

# Opinion & Analysis

## Is it time to think it out again on nuclear power?



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**I**F YOU can find something everyone agrees on, there's a good chance it is dead wrong. One of our few remaining national certainties is our collective reflex rejection of nuclear power.

For our political establishment, it is an article of faith that nuclear energy is a bad thing. Is there an Irish politician who has ever lost a vote condemning Sellafield? For the Green Party, their own resolutely anti-nuclear stance is the one environmental issue guaranteed to have the Coalition partners agreeing violently.

State policy until 2020 was framed in last year's energy White Paper. "The Government will maintain the statutory prohibition on nuclear generation in Ireland," it stated. "For reasons of security, safety, economic feasibility and system operation, nuclear generation is not an appropriate choice." It didn't even get a line in yesterday's carbon budget announcement.

Perhaps the real reason why it is a non-starter shows up in another part of the document. And this is "public antipathy towards nuclear power". Ireland's strong anti-nuclear posture has been largely shaped by two decades of forceful post-Chernobyl campaigning led by Adi Roche. Until very recently, there were few dissenters from this

vague yet potent moral consensus. Nuclear energy may or may not have a useful role to play in securing Ireland's emissions targets in the medium term, but we won't find out if we refuse to discuss it. Few regard nuclear power as an energy panacea, but to totally exclude it while promoting the oxymoronic "clean coal" smacks of ideology.

In the wake of the oil shocks, in 1977, then Fianna Fáil minister, Des O'Malley famously proposed nuclear power as a way for Ireland to obtain energy independence. The idea fell after concerted public protests. As Minister for the Environment John Gormley recalled: "All organisations have their foundation stories. For the Green Party, whenever old heads get together they will eventually get around to reminiscing about Carnsore Point."

Lacking our moral purity, France chose a radically different path; it invested massively in nuclear and today its 59 plants generate about 80 per cent of the country's total electricity, which is also much cheaper than Irish electricity.

The nuclear accident in Three Mile Island in 1979 halted the industry in the US for 30 years. Now, more than two dozen new plants are in the pipeline. Climate change has breathed new life into a debate that seemed to be dead and buried, especially after the

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Chernobyl disaster in 1986.

But all across the world, governments are rethinking their nuclear options in the light of the overwhelming imperative to drastically cut CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. In 2000, Germany legislated for the total phasing out of nuclear power. Alternative technologies were to allow them to smoothly phase out their nuclear plants. Despite huge investment, renewables are still coming up short. Combined output from wind, solar and biomass, still make up only 14 per cent of German energy supply. Meanwhile, plans to phase out nuclear have been quietly mothballed.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) is firmly behind a massive global investment in renewable energy, but it also argues that the world may need another 1,300 new nuclear reactors by mid-century. IEA executive director Nobuo Tanaka said recently that Ireland would fail to achieve its goal of cutting carbon emissions by 50 per cent by 2050 if it continues to rule out nuclear.

Had Des O'Malley's plan gone ahead, cash-strapped Minister for Finance Brian Lenihan could today be looking at a situation where older reactors (having paid off their capital costs) would be pouring €1 million a day into the coffers, as is now the case in Germany.

While many environmentalists remain implacably opposed, others suggest it is time to think it out again. James Lovelock, the grandfather of environmentalism declared bluntly in 2004: "only nuclear power can now halt global warming". It's a view echoed by Nobel prize winner Al Gore.

It is almost certain that the US will shortly place a price tag on carbon emissions. This should permanently tilt the economic argument decisively away from fossil fuels and towards both nuclear and renewables. The world's largest producers of uranium are Canada and Australia. They are surely less

volatile energy sources than Russia and the Middle East.

The received wisdom has been that nuclear power is fatally flawed in that it's risky, expensive and that radioactive waste is an unfixable problem. Global warming is the game changer. We must now measure the very small risk of a serious nuclear incident against the near-certainty of catastrophic climate change driven by pumping billions of tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> into our atmosphere. Containing nuclear waste is a challenge. Containing carbon emissions is a virtual impossibility. Many of us fear flying, yet the drive to the airport is the riskiest part of the journey. We fret about Sellafield yet don't bother putting on our children's seatbelts. As individuals, we are poor judges of risk.

Burning coal emits deadly carcinogens, including mercury and nitrogen oxide. Chernobyl was bad, but according to the IEA, in total just 56 people died, with another 4,000 cancer deaths likely among exposed people. Contrast that with the millions worldwide who die every year from the direct effects of fossil fuel combustion.

Like Lisbon, our high-minded opposition to nuclear power at all costs is beginning to take us out of step with Europe and down an isolationist path we may yet bitterly regret.