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Nuclear waste imports could turn Canada into a dump: Dion

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NIAGARA FALLS, ONT. and SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA Canada would become a "nuclear waste garbage dump" if the federal government agrees to import spent nuclear fuel from other countries under a proposed international partnership, Liberal Leader Stéphane Dion said yesterday.

In a speech to an Ontario energy conference, Mr. Dion noted the Conservative government is considering joining the U.S.-led Global Nuclear Energy Partnership, which could include a requirement that Canada take back waste from countries to which it exports uranium or sells Candu reactors.

Prime Minister Stephen Harper is in Australia for a meeting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum, where the nuclear partnership is expected to be discussed. Like Canada, Australia is a major uranium producer and its government has expressed interest in joining the group, which includes nuclear powers such as the U.S., France, China and Russia.

"I am concerned about Prime Minister Harper going off to Australia and having discussions behind closed doors to potentially broker a deal - a deal that would have all of the waste generated from the uranium we sell to the world, back on our doorstep for disposal," Mr. Dion told a meeting of the Ontario Energy Association. "Imagine - we would become a global nuclear waste garbage dump."

In an interview, the Liberal Leader said the Conservatives have failed to provide leadership on the disposal of nuclear waste.

Last spring, the government endorsed a plan for disposal of the nuclear waste, including decades of above-ground storage at the reactor sites, followed by deep burial at a central storage area. The plan left open the door for possible reprocessing of domestic nuclear waste.

This week, Natural Resources Minister Gary Lunn said he believes it is inevitable that the spent fuel, which contains significant energy potential, will be reprocessed, and then reused by the domestic Candu owners. However, Mr. Lunn denied Canada would be required to accept imported waste under the global partnership agreement.

Mr. Harper told a Friday afternoon press conference in Sydney that he felt no pressure to decide, within a particular time frame, whether Canada should take part in the initiative.

"Obviously, in terms of anything internationally in this, Canada would have two priorities. One is to ensure that our uranium industry and our nuclear industry are not left out of any of the international opportunities that other countries may take advantage of," he told reporters.

"And, at the same time, we would obviously want to make sure that any kind of international agreement or any kind of international co-operation on nuclear energy fully respects the non-proliferation agreements and the non-proliferation objectives that Canada and other major countries have long subscribed to."

But Mr. Dion wants the government to take a stand. He said Canada has to decide what to do with its own nuclear waste - including whether the industry will be allowed to reprocess the spent fuel rods - before it deals with the international issue.

"First, we need to have a debate in Canada about what to do with our own waste. If we are comfortable, if we have a solution - if all the majors are saying 'I want a site in my community - let's talk after. But we are not there."

In Sydney, Foreign Minister Maxime Bernier said the government will make that decision "in the near future." Canada and Australia, both non-members but major uranium producers, have been asked to attend a conference about the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership in Vienna on Sept. 16."We have been very clear right now that no decision has been taken here in Canada," Mr. Bernier said. "Australia and Canada, we are two major producers in the world and we have considerable interests in whatever the United States and the international community have in mind - in terms of future uranium development and production and marketing - so we will have a decision in the near future about our participation."

Australian Trade Minister Warren Truss said yesterday that between them, Australia and Canada accounted for about 60 to 70 per cent of the world's uranium production.

"We could reach an agreement that we both take every means to ensure it is used for peaceful purposes," Mr. Truss told The Australian newspaper. "Because we are in such an influential position, we could make sure the uranium is used wisely and under proper supervision."

The Canadian nuclear industry is keen to see the government join the international grouping, arguing that if it does not, Canada will be shut out of the lucrative business of reprocessing nuclear waste. That technology is expected to become more attractive as countries build more reactors and supplies of raw uranium become tighter.

Murray Elston, president of the Canadian Nuclear Association, said the federal government undertook an exhaustive review of nuclear-waste disposal issues, including the possibility that the industry would reprocess domestically produced waste.

"Now, Mr. Harper is now talking to the folks in Australia about not only accessing the value of energy which is still in our materials here, but the prospect that having sent the uranium to other areas, that we could then repatriate it to make it available for more energy for the external market," said Mr. Elston, who was also attending the conference in Niagara Falls.

He added that the "repatriation" of the waste would allow poor, undeveloped countries to purchase nuclear reactors without them - and the rest of the world - having to worry the disposal of the radioactive waste.