

Selling CANDU to Britain: a venture in public diplomacy

By Don Peacock

There is a new buzz-phrase around the Department of External Affairs headquarters in Ottawa — “public diplomacy”. It refers to the expanding emphasis being given to the public relations, or public information, aspect of the promotion of Canada’s foreign policy objectives and interests. It may be argued that public diplomacy, in contrast with the traditional diplomacy conducted in private between one government’s diplomats and another’s officials, is a recognition of the decisive role of public opinion in open democracies. The right kind of public persuasion may help win diplomatic campaigns conducted in private at more conventional levels of diplomacy. So much for the theory. How does public diplomacy work in practice?

Without much doubt, the most important public diplomacy campaign in which Canada has been involved to date was the struggle from late 1973 until July 1974 to persuade the British Government to stay with Canadian-style nuclear-power technology instead of switching to American. (I make this assertion as a prejudiced witness, having been personally involved in this particular campaign. But I am confident the facts, speaking for themselves, will substantiate the assertion.) As it developed, the campaign to sell CANDU-type reactor technology became a combination of public and private diplomacy unique in Canada’s recent foreign policy experience — and perhaps unique, period. Frankly, and happily, the campaign succeeded beyond the initial dreams of any of us who were involved in it.

Inspired articles

About mid-October 1973, in the press office of the Canadian High Commission in London, we began to notice the appearance of articles, first in one newspaper, then in another, forecasting that Britain would soon decide it had no choice but to buy American reactor technology for its future power needs. The articles seemed quite clearly to have been inspired by “leaks” from sources within the British

nuclear-power industry. These sources seemed to have concluded that the American reactor was the only practicable one on the world market. We at the High Commission held a different view.

On October 15, *The Guardian* printed a story under the headline “US reactors may power Britain”. Technology correspondent Peter Rodgers wrote that Britain was “moving strongly” towards a decision to buy American designs of nuclear-power stations for the next stage of its nuclear program. This would mean dropping the British steam-generating heavy-water reactor and the advanced gas-cooled reactor. (While there had for years been regular consultation and exchange of information between Canadian and British nuclear-power officials, Canada had not been pressing to sell its CANDU reactor in Britain because the British were working on their own version — the steam-generating heavy-water reactor now, it was reported, about to be dropped.)

A week later, *The Financial Times* carried a similar story by its respected science editor, David Fishlock. He predicted, as Rodgers had, that there would be a first-class political row over the efforts of the Central Electricity Generating Board to persuade the British Government to switch from British to U.S. nuclear-reactor technology. What really stirred the blood in the Canada House press office that morning, however, was this sentence

*British research
had precluded
Canadian pressure
to buy CANDU*

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