

THE NUCLEAR ENERGY DEBATE:

CAN THERE EVER BE CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE?

Address given to the Canadian Nuclear Society
Officers' Seminar

Constellation Hotel

September 13, 1984

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I don't know how many of you have noticed, but it seems there is an occupational hazard faced by nuclear energy supporters which has not been identified by the AECB or Ministry of Labour. Our Health and Safety people haven't got a name for it yet, and it needs one, so I'm going to call it "party nuclearitis".

In non-medical terms, party nuclearitis is what happens to nuclear workers after they announce they are pro-nuclear at a cocktail party. It's an affliction we encounter many times and its symptoms are as follows.

First, you are singled out as the only one who hasn't described what you do for a living. Your announcement that you work for Hydro or AECL brings on the second symptoms. Now, the second symptoms involve the people listening to you. Half the people listening to you immediately conjure up images of a nuclear energy supporter as someone who is unkind to dogs and teases small children. They find the first reason they can to slide away and put more ice in their drinks.

The other half take on the characteristics of white corpuscles. Armed with knowledge from every article about nuclear energy ever published by Harrowsmith and Time magazines, they proceed to tell you why nuclear energy is wrong. You find you can fight them off with reliability, safety and environmental impact statistics, but you can't quite convince them that nuclear energy is inherently right and the way we ought to go. After three hours you are drained and exhausted, - this, my friends, is "party nuclearitis".

Party nuclearitis would seem to be a harmless occupational hazard if it was isolated and short lived. However, I suspect it is a more widespread problem that stems from the strong feelings of some members of the public about what is morally right and wrong. For the next few minutes I will investigate this problem by sharing a few thoughts about why we can't establish closure, or at least constructive dialogue, in the nuclear energy debate. I'll also talk about what some people in the nuclear energy industry are doing about it. And, in the process, I'll provide a few interesting details about our involvement with a group known as the Interfaith Program for Public Awareness of Nuclear Issues.

Why can't we obtain closure in the nuclear energy debate?

Let me answer by making two observations. First, our nuclear program is probably the finest in the world. It provides us with relatively inexpensive electricity. It is safe, environmentally benign, and, through the efforts of AECL we have a safe way to dispose of the waste. My second observation is that perceptions of nuclear energy for some members of the public are completely out of sync with the realities. For example, since Three Mile Island Canadian public support for nuclear energy has varied between 48 and 69 percent in favour of nuclear energy. Our surveys indicate that an average 61 percent of those surveyed are

either strongly in favour or somewhat in favour; 26 percent are somewhat opposed or strongly opposed and the rest have no opinion. On the surface having a 61 percent majority favouring nuclear power is not bad. For those of us who keep track of whether we're winning or loosing on the basis of opinion polls, 61 percent might be reason to rejoice. However, for those of us who view the outcomes of public hearings and government decisions as yardsticks to measure the success of the nuclear industry, 26 to 52 percent still opposed causes some concern.

Why haven't we been able to make any in-roads in dealing with the concerns of those strongly opposed to nuclear energy?

Well, our usual diagnosis of public perception problems is limited to observations that people are not well educated about technical matters, they don't understand the facts, or they are given too much emotional misinformation by anti-nuclear groups. I believe Bernard Cohen goes as far as suggesting that the nuclear industry is being persecuted by the New York Times. Our usual solution is to generate more facts and disseminate those facts to more people.

While this is fine, as far as it goes, I think that in addition we ought to be looking hard for the root causes of why 26 percent are concerned about nuclear energy.

If we do I think we'll find that a major cause has to do with the fact that serious moral and ethical questions are being asked and not being answered satisfactorily, such as: "Are the risks of nuclear energy really worth it?"; "What about future generations?"; "Does nuclear energy violate our trust to the creator?"; "Is nuclear energy really appropriate technology?"; and so on. In fact, most individuals or members of interest groups who have an opinion about nuclear energy also have an opinion about the morality of nuclear energy and there are strong differences of opinion between people who have concluded that nuclear energy is or is not morally acceptable.

If the concerns about morality were confined to idle chatter at a cocktail party or personal reflection, our traditional response might still be sufficient. However, these moral and ethical issues tend to find their way into forums where public decisions are made, and in the past few years all Canadian boards and commissions reviewing major nuclear energy matters have considered moral and ethical issues as part of their mandate. In fact, moral and ethical issues are not only considered but have an influence on the outcome of nuclear related decisions.

