

PIME '89

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Roundtable 1:

Introductory remarks by John A. Macpherson, Atomic Energy of
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Are the advocates of nuclear power and the adversaries listening to each other? Does dialogue have a chance?



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My short answer to both questions posed as the title for this discussion is NO. And I would add: **THERE IS NO POINT IN TRYING TO BRING OPPOSITE POLES TOGETHER.** It requires too much investment for too little return.

One of Canada's leading authors once wrote a book called "Two Solitudes." Although he was talking of a linguistic and social phenomenon, he could very well have applied the phrase to the nuclear debate. One of our most prominent newspaper editors has called this debate a "dialogue of the deaf." I believe that is how the dynamic of the nuclear debate is bound to continue, with both the pros and the antis -- regardless of legitimacy or validity of argument -- sacrificing communication via logic and dialectic in favour of rhetorical fuel on the flame of what-if scenarios.

A nuclear dialogue will have a chance only if a distinction can be shown between physics and metaphysics, between chemistry and alchemy, and if the gap can be bridged between the polarized views of the world's societal needs which, incidentally, create the nuclear issue in the first place. This is a daunting task. Movements in search of a cause have a passion for preaching rather than a love for listening.

Why is it futile to try to reconcile the polarized views on nuclear power?

First, because of the uncompromising nature of the opposition, which falls into four basic categories: the hard core which takes an unbending moral and philosophical stance against everything nuclear; those who have a vested interest in blocking

future developments in the nuclear industry; those who are genuine doubters and fear the primitive power of nuclear mythic imagery; and those who use nuclear energy as a metaphor of their disaffection with a technological society which they regard as intrinsically immoral and corrupting.

Secondly, the opposition is not homogeneous. It consists of a range of personalities: advocates who propose something they believe in; dissidents whose nature it is to be against something; activists who want things changed; zealots who pursue their cause with a relentless single-mindedness; and fanatics who are post-graduate zealots. No communications strategy has been devised which can involve such opposition in meaningful concentrated dialogue.

Thirdly, the extremes of opinion on any topic are the 5 per cent at each end of the bell curve. On each side of the median there are 40 per cent who are apathetic, leaving a swing group in the middle of 10 per cent who take an active interest in the subject and are open-minded about it. This is the segment on which most communication strategists would focus their efforts.

Fourthly, we should not delude ourselves into thinking that the nuclear opposition is going to change its mind or be persuaded by rational discussion. To the anti-nuclear lobby, analysis means listening to the proponents in order to distort their arguments, or to use their statements as evidence against them, and to exploit the public's apparent bewilderment about the difference between real and hypothetical risks.

Fifthly, why should we perpetuate the traditional pro-anti war dance and the ingrained knee-jerk rejection of each other's views? Why should we extend, through dialogue, another platform and greater credibility to the anti-nuclear groups when they themselves have a propensity for impairing their credibility. We

should be convincing people through the earnestness of our tone and not by the volume of our sound. The dissonance between the pros and the antis is more offensive when we hear it in stereo.

Sixthly, the anti-nuclear forces per se are not as persuasive as the media which they use effectively and which promulgate their litanies regularly, uncritically and supportively, or the politicians who are partisan to their blandishments. No amount of dialogue between advocates and adversaries will correct that imbalance. If dialogue is to take place it should be between the industry and the media, where exists at least some chance of listening with a view to gaining better mutual understanding.

Finally, the obstructionism which perplexes the nuclear industry is not new. Columbus, Pasteur, Galileo, Newton and Jenner were vilified by the naysayers. Jenner complained to a friend in 1799 that although he was fighting an enemy of mankind with vaccination, he was "beset on all sides with snarling fellows, and so ignorant withal that they knew no more of the disease of which they wrote than the animals which generate it....It is impossible for me, single-handed, to combat all my adversaries." We know how Jenner felt.

In conclusion, I would suggest that proponents and opponents of nuclear power have been listening to each other. But it has been selective listening, with both sides amplifying what they want to hear, muting what is not central to their argument, and completely tuning out what they do not want to know. Selective listening is not the basis for constructive dialogue or for conflict resolution.

The nuclear debate is in essence a latter-day manifestation of the argument that has been rampant since Roger Bacon urged his fellow clergy to sweep the alchemists from the church's doorstep. Then as now, the issue was science versus dogma, rationality

versus superstition. Bacon said: "Observe, try, record, speculate logically, try out your speculation, confirm or correct, communicate to other investigators, compare." He did not say: "Chat with the charlatans, ask the astrologers, gossip with the gurus, mix with the metaphysicians." If he had, dialogue would not have had a chance. Neither would the Renaissance.