

# THE PUSH FOR NUCLEAR WEAPONS IN AUSTRALIA 1950s–1970s

Nuclear-Free Campaign – Friends of the Earth Australia  
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During the 1950s and 1960s, there were several efforts to obtain nuclear weapons from the US or the UK. In the mid-1950s, the Australian government asked the US if Australia was eligible to participate in nuclear sharing initiatives being discussed within NATO. Nothing came of the government's approaches except some vague promises to consider Australia if the US chose to develop a weapons capability among allied nations.

The greater part of the bomb lobby's effort was directed at Britain. Beginning in 1957, the matter was often addressed by representatives of the Australian and British governments and military organisations.

The British realised that supplying nuclear weapons could cause problems, such as encouraging horizontal proliferation and perhaps jeopardising US/UK nuclear cooperation agreements. But there was support nonetheless, partly because of Australia's status as a Commonwealth country, and also because of the British government's desire to sell Australia the aircraft and missiles that would be required to deliver nuclear weapons. British documents also make it clear that if Australia was to cut a deal with either Britain or the US, it should be with Britain. Communications and negotiations continued into the early 1960s, but nothing concrete was ever agreed.

There were ongoing efforts through the 1950s and 1960s to procure nuclear-capable delivery systems. The 1963 contract to buy F-111s bombers from the US was partly motivated by the capacity to modify them to carry nuclear weapons. Moreover, their range of 2000 nautical miles made them suitable for strikes on Indonesia, which was seen to be anti-British and anti-imperialist under Sukarno's presidency.

## **Domestic weapons production**

In the 1960s the interest in nuclear weapons was spurred on by China's development of nuclear

weapons, Britain's decision to withdraw troops from the Pacific, and US withdrawal from Vietnam.

From the mid-1960s to the early 1970s, there was greater interest in the domestic manufacture of nuclear weapons. In 1965, the Australian Atomic Energy Commission (AAEC) and the Department of Supply were commissioned to examine all aspects of Australia's policy towards nuclear weapons and the cost of establishing a nuclear weapons program in Australia.

The AAEC (later renamed ANSTO) began a uranium enrichment research program in 1965 in the basement of a building at Lucas Heights. For the first two years, this program was carried out in secret. There were several plausible justifications for the enrichment project, such as the potential profit to be made by exporting enriched uranium. Nevertheless it can safely be assumed that the potential to produce weapons-grade enriched uranium counted in favour of the government's decision to approve and fund the enrichment research.

Despite the glut in the uranium market overseas, the Minister for National Development announced in 1967 that uranium companies would henceforth have to keep half of their known reserves for Australian use, and he acknowledged in public that this decision was taken because of a desire to have a domestic uranium source in case it was needed for nuclear weapons.

In May 1967 Prime Minister Holt and the Cabinet's Defence Committee commissioned another study to assess the possibility of domestic manufacture of nuclear weapons, as well as "possible arrangements with our allies."

It is not known how seriously Holt might have pursued nuclear weapons. In December 1967 he disappeared while swimming off Port Phillip Bay. The

new prime minister was John Gorton, who was on public record as an advocate of the production or acquisition of nuclear weapons.

By the mid-1960s, the AAEC had become the leading voice on nuclear affairs, thanks in large part to its influential chairman Philip Baxter. According to academic Jim Walsh, "Baxter personally supported the concept of an Australian nuclear weapons capability and, perhaps more importantly, viewed the military's interest in nuclear weapons as consonant with the AAEC's need to expand its programs and budget."

### **Nuclear power – Jervis Bay**

On several occasions through the 1950s and 1960s, nuclear advocates argued for the introduction of nuclear power. One of the arguments routinely put forward in favour of nuclear power was that it would bring Australia closer to a weapons capability. The expertise gained from a nuclear power program could be put to use in a weapons program, and the plutonium produced in a power reactor could be separated and used in weapons.

While favourably inclined to proposals for nuclear power, the government continually deferred making a decision, largely because of the immature state of the industry overseas.

In 1969, with Gorton as Prime Minister, the time was ripe. Cabinet approved a plan to build a power reactor at Jervis Bay on the south coast of New South Wales (but on Commonwealth land). Site work began, and tenders from overseas suppliers were received and reviewed.

There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that the Jervis Bay project was motivated, in part, by a desire to bring Australia closer to a weapons capability, even though key players such as Baxter and Gorton refused to acknowledge the link at the time.

In 1969, Australia signed a secret nuclear cooperation agreement with France. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported in 1969 that the agreement covered cooperation in the field of fast breeder power reactors (which can produce more plutonium than they consume). The AAEC had begun preliminary research into building a plutonium separation plant by 1969, although this was never pursued.

Gorton's position as leader of the Liberal Party was under intense pressure and he resigned in March 1971. William McMahon succeeded him. McMahon

was less enthusiastic about nuclear power than his predecessor. Reasons for this included concern over the financial costs, awareness of difficulties being experienced with reactor technology in Britain and Canada, and a more cautious attitude in relations to weapons production. McMahon put the Jervis Bay project on hold and then deferred it indefinitely.

The Labor government, elected in 1972, did nothing to revive the Jervis Bay project, and it ratified the NPT in 1973.

Since the early 1970s, there has been little high-level support for the pursuit of a domestic nuclear weapons capability. There have been indications of a degree of ongoing support for the view that nuclear weapons should not be ruled out and that Australia should be able to build nuclear weapons as quickly as any neighbour that looks like doing so. This current of thought was evident in a leaked 1984 defence document. Bill Hayden, then the Foreign Minister, attempted to persuade Prime Minister Bob Hawke in 1984 that Australia should develop a "pre-nuclear weapons capability" which would involve an upgrade of Australia's modest nuclear infrastructure. His efforts fell on deaf ears. Moreover the AAEC's uranium enrichment research, by then the major project at Lucas Heights, was terminated by government direction in the mid-1980s.

Through the 1950s, the military alliance between the US and Australia amounted to little more than a minimal formal agreement as expressed in the ANZUS Treaty. By the 1970s the construction of a number of US military / spy bases in Australia had tied Australians to the nuclear arms race. Agreements were signed in the 1960s for three major bases at North West Cape, Pine Gap, and Nurrungar. These bases became operational in the late-1960s and early-1970s.

The development of the US alliance – and the 'extended nuclear deterrence' – is arguably one of the stronger explanations for the declining interest in a domestic weapons capability from the early 1970s.

By virtue of the US alliance, Australia is a nuclear weapons state *by proxy*. The intransigence of the US and other nuclear weapons states is a fundamental barrier to global nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation efforts. Australia is part of that problem.

### **More information:**

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