If the problem we're facing is answering the moral and ethical questions or convincing people our answers are sound, why haven't we been able to answer the questions to their satisfaction or at least achieve constructive dialogue? I suggest we're having this difficulty because the nuclear energy debate is much more complex than we previously thought.

For example, a few years ago the CNA held a seminar on moral and ethical issues related to nuclear energy generation. The keynote speaker was Dr. George Pickering, University of Detroit, who shared some key insights about nuclear energy. He said that understanding nuclear energy issues is not an easy job because the questions we're asked are difficult. Pickering suggested that the technical complexities of nuclear energy are at least matched by the ethical complications and no one should expect either simple understandings or easy resolutions.

One can get a clear picture of the ethical complications when addressing questions related to a nuclear waste disposal facility. It's not easy to answer the question of how to deal with the rights of local people vs the rights of the public at large when decisions about sites are required. How do we balance probabilistic vs perceived risk? What are our obligations to our children's children? For some of these questions there may be no answers and for others there may be many or conflicting answers. These same questions can also be asked of any human activity.

While Pickering pointed out that the questions are difficult, Dr. Ed Beahm from Oakridge Labs in Tennessee has gone even further by suggesting that the whole nuclear energy debate can be classified as a "technoethical debate" involving technology, values and rights. He asserts that we have always had, "within technology, a sort of ritualistic ethic for such things as honesty in our dealings with people and in our treatment of data and we have always had a free exchange of information as part of our ritualistic scientific-technological ethic." He's quite right. Energy Probe and other anti-nuclear groups are using the same information to make their case as we do to make ours. It is we who ensure they are given all the scientific and technological facts. "Now, however, we are in a time in which greater ethics of technology is starting to emerge." As such an ethics of technology would call for the sorting and evaluation of facts, rights and values as they interact with technology. It is a kind of evolution of the anti- vs pro-argument.

Why haven't we been able to answer the questions and establish closure? A whole other set of reasons is apparent. One major reason has to do with the cultural and political complexities of the debate. You may notice, for example, that sometimes no matter how sound your thinking, you will not be listened to because of who you are and how the listener views the world.

Michael Thompson writing from the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis in Austria analyses this aspect of the debate from a cultural perspective. In looking at risks he asks, why do some people view risks of nuclear energy differently than others? He suggests that within society, different communities have different beliefs and convictions about how the world is and how the world should be. He calls these "moral communities". If you are not a member of a particular moral community, you do not appear credible to that particular community. Thus, Bernard Cohen may see anti-nukes as eco-maniacs or eco-nuts, and they may call him a few adjectives which I'd be embarrassed to state. Each person is committed to his own moral community and the rightness of

its cause. No one can concede that thoughts of a member of another moral community might be valid. He states, "any approach aimed at determining which rationality is right is bound to be wrong." This might explain why, when we are debating Energy Probe, the industry representative tries to convince the public of the appropriateness of nuclear due to the safe design of the reactor vessel while on the same platform the anti-nuclear representative talks of the value of soft-technology. Both are appealing to a different community.

With respect to the "political dimension" of the nuclear energy debate, Christine Hoff of the Hastings Centre in New York has observed a lot of ideology and righteous thinking are tied into the nuclear energy debate. For example, rational discussion about these issues is often clouded by ideological positioning. In agreement with Michael Thompson she states, that being morally right means holding "correct" views on various matters. According to Hoff, we've seen a kind of "ideological political diversion" of ethics. Where, being "morally right" means holding an enlightened set of principles - to hold correct views on gun control (-pro), bussing (-pro) and nuclear weapons disarmament (-pro) or holding correct views on ecology (-pro), abortion (-pro) and to be anti-nuclear energy. You are perceived to be in a morally disadvantageous position if you held "objective" views or were taking time to work the problem through. And, you appear to be morally confused if you are anti-nuclear weapons and pro-nuclear energy!

Where is this all getting us?

It's my belief that there might be better ways for society to address these issues. To begin with, we might look for points of agreement and disagreement and use these points to begin reasoned discussion and conflict resolution. If we're looking for possible areas of agreement, for example, I believe that persons both within and external to the nuclear industry are concerned about the sanctity of life and concerned about making the future a safe place for our children to grow up in. We may disagree with how this should be done, but we are at least starting from a set of values we can agree are important. Are there other values we can agree upon?

