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TRANSCRIPT

Coalition nuclear confusion: call for Dr Nelson to rule out nuclear power.

**E&OE TRANSCRIPT
INTERVIEW SKY NEWS
THURSDAY 28 FEBRUARY 2008**

11.10 am

LEIGH HATCHER: The Federal Opposition may have scrapped its support for a nuclear industry in Australia.

TRACEY SPICER: Coalition Environment spokesman Greg Hunt says the Coalition's policy was changed at a shadow cabinet meeting in December. But their leader Dr Nelson is denying that. Environment Minister Peter Garrett joins us on the phone now. Good morning.

PETER GARRETT: Morning Tracey

TRACEY SPICER: Do you welcome this apparent about face?

PETER GARRETT: Well is it an about face or isn't it? That is the big question. And at the moment we've got a senior Liberal Shadow Minister saying it's a highly different thing. And it's very clear that if in fact they have scrapped that policy, then Dr Nelson needs to come out and make absolutely clear that he rules out any nuclear power stations across the country. He's just got to literally say we are not now in favour of nuclear energy and that is our position. Now he's not saying that, he's saying something completely different. So he needs to clarify where they stand on this issue.

LEIGH HATCHER: He's denied it's changed, yet Greg Hunt says the move was decided at a shadow cabinet meeting three months ago, just after the election.

PETER GARRETT: Yeah look, I think the public are entitled to be a bit bemused, if not downright frustrated, at the failure of the Liberal Party to get its policy settings in place. If in fact they have decided at a shadow cabinet meeting that they have reversed their policy on wanting to have nuclear power plants in Australia, then they should make that clear. We had Shadow Defence Minister Minchin saying specifically we are not supporting nuclear power, and that it is not Coalition policy. We now have the Opposition Leader saying it is Coalition policy to investigate the possibility of nuclear energy. Enough of these shadowy words. The challenge here for the Opposition Leader, Dr Nelson, is to rule out nuclear power stations once and for all. Not engage in some sort of investigation and some sort of secret form of policy analysis, but just make clear to the Australian people where they stand.

TRACEY SPICER: Minister, with all due respect. Isn't this a bit like the pot calling the kettle black, with your individual, and your party's flip flopping on the nuclear issue over the past couple of years?

PETER GARRETT: Well Tracey, I don't think that's the case at all. I think we went to the election campaign with a very clear policy on saying that under Labor there would not be nuclear reactors in Australia. There are some 25 reactors that the former Prime Minister, Mr Howard, was proposing and that his nuclear tsar Dr Switkowski had been advancing. And we said specifically and clearly that under Labor there would not be nuclear power stations in Australia. Nothing could have been clearer and we campaigned on that. And frankly the Australian people provided the most necessary and clear signals that they ever could on this issue, when they voted resolutely in November of 2007.

Now it seems as though the Liberal Party party room sort of got the message. But it seems like Dr Nelson hasn't got the message. Maybe that shouldn't surprise us, because Tracey, it was Dr Nelson who was one of the strongest proponents of nuclear energy when he was in government. And now we have some of his senior colleagues saying that they're not in favour of nuclear energy and nuclear power stations and yet he himself is unable to rule it out. That is a completely unacceptable policy position for the Opposition to be in, more confusion, perhaps it's a back-flip, but it's up to Dr Nelson to rule out nuclear power from the coalition's policy agenda.

LEIGH HATCHER: Can we put it like this? If you see the dire warnings of the future from the Garnaut interim report, is there no chance that the Government would consider nuclear power in any shape or form? If, as the supporters say, it's cleaner and more efficient and less impactful on our environment than alternatives?

PETER GARRETT: Well Lee, we have never accepted the view that 25 nuclear reactors dotted up and down the Australian coastline in and near our cities and suburbs producing tens of thousands of tonnes of radioactive waste is a solution to climate change.

LEIGH HATCHER: How about one or two though?

PETER GARRETT: Absolutely not. We totally rule out nuclear power plants as a solution to climate change. We think that there are better, safer, cleaner, and in the long-term, cost effective solutions to deal with that issue. But here's the rub, Mr Howard when he was Prime Minister specifically said that he would announce plans into the Parliament to repeal legislation dealing with nuclear matters.

At the Liberal Party conference, the conference basically said, look nuclear power is inevitable, and also incidentally that Australia should be contemplated as a place for the location of global nuclear waste. They said all along the line that they believe that we should have 25 nuclear reactors in and around Australian cities and suburbs - and the Australian people emphatically repudiated the Liberal Party position on nuclear. Now it seems as though there are senior Opposition Ministers who frankly got the message from the Australian public, but here the Opposition Leader doesn't seem to have got the message. It's now time for him, given that he's at complete odds with his Shadow Environment Minister and his Defence Minister to make clear what their position is.

LEIGH HATCHER: Peter Garrett, appreciate your time, thanks for joining us.

PETER GARRETT: Thanks Leigh.

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