



A Science Think Tank

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The Australian

I stayed with some friends in their house near Tarragona in Spain some time ago and each morning, from the balcony of my room, I could look out at the shiny white dome of the local nuclear energy plant.

It was a couple of kilometres away but looked so close at hand I almost felt I could reach out and touch it with the end of my toast. Other people in the house - and for that matter, in the neighbourhood - hardly noticed it.

But I was personally very conscious of the Tarragona reactor. I had first visited the Tarragona area in 1963 and it was then one of the poorest, most ramshackle corners of Western Europe, a notch above Third World standards - but not two notches.

Now Tarragona and the jigsaw of small towns around it would fill in as a Sydney suburb - with more interesting architecture. The area gleams with prosperity. Well-made roads and efficient public transport, handsome public buildings, unlimited fresh running water, not a broom cupboard without electricity. Virtually a century's leap forward has been made in 30 years.

The end of Franco's dictatorship and the arrival of democracy and a free economy helped Tarragona reach the 20th century. So did the Western European boom of the past 40 years, and the discovery of Spain by tourists.

But at the centre of it was the white dome alongside my balcony. I felt comfortable with the dome, anyway, but if I had bought some Tarragona real estate in 1963 I would have felt like getting out my chamois and running down to give it a polish every morning.

One more traveller's tale.

As a newspaper correspondent I lived for six years in Japan, and made several visits to Hiroshima. To be

honest, I grew a little impatient with Japanese harping on their suffering at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and on the unique perspective they brought to worldwide movements opposing nuclear weaponry.

However, I admired and still admire the coolness and commonsense with which the Japanese have embraced nuclear energy. They have more than 50 nuclear plants, and get more than a third of their electricity from them. Japan would not have become Asia's economic giant without nuclear energy.

I think it remarkable that Japanese pragmatism seems even to have withstood the impact of the accident at the nuclear test facility at Tokai-mura - especially in view of the bungling and secrecy with which the company operating the facility behaved.

This was by far the largest accident that has happened to a Japanese nuclear facility, exposing some 350,000 people to atmospheric radiation, without apparent ill-effect to more than a handful. However, this accident brought to public attention the fact that there had been seven lesser accidents at nuclear plants in the previous four years.

Some reports here made mention of a revival of the nuclear phobia of the Japanese, as a result of Hiroshima.

But the events at Tokai-mura appear to have been treated quite phlegmatically by the majority of Japanese. Perhaps experience of disaster caused by natural phenomena has hardened them to risk. Perhaps they have also grown philosophical about human error as a source of disaster.

They have seen a local government official order the turning back on of electrical power after the Kobe earthquake - and cause a devastating explosion of leaking gas. They have lived through a Japan Airlines pilot named Captain Aso making a perfect landing on a sand bar off the Californian coast - which would have been more conventionally directed at the nearby Los Angeles airport.

However, I think the real reason for Japanese calm about the mishap at Tokai-mura is that most of the population has an understanding - not so much of science and technology but of the role of nuclear energy in public policy. This may be the case with science generally.

In other words, most Japanese have a good idea of the consequences of discarding its nuclear power stations - either a ruinous reduction of productivity or a deadly increase in industrial pollution.

By contrast, the cries of horror and dismay about Tokai-mura in Australia suggests that you could probably launch a political party here, with a chance of getting a few seats in a State Upper House, with the sole platform of closing down Japanese nuclear facilities.

My own newspaper, The Australian, topped its front page with the heading: Nuclear Death Sentence. I saw another headline: It couldn't happen here - could it? above an article adding further to Lucas Heights's undeserved glamour.

I wouldn't point fingers too aggressively at newspaper headline writers, however. They have often to work fast with sparse information. A ration of three or four words doesn't permit a great deal of pro and con, either.

What perturbed me most about the Australian media's reaction to Tokai-mura was the space and air time given to the blathering of organised conservationist groups, like Greenpeace.

Here are people who dress up their children in gas masks and death masks to demonstrate against the evil of burning coal. But who won't let a valley be flooded to generate hydro-electricity. But who were now spruiking away about nuclear energy as the devil's creation.

Of course, I'm not telling anybody in this room anything he or she doesn't already know. But I want to introduce myself as a journalist with some appreciation of the public policy significance of nuclear energy. I am far from being the only member of my profession who is in this position.

I even find myself interested in the arguments in favour of Australia's storing of nuclear waste.

However, I almost never write as a contributor to popular newspapers on such subjects - except occasionally to deride people hugging trees or camping out at Jabiluka.

The truth of the matter is that there is virtually nothing Australian to write about in connection with nuclear energy. When the University of New South Wales closed down its department of nuclear engineering in 1991, science, government and the academy made sure that there wouldn't be this kind of teaching - nothing sensible, anyway.

You will remember that the New South Wales department had undergraduate as well as graduate courses. Consider the consequences if the department had flourished for the past 18 years.

It would have become at least a repository of and probably a participant in edge-of-the knife international research. It may have made significant original contributions.

It would by now have instructed perhaps as many as 400 men and women. They would constitute a corpus of expertise whose existence alone may have influenced private industrial and government planning in Australia.

It is possible that many of the Department's undergraduates at least would have gone off to careers in occupations other than nuclear engineering. Some would no doubt have become secondary school general science teachers.

Some would have become journalists - especially during the last 10 years or so, when value has come to be placed on journalists having some depth of specialised knowledge.

Closing the New South Wales school has, in fact, cost the whole country just that - some depth of specialised knowledge. Poor Australians have no depth, no knowledge at all, really. I don't know any country as phobic as we are about nuclear energy.

Like the Americans we have have chosen other energy sources because we have them in cheap, copious supply. Unlike the Americans, however, we are at risk of degenerating into Luddite zombies cattle-prodded through the desert by frauds and zealots.

My limbs grow numb when I hear and see Greenpeace taking the lead in policy matters of any kind.

Some might say the media is to blame for this situation. Hardly at all, I would respond. The task of the media is to report and comment on events. It is the task of others to provide the events, which include football games, crimes, books, movies, paintings, sexual provocation - and shared ideas.

Not to be too uppity, I believe Australia's nuclear science community has been far too reticent in sharing its ideas, leaving a lot of the job to Greenpeace. Much the same could be said of other physical sciences.

As you would all be aware, university enrolments in graduate science courses are in sharp decline. This may be because students come to universities from a society unacquainted with science as part of intellectual life.

Australia could use a really good scientific think tank.

The two outstanding think tanks of the moment, the Centre for Independent Studies in Sydney and the

IPA in Melbourne, began essentially as analysts of economics in public policy formation.

Both have expanded over the years to consider political, social and cultural issues. The Centre for Independent Studies recently added a religion and policy unit.

Through seminars and forums, public lectures, learned papers, books and quarterly journals the two organisations have had significant influence on the thinking of national leaders in many fields.

The Centre for Independent Studies has assembled a formidable list of scholarly consultants. Its objective is not popular education, nor propaganda, but genuinely to promote independent thinking of a high order on matters of consequence to a civil society.

Is science not such a matter? It would a badge of honour for nuclear scientists if they were to be the ones to found a science think tank.

Cost should be no great concern, Greg Lindsay founded the Centre for Independent Studies 25 years ago on his own in his toolshed.