With respect to the "political diversion of ethics," everyone has his or her own view about the morality of nuclear energy. However, people shouldn't expect that their personal moral view will be a good indicator of morally appropriate public policy. According to John O'Brien of Brookhaven National Labs "to be serious about minimizing the conflict and deal with moral and ethical issues, both sides must:

- acknowledge there may be middle ground options, and that a middle ground opinion is not necessarily opposed to your own.
- acknowledge that the other side has facts which must be considered.

- acknowledge that some issues are linked to the nuclear debate and others are not, and should not be allowed to cloud the issues.

With this in mind I think that nuclear energy can stand on its own as a morally legitimate energy source when given a full examination and fair hearing.

For example, through our waste management studies and follow-through efforts, we are fulfilling our obligation to future generations. In addition, the probabilistic risks of nuclear energy are much less than those risks created by other human activities. And, through public hearings, perceived risks do become part of the risk/benefit calculations. As for the accusation of being too complex for comprehension - nuclear energy may be complex, but it is by no means beyond human capabilities.

With this in mind, a number of people have tried to improve the quality of dialogue about these issues.

The CNA, for example, has tried to facilitate better informed decision-making and in the process has investigated whether there is any way to reduce the polarized nature of the debate. They have focused on establishing dialogue with people from universities and churches who are well versed in philosophy and theology. They looked inwardly by sponsoring a "Seminar on Moral and Ethical Issues Relating to Nuclear Energy Generation, in 1980". And, in 1981, they initiated the Ethics and Energy Newsletter as a vehicle for sharing findings and ideas and investigating ethics issues associated with energy and technology.

In the same year, they held a Seminar on Theology and Energy for nuclear industry representatives and clergy. Since then, they have engaged in a pro-active plan to contact all Canadian church and university groups involved in the discussion of ethics issues, with the intent of listening to what they had to say. Those are a few of the things the CNA has done.

Ontario Hydro has also been active. Since 1981, Hydro has sponsored a program for identifying moral and ethical issues associated with our policies. And we've attempted to ensure staff are informed of the moral and ethical effects of policies. A good example lies with our CANDU export policy for Ontario Hydro assistance in offshore exports. To my knowledge, this was the first approved Ontario Hydro policy that used philosophers as consultants. They told us that human rights issues and nuclear weapon proliferation issues are important. And, the policy addresses these issues.

Suffice it to say, the Canadian nuclear industry is developing a strong record of sincere and forthright concern about these issues. Yet, there is still a long way to go.

A few minutes ago, I promised I'd elaborate upon a group we've been actively involved with for the past eighteen months. This is a group

known as the Interfaith Program for Public Awareness of Nuclear Issues (IPPANI). Rather than give all the details I'll concentrate on their approach to these issues.

In May 1983, Jim Weller of the CNA learned that three or four Toronto area faith groups were holding public hearings on nuclear issues. Their concern was based on shipments of uranium fuel to Argentina during the Falklands conflict. It seemed that an agenda had been prepared by Gordon Edwards of the Canadian Coalition for Nuclear Responsibility. The sponsoring church groups had been informed that the questions that were supposed to embarrass the nuclear industry represented the proper moral and ethical questions to ask. If you remember the phrase used earlier - "ideological political diversion of ethics" - here is a good example.

The CNA was invited to sit as observers on the planning committee and we began what amounted to eighteen months of intensive discussion about the "proper approach to a public examination of ethic issues", "what it means to think ethically and politically about these issues", and "the role of the church in assessing technological matters". As a result, their agenda changed 180° and represents a set of questions I think the industry can live with. We still have a few major problems with their approach because they insist on adding a nuclear weapons discussion to the same set of hearings. However, we feel their panelists are objective. Even with these concerns, a number of industry people have agreed to participate.

Currently, IPPANI is sponsored by the Jewish faith, Baha'i, Roman Catholic, United and Anglican churches.

The hearings start on the week of October 29, and they will extend to the end of November. The hearing panelists include Gordon Butler, Harold Schiff, Jim Ham, Doris Anderson, and overall it promises to be a pretty interesting couple of weeks.

I'd like to conclude by stating that nuclear energy may be playing a path finder role for other technologies. As such, the nuclear energy debate may be evolving from a rancorous disjointed debate between the pro's and anti's, to a calm rational discussion about technology, rights and ethics. At least I hope so. The nuclear industry has a lot of strengths in the areas of safety and reliability and it is my belief we can add moral appropriateness to that list. Turning back to quote Ed Bealm, "it will be to our credit and for the good of society if we succeed in elevating the debate to one of mutual understanding (though not necessary agreement) that culminates in constructive results."