, Peter Dutton, former Minister for Home Affairs and Defence, promised at the end of June to introduce "zero-emission nuclear power" in Australia, partly to bring down electricity costs, and partly to offset the move away from fossil fuels with a view to achieving carbon neutrality by 2050. This is the Conservatives' main argument to counter the ruling Labour Party - which is banking heavily on renewable energies - ahead of the general election in a year's time.

Replacing coal

"One of the main advantages of modern zero-emission nuclear power stations is that they can be connected to existing grids. They can effectively replace coal-fired power stations that are out of commission or about to be. And avoid much of the new spending needed for Labour's 'renewables only' ambitions, including building new transmission infrastructure, "the expense of which is reflected in bills", argue the Conservatives, in opposition in coalition with the National Party.

The party claims that nuclear power could be produced in Australia by 2035 using small modular reactors (SMRs) or as early as 2037 with larger reactors (of the AP1000 or APR1400 type from the American company Westinghouse).

The plan is conceived in two phases, with the first two projects under way by the end of the next decade, and the construction of all the others by the middle of the century. Detailed on the dedicated "Australia needs nuclear" website, the proposal does not put forward any figures, but announces that the plants would be owned by the federal government, built and operated by the "most experienced nuclear companies in the world".

Nuclear tests in the desert

The strategy put forward has been received with a great deal of scepticism in a country where almost one roof in three has solar panels, and whose history is marked by British nuclear tests in the desert in the 1950s.

The main Australian states concerned have banned the construction of nuclear power stations on their territory. Objections also relate to the cost of nuclear infrastructure, construction times and the management of radioactive waste.

A report by the Australian government's scientific research organisation (CSIRO) estimates that nuclear energy would be more expensive than energy from renewable sources (the installation of the first reactor is estimated to cost between AUD 8.5 and 17 billion, or between €5 and 10 billion). But also, with at least fifteen years needed to develop this technology in Australia, the potential of nuclear power to help reduce CO2 emissions is limited.

"Political bluff

For the director of the think tank Climate Energy Finance, Tim Buckey - who describes himself as technologically neutral - the Australian Conservatives' proposal is nothing more than a political bluff that "conflates higher electricity prices with renewable energy".

Among the weaknesses of the plan in question, he cites the envisaged use of SMRs "which are not even commercially available". He also notes that, when it comes to nuclear power, "Australia is relying on foreign know-how, because we have no skills, expertise or technology, zero", which suggests that budgets and delivery times are likely to be exceeded.

The Australian Conservatives "have published a one-page brochure, a plan with little documentation or peer review, and yet they propose to commit to spending hundreds of billions of taxpayers' money", he castigates. "It's ludicrous, I don't know anyone who thinks it's economically probable or likely to see the light of day," he sums up.