

## **Campaigner attacks nuclear inquiry's credibility**

Australian Broadcasting Corporation

7.30 Report

TV PROGRAM TRANSCRIPT

Broadcast: 03/07/2006

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**KERRY O'BRIEN, PRESENTER:** Twenty-five years ago, Australian doctor Helen Caldicott was one of the most powerful and compelling figures on America's public stage. She founded a movement of more than 20,000 physicians and scientists against the nuclear arms race, and even her enemies had to acknowledge the potency of her appeal.

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** Don't believe what they're saying, watch what they do.

### **CHEERING AND APPLAUSE**

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** In one disarmament rally in New York's Central Park in 1982, something like a million people turned out to hear her speak. But the end of the Cold War was pretty much the end of the movement, and the one-time Nobel Prize nominee eventually retired to the NSW Central Coast. Yet in recent years, she's sought to rekindle the spark of protest. And now, as the Australian Government launches its inquiry into the feasibility of nuclear power here, she's already moved to attack its credibility, with her own launch in Melbourne this week - a book called Nuclear Power is Not the Answer. I spoke with Helen Caldicott at her home near Gosford.

Helen Caldicott, can I begin with, I suppose, the most obvious question. You had an enormous following in the early 80s. The impetus of your campaign tended to peter out as the threat of nuclear holocaust dissipated. You retired to your coastal garden and to spend more time with family. Why the comeback?

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT, ANTI-NUCLEAR ACTIVIST:** Well, I, too, thought that the risk of nuclear war would just dissipate and go away and the main movers and shakers would get rid of the nuclear weapons and for a while there in the 90s, no-one really knew which direction it was going to take. And then Clinton was elected and Clinton didn't have the courage to take on the Pentagon. He was scared of them. He just let the matter lie. And now America and Russia still target each other on hair-trigger alert with thousands of nuclear weapons. And I'm trying to set up a conference with the Pentagon at the moment and the White House and the Russians to talk about the fact that we could be blown off the face of the earth tonight. And it's more serious now than it was at the height of the Cold War.

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** And yet, you found it very hard to reignite the spark this time round, haven't you? Why?

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** Because people think the risk's gone away. They're practising psychic numbing. Thank God it's all finished, we're friendly with the Russians. But the fact is the Russian early warning system doesn't work and by accident or by terrorist intrusion they could blow up the world tonight.

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** On nuclear power, on which your book is about to be launched, you say the arguments against nuclear power are overwhelming. You're not shaken by the fact that some highly-respected global warming campaigners say that the threat of greenhouse is so great that the risks of nuclear power are outweighed by the benefits that nuclear power on a large scale would deliver on greenhouse.

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** What are the benefits it would deliver? The fact is that the nuclear fuel cycle from A to Z, mining, milling, enriching, building the reactor, storing the waste for half a million years, produce a lot of greenhouse gases. So nuclear power, in fact, adds to greenhouse warming, does not detract, does not negate it, adds to it substantially.

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** But once a nuclear power station is built, it is then not adding to greenhouse, correct?

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** No, but you've got to make the fuel, Kerry. You've got to enrich the uranium, you've got to dig it up and the quality of uranium will be declining rapidly over time and it's going to produce, use a huge amount of fossil fuel to enrich it. So soon, in a decade or two, a nuclear power plant will produce as much CO<sub>2</sub> as a similar sized gas-fired plant. So the argument is fallacious, but the nuclear industry is spending hundreds of millions of dollars to convince people that nuclear power is the answer to global warming, which it's not.

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** But some highly credible scientists, eminent scientists, are swayed by the argument.

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** Name them. Which ones?

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** Well, I'll tell you. James Lovelock is a powerful environmentalist and scientific voice, isn't he? When he calls for a massive expansion in the world's nuclear energy programs because he believes it's the only option left to stem the rapid advance of the greenhouse threat, I mean, is he dumb on this?

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** He's off the tracks. I've spoken to James Lovelock several times. He thinks that oxygen causes cancer, although he's a medical scientist. And he said, "Look, the way to heat my house is to put nuclear waste in my basement". So he wasn't open to reason or understanding. He's right on greenhouse warming, absolutely. He's totally wrong on nuclear power. And nuclear power from a medical perspective will, over time, induce epidemics of cancer and leukaemia and genetic disease forever more. And if he's a medical scientist he should indeed be concerned about that.

