

Nuclear Industry

Political Power Evident

Biographical Note:

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by Michael Clow

Sometime early in the new year 1980 one of the most important studies into energy matters, the Final Report of the Royal Commission on electrical Power Planning in Ontario (the Porter Commission) can be expected to be released to the public. What should environmentalists expect from the Final Report of the Commission? While the scope of the report will be huge, covering as it does "a framework for further development of the electrical power system" in Canada's most heavily populated and industrialized province, with respect to one important issue, nuclear power, we can reflect on the special Interim Report (*A Race Against Time*) published in September 1978 and speculate on the changes which events