

The future of Uranium Development and Nuclear Power in Canada

Political, environmental, economic and moral ramifications

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Decisions on the future of uranium development and nuclear power will have profound and far-reaching political, environmental, economic and moral ramifications for our province.

As a fourth generation Saskatchewan farmer with a long-standing interest in the environment, I have actively followed the nuclear power issue for twenty-five years. I was twice a political candidate in central and northern Saskatchewan, where the uranium mining and development issue is of central importance. In 1998 and 2003, I was also a leadership contender for the federal Progressive Conservative party and grappled with the question of nuclear power in that capacity. Saskatchewan has already embarked in a significant way on uranium mining. Now our government is strongly promoting the idea of building a nuclear reactor. If Saskatchewan proceeds with atomic power, we will be placing ourselves squarely on the nuclear road with all the implications involved. One of the first questions to ask is, do we need the amount of extra power a reactor will produce? If so, what are the options to get it? The cost of a nuclear station is so great that major resources will be channeled towards nuclear energy at the expense of all other energy options. It is clear that at this time and for the foreseeable future Saskatchewan does not need the amount of power an industrial nuclear reactor is designed to produce. So the question becomes, do we want to take this major step in order to generate power for export? In my view the costs and risks are far too high for us to do so. Options There are other options available for Saskatchewan to add additional power. Several Canadian provinces have a surplus of power they are seeking to sell. Incredible as it may seem, Canada does not have an east-west electricity grid connecting our provinces. Prime Minister John Diefenbaker proposed some fifty years ago that we link our country east and west, so that the provinces which needed electricity would have access to those with power to sell.

Instead, most of the provincial electrical utilities have tied themselves more tightly to the U.S. states to the south than to their neighbouring provinces. During the 2003 blackout in Ontario, for example, the lights were burning in Quebec, which had surplus electricity it was seeking to sell south, but the link did not exist for Ontario to take the power and it ended up buying expensive, and dirty, U.S. coal fired electricity. Saskatchewan could take the lead in advocating a national east-west grid that would give all Canadians a sense of energy security. With a simple high-voltage line to Manitoba, Saskatchewan could purchase extra power when needed, from already existing hydro facilities, without the high cost of building

a nuclear station. (Manitoba produces many times more power than it uses.) This is one clear and obvious solution, which has received very little discussion. A second option involves looking at alternative sources of energy. Germany, for example, after a great deal of study and debate, is phasing out its nuclear reactors and is developing wind and solar generation. Saskatchewan has a good deal more wind and solar resources than most jurisdictions in the world, including Germany, but has done very little to develop them. Both wind and solar energy are sustainable indefinitely and don't carry with them the large risks and problems of nuclear energy.

Developing solar and wind capacity, along with access to neighbouring Manitoba power, combined with a sensible plan to reduce consumption, could look after our needs without the addition of nuclear power. Problems with nuclear power The first and foremost problem with atomic power is the nuclear waste it generates. Reactors in Canada and around the world are producing highly toxic waste with no functioning, agreed-upon solution in sight. Because of its importance I want to look briefly at the history of this problem. At one point, not that long ago, drums of nuclear waste were being dumped into the ocean. The practise was discovered and exposed to the public by environmental organizations. The resulting outcry has largely forced a halt to these actions. Then proposals were made to use rockets to shoot nuclear waste into outer space. The obvious danger and resulting public opposition forced an end to this plan. The idea currently being proposed is to bury the waste deep underground in solid rock formations. Manitoba spent many years studying and experimenting with deep rock disposal at the Whiteshell facility at Pinawa. It concluded that no matter how solid the rock, water moves through it.

The cocktail of waste generated by nuclear reactors is lethal for up to a million years. Any container will leak long before that time and the buried waste will be released, irretrievably, into the environment, leaving a deadly legacy for eternity to future generations on the planet. Manitoba concluded with a ban on burying nuclear waste in that province. Virtually every state in the U.S. has said they do not want it. For two decades, the Yucca Mountain site in Nevada has been the sole focus of U.S. government plans to store nuclear waste deep in solid rock caverns. Over \$13 billion has been spent on this site, but opposition grew steadily across the state and now both U.S. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and U.S. Energy Secretary Steven Chu have pronounced the project dead. So there are now over a hundred reactors across the U.S. looking for a place to get rid of their nuclear waste. If Saskatchewan builds a nuclear reactor, it will also need to do something with the waste. Pressure will increase for a disposal site in our province.

Furthermore, if Saskatchewan agrees to construct such a site, nuclear power stations from eastern Canada and across North America will be anxious to send us their waste. I don't believe this is a future most of us want for our province. Other considerations Canada is the largest supplier of uranium to the U.S., most of it from Saskatchewan. The U.S. military has used hundreds of tonnes of depleted uranium (DU) munitions in Iraq, Afghanistan and also during the bombing of the former Yugoslavia in 1999. Upon impact DU hardened missiles often burst into flames and vapourize. A tiny speck of DU inhaled can be an agonizing death sentence, as the escalating cancer rates of the countries mentioned have shown. The entire subject of the use of DU weaponry has been virtually taboo, but there is no way that we can pretend that our uranium is not responsible for massive suffering, which will go on for generations to come, in other countries. This is an ethical and moral question facing us as a province.

Conclusion

We must ask why so many other jurisdictions have said no to both nuclear power and to uranium mining. Decades ago, British Columbia, for example, imposed a moratorium on uranium mining and exploration. If B.C. does not want this industry, why should we accept it? During the debate over the proposed Warman uranium refinery in the early 1980s, the prominent Cree leader, Senator John B. Tootoosis, spoke eloquently about the power of uranium, which, he said, had been placed in the ground by our Creator and which, he told us, should never be disturbed.

I share Senator Tootoosis's view and urge you, Mr. Chairman, to take a long, sober look at the environmental destruction, the risks, dangers and the economic costs involved in this industry and make sure that we go no further down this path.

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