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** No-one can doubt Tim Flannery's scientific and environmental credentials. He says James Lovelock has a point on nuclear power. Flannery, too, is coming to see nuclear power as possibly a lesser of evils with regard to greenhouse in Australia.

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** You don't replace one evil with another, Kerry.

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** If it's the lesser of evils?

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** It's not the lesser of evils. The generation of nuclear power is the only electricity generation that can destroy a city. There are two huge nuclear reactors 35

miles from Manhattan. They were targets for the 9/11 terrorists. If one of those goes and the wind blows towards Manhattan, that's the end of the financial capital of the world.

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** If all the arguments against nuclear power are as overwhelming as you assert, particularly the economic arguments like the need for massive government subsidies, surely those arguments have to win the day? In which case, what have you got to worry about?

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** Yeah, it's a good point. I mean, Wall Street is very reluctant to invest in nuclear power. Standard & Poor's now - they are very allergic to it. And really, it's a socialised industry. The Energy Bill of 2005 in the US allocated \$13 billion to subsidise nuclear power. It can't operate without huge government subsidies. So it's a socialised industry and a capitalistic society. And if the government keeps subsidising it, then I guess they can build a few reactors but certainly not enough to make any difference to global warming, not that they will anyway in the long term.

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** You attack the nuclear industry for propagandising, but haven't you been guilty of setting out to manipulate your audiences over the years in the way you have sold your case, at times, dare I suggest, to harangue, generate fear, to push your arguments to the limits, to enlist the public to your cause?

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** How?

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** I've seen you give speeches to audiences.

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** And?

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** I would say promoting fear by painting very fearful cases of the picture that you paint of a nuclear holocaust, the picture that you paint in this interview of nuclear accident, isn't that pushing at emotions?

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** Kerry, I don't want the only life in the universe to be destroyed and it's possible to do that now and it makes me scared and I'm a paediatrician having taken the Hippocratic oath. All the world's children are potentially my patients. I'm practising global preventative medicine. And so I have to speak the truth. And if it makes people frightened...you know, it's hard to speak this stuff, because it's boring, you know, and if you've got an audience and you're giving them fact after fact, they sort of go to sleep. So you have to be an actress, too, to wake them up and get them to face reality. Like getting a person to stop smoking. I've done that lots of times by scaring them and they hate me. But you know what, they stop smoking. This is practising preventative medicine.

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** Coming back to your personal motivation. You say in retirement you became depressed, did you honestly ask yourself whether a part of that depression was simply that you missed the fray?

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** Partly and partly because I'm pretty intuitive to my detriment. And I know what's happening, I can see what can happen in the future. I'm not good at denial, I'm not.

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** You've talked before about the personal cost to your family of your years of campaigning. What's been the worst of that personal cost?

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** I lost my marriage.

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** Worth it?

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** It's hard to know, really, isn't it? I mean, it was my destiny to do this work and it kind of still is. I knew from a child that I would do something like this.

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** But isn't that - look, I'm not suggesting that this is so in your case, but when a person talks about their destiny, isn't there a little bit of a danger in that that you kind of can persuade yourself to all sorts of things because you say it's your destiny?

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** I couldn't not have done it, Kerry. I read *On The Beach* when I was 15. And that was the turning - I lost my innocence. I lived in Melbourne. I could feel the bombs exploding shortly after that. We could destroy life on earth. Then I did medicine at the age of 17, I learned about genetics and radiation. It was so obvious to me and Russia and America were blowing up bombs in the atmosphere and the fallout was falling down and Linus Pauling said children would get leukaemia and cancer, medically it's obvious. Now, I could practise medicine, I could have stayed at Harvard and done really well. I had a great boss. But I could see beyond pouring stuff into test tubes and treating individual patients. What was the use of caring for my patients so carefully if, in fact, they had no future?

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** And so here you go again?

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** Yeah.

**KERRY O'BRIEN:** Helen Caldicott, thanks for talking with us.

**DR HELEN CALDICOTT:** Thanks, Kerry.

<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2006/s1677668.htm>