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FUTURE SUMMIT 2007 Shaping the Future

Tech-savvy see shift in power grid

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THE ability to navigate an iPod may seem far removed from the task of coming up with workable, cost-effective technologies to battle climate change. But a generation that sees technology as a solution rather than something to be feared may lead to a radical shift in efforts to reduce carbon emissions.

Ziggy Switkowski, nuclear physicist and businessman, thinks there is growing acceptance that nuclear energy, with its low emissions of carbon, will be a key tool. John Howard's decision to commission a report from Switkowski on the viability of nuclear power, and Labor's decision to cast off a 25-year ban on further mining, have been part of the shift. But shaking off the fears of the past is also guiding the reassessment.

"The absence of, over 20 years, any debate is part of the reason there are still concerns about nuclear power," he says.

"The debate we have had over the past 12 months... has put nuclear [power] back on the table. And already you can see the community engaging. Not necessarily in a supportive sense, but they are certainly much more open-minded than 12 months ago."

Thirty-one countries have more than 400 nuclear reactors between them, with another eight looking for their first. Those nations have traversed the complicated issues that dog nuclear power, but Australia is behind.

"We live in an age where technology is much more accepted and much less threatening than may have been the case [in the past]," Switkowski says. "The way [in] which Australians as a nation embrace technology gives you confidence that the technology is not an inhibitor or a source of concern."

But the nuclear option has a troubled legacy. Its origins lie in World War II and there have been catastrophic events such as Chernobyl, and upper-atmosphere weapons testing.

"All of this has added up to giving nuclear a dark halo, and we just have to evolve," Switkowski says. "Australia is grappling with these memories later than other countries."

Climate change is one of the key issues to be debated at the Future Summit 2007, titled New World Order 2.0, in Melbourne next week, which will examine how Australia traverses the economic, geopolitical and societal shifts in power over the coming decade. Switkowski makes a compelling case for the potential of uranium mining. He thinks bipartisan support for uranium mining and export may be the most important contribution Australia makes to the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions.

Nuclear power accounts for 15 per cent of electricity generation in the world. Raise that to 16 per cent and the cut in emissions is the equivalent of Labor's proposed 60 per cent cut on 2000 levels. Lift it to 16.5 per cent and the pollution reduction is equal to all of Australia's emissions. More important, Switkowski thinks the expansion will be huge, turning a \$500 million industry into a \$10 billion enterprise in a decade, more than accounting for any flattening of the coal industry.