

Profile - Helen Caldicott

By Lucinda Schmidt

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This anti-nuclear campaigner has spent a lifetime striving to create a better world.

The day after the Federal Government approved a new uranium mine in South Australia, veteran anti-nuclear campaigner Helen Caldicott was appalled. In her view, exporting uranium, to any country, is morally indefensible.

"I think it's devastating," she says, describing Prime Minister Kevin Rudd as "a wolf in sheep's clothing" and accusing Environment Minister Peter Garrett of moral turpitude.

"I'm so ashamed to be an Australian at the moment," says Caldicott, 71, a Melbourne-born medical doctor.

"As we export uranium, we're in fact exporting nuclear weapons, cancer, leukaemia and genetic disease. It's a public health issue."

In the 1970s and 1980s, Caldicott was one of the world's leading anti-nuclear voices, as the Cold War generated fear of a nuclear holocaust.

In Australia, she played a big role in forcing the French atmospheric nuclear tests underground, after writing a letter to a newspaper in 1971 about the increase in radiation levels in Adelaide's water supply following tests over the Pacific Ocean.

The ensuing publicity caused a wave of citizen rebellion against France, including a boycott of its cheese and perfume ??? a campaign Caldicott led while she was working 80 hours a week as a pediatrician and caring for three small children of her own.

"People say they're too busy; I say you always have time if you're passionate enough," she says.

Her next victory was a five-year union ban on uranium exports ??? an industry she attacked by talking to workers about the medical dangers of uranium, including the effect of radiation on their testicles.

"I don't call myself an activist, I call myself a doctor practising preventative medicine," she says.

In the US, where Caldicott lived for a decade from 1977, the Smithsonian Institution named her one of the most influential women of the 20th century and she spoke at a rally of 1 million people in New York's Central Park in 1982.

More recently, as the US-Russian relationship thawed and the public's fear of nuclear war abated, Caldicott has faded from prominence. Speaking to her by phone at her home on NSW's South Coast, however, it's clear she's still fighting.

Two days after the interview, she was off to Madrid to attend a committee meeting alongside US economist Joseph Stiglitz and British economist Sir Nicholas Stern advising the Spanish Government on climate-change issues.

She's just revised her 1992 book *If You Love This Planet ??? A Plan To Heal The Earth* and has plans to write her eighth, tentatively titled *Why Men Kill*.

"I haven't retired, I think I never will," says Caldicott, who has been passionate about anti-nuclear issues since reading Neville Shute's novel *On The Beach* as a 15-year-old.

"That really seared my soul, I've never forgotten it," she says.

She admits it's harder to ignite the spark of citizen rebellion now. But the revival of nuclear power as an answer to global warming, and the continuing presence of Russian and US nuclear weapons targeted at each other's cities, keeps her passion alive despite the high personal cost of 35 years spent campaigning on nuclear issues.

Her marriage ended 20 years ago, she's received at least eight serious death threats, she gave up her medical career in 1980 to work full-time on

anti-nuclear issues and she was ousted from the organisation she co-founded in the US, Physicians for Social Responsibility, before it won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985.

"I wasn't home much when the children were adolescents and they still resent that ??? although we're very close now," she says.

"But I don't think anything could have stopped me, I could feel the heat of nuclear war."

THE BIG QUESTIONS

Biggest break In 1981, [Hollywood publicist] Pat Kingsley heard me speak and offered to represent me. I couldn't afford her but she waived her fee and used her film stars to get me on [US talk shows] Phil Donahue and Merv Griffin and in *Family Circle* magazine. She'd say: "You can have [comedian] Lily Tomlin if you also take this Australian doctor."

Biggest achievement Helping to end the Cold War ??? although Bill Clinton's legacy is that it still goes on [because he didn't get rid of the US nuclear weapons]. And helping to stop uranium mining [for five years from 1976]. And the third thing is getting the French nuclear tests to go underground [in 1971].

Biggest regret I was very sad about the end of my marriage but one does get over that.

Best investment My three children. They're marvellous human beings and it's what I've contributed; it's my gift.

Worst investment I don't really think like that.

Attitude to money I've never thought about money really. I believe I'm here to serve; I took the Hippocratic Oath. If patients can't pay they'll give you a cake or a chook.

Personal philosophy I want written on my gravestone: 'She tried'. I try to live by doing the right thing.