Topics for the preliminary rounds

Round 1 - That Australia should cease all uranium exports

Uranium has been mined and processed in Australia for over a century. Australia is endowed with the world's largest reserves and is the world's third-ranking producer. Almost all its uranium production is exported, with a value of over A$1 billion. It generates over A$65 million in government income and about 1200 people are employed in uranium mining. With energy demand growing, especially in East Asia, uranium’s demand and price are expected to rise.

Policy on uranium mining has varied over four decades, from encouragement by offering tax concessions to almost being banned. Generally, there is only one commercial use for uranium, as a fuel for nuclear power generation. There are no nuclear power generation plants operating in Australia and therefore there is no domestic demand.

Even when Australian uranium is supplied for electrical power generation only and under the strictest safeguards, the fuel could be used for the wrong reasons. Should Australia cease exporting uranium, and therefore shut down its uranium industry to stop its contribution to the nuclear fuel cycle? To what extent would Australia be morally responsible if its fuel was used for building nuclear weapons? Would it help the international community if Australia stopped its exports or would it bring deeper problems?

At present, each country is ethically and legally responsible for its own waste. Yet, that may change in the future. Should Australia stop its uranium mining to avoid any potential issues surrounding waste disposal? If Australia decides to cease exporting uranium, is it possible to overcome public and political opposition against nuclear power producing plants to save the mining industry and at the same time reduce greenhouse gas emissions from electricity generation? Once Australia allows nuclear power generation, it will need to find a solution for its waste disposal, is this cost worth paying?

Morally, stopping uranium export may be the road to follow but, is it in the national interest? And, would ceasing exports help in facing the major challenges of the uranium industry?
Round 2 - That Australian universities should cease accepting international students

Education, along with mining and agriculture, has emerged as a major export industry for Australia. In the past two decades enrolments of international students in Australian universities have grown exponentially. So, should participation of international students in Australian universities be encouraged? Does the education sector deserve the same type of support and government assistance provided to other export industries? On the other hand, does the focus on international students reduce education opportunities and experience for Australian students?

In today’s globalised world, international students in Australian universities can present an opportunity to engage with the world. However, if universities become fragmented in groups unable to engage with each other in quality educational discourse, international students divert resources away from the Australian universities, and therefore, from the domestic students.

The main goal for Australian universities should be to equip the future labour force with skills and knowledge to meet future challenges. The question is how and whether educating international students contributes towards that goal.
Round 3 - That we should prohibit Chinese corporations from owning Australian natural resource companies

China’s investment abroad has grown dramatically in the few years since the ministry of commerce in China encouraged Chinese enterprises to “go global” in 2002. In the 2008/9 financial year, Chinese direct investment (FDI) into Australia amounted to over US$25 billion, most of it in the resources sector. In 2010, China was Australia’s third largest FDI source country, following the US and UK.

Chinese investors in the Australian resources sector are drawn to securing the supply of resources to satisfy rapidly growing markets in China. In addition, by forming joint ventures with Australian companies, Chinese investors could benefit from Australian know-how, technology and markets – which have a positive impact on Chinese operational efficiency and corporate standing.

While Chinese direct investment in the resources sector brings benefits to Australia - including the provision of capital, technology, know-how and access to markets - there are several concerns regarding these developments from Australia’s perspective.

The first is about Chinese control over global resource markets. A common argument is that the Chinese strategy is to lock world resources away from other buyers and create a monopoly advantage for Chinese buyers.

The second is about state ownership of Chinese enterprise. The new wave of Chinese investments mostly originates from state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and state-owned wealth funds. Will a SOE behave as efficiently as private profit-maximising enterprise? Will the government involvement place political goals before economic ones?
Topic for Semi-finals

That developing countries should prioritise economic development over environmental concerns

Economic growth, especially during initial phases of development tends to be driven by the agricultural and manufacturing sectors. This historical trend indicates that economic growth in less developed countries will place a significant burden on natural resources and the environment as production and incomes and hence, demand in the economy, increase. While societies today understand more about long term and lasting damage to the environment created in this process, urgent and pressing needs and aspirations of people in developing countries must be met.

What are the 'real' costs of environmental damage? Can these be balanced against the benefits of higher incomes and economic activity, particularly for the poor in developing countries? Is the trade-off between economic growth and environmental concerns real, long-term or sustainable? While some consider a sustainable environment to be a luxury good and that environmental concerns should be a priority only after reaching a certain level of development; others consider that a sustainable environment should be a crucial pre-condition for long term growth. This dilemma is a real policy issue facing developing countries today.