

We should not be exporting uranium because you are exporting cancer

Not recognised among Australia's 100 most influential people, anti-nuclear campaigner Dr Helen Caldicott still stands tall on the world stage, Erin O'Dwyer writes. 'We've gone backwards decades under Bush and Howard'

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LIKE all our best intellectuals, Helen Caldicott is better known in the United States than at home.

In 1982, she silenced a crowd of 1 million people who gathered in New York's Central Park to hear her speak on nuclear disarmament.

But in 1998, when she addressed 1000 people in Engadine protesting against Sydney's Lucas Heights reactor, Caldicott was shouted down by hecklers.

It was a similar story last week when The Bulletin magazine listed 100 of the most influential Australians. Cookery writer Margaret Fulton and pop star Kylie Minogue made the cut. Helen Caldicott, the world's leading anti-nuclear voice, did not.

Yet she has been named as one of the 100 most influential women of the 20th century by the Smithsonian Institution, and she was nominated in 1985 for the Nobel peace prize.

Perhaps it's tall poppy syndrome. Perhaps it is sexism. Or perhaps Caldicott is unsung here simply because we have stopped listening to her message.

"In the '70s and '80s, Australia was very anti-nuclear," she says. "And I used to be very well listened to in Australia in the '70s and '80s. But we've gone backwards decades under the Bush Administration and under the Howard administration and it's been quite devastating."

This month Caldicott publishes her sixth book - Nuclear Power Is Not The Answer To Global Warming Or Anything Else (Melbourne University Press). It comes as the nuclear energy debate heats up amid increased awareness that Australia has about 40 per cent of the world's recoverable uranium resources.

Caldicott hopes the book will penetrate the political untruth that nuclear energy is a safe, green alternative.

"[People] think that it is the answer to global warming," she says, "but in truth it adds to global warming. It does not fix it."

Caldicott's message has always been simple. Nuclear energy leaves a toxic legacy to future generations because it produces not only global warming gases but also massive amounts of toxic carcinogenic radioactive waste. It is also far more expensive than other forms of electricity generation and can trigger proliferation of nuclear weapons.

Even worse, radioactive elements in nuclear-powered countries are already leaking - into the ground, into rivers and oceans, and into the food chain. Already 40 per cent of Europe's

landmass is radioactive after Chernobyl, and increasingly so are its food supplies. Alarmingly that includes human breast milk.

Caldicott warns that as more people are exposed, cancers such as leukemia will become more common. So will genetic diseases such as cystic fibrosis. "We should not be exporting uranium because by exporting uranium, you are exporting cancer," she says.

A pediatrician who specialised in cystic fibrosis, Caldicott first grabbed headlines protesting against French nuclear testing in the 1970s. She used her profile to mobilise trade unions and elicited an ACTU resolution to ban uranium mining.

After migrating to the US in the late '70s with her then husband Bill Caldicott, she became a faculty member of the Harvard Medical School. There she mobilised doctors and established Physicians for Social Responsibility with 23,000 influential members. It became one of the US's most powerful anti-nuclear lobby groups and won the Nobel peace prize in 1985.

Caldicott had resigned from the leadership group amid political power play and did not attend the ceremony. Yet she refused to let that devastating experience stop her. She went on to teach at leading universities and was honoured with countless awards and honorary degrees.

Three years ago, she established the Nuclear Policy Research Institute in Washington, known for its high-powered scientific symposiums. She has just been named as the inaugural winner of the Australian Peace Prize.

The journey hasn't always been easy. On the eve of her 50th birthday, Caldicott's marriage ended. All her anti-nuclear work was "ashes in my mouth".

She includes the break-up when asked about her personal milestones. She also includes the births of her six grandchildren. This is because, as a pediatrician, Caldicott's motivation has always been her children, her children's children and children everywhere. "It's one of the reasons I do the work I do," she says. "I practise global preventative medicine."

This year Caldicott will turn 68. She is slowing down, spending less time on the world stage and more time with family at her Central Coast hideaway. But she refuses to go quietly, and has mastered the art of working smarter not harder.

Now, instead of rallying unionists and doctors, she maintains a contact book of the world's top opinion leaders and journalists. Three times during our interview she quotes Thomas Jefferson about a functioning democracy requiring an informed citizenry.

"In the old days it was grass roots and this time it's tree tops," she says. "I'm getting older and it's more efficient to educate the media because through them you get to millions of people."

Caldicott's motivation might always have been her family, but these days she is careful to spend more time with them.

The best example is the night Madonna called to chat about the medical dangers of nuclear power.

Caldicott was preparing a lamb roast for her family and said: "Madonna, I can't take your call right now. I'll have to talk to you later."

"My family has never forgiven me," she says with a laugh.

"But my children were resentful that I wasn't around much and I do think about that. I wish I had been.

"On the other hand, I was wanting to make sure that they had a future. Nothing you do comes without consequences."

See <http://www.nuclearpolicy.org> and <http://www.helencaldicott.com>

<http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/we-should.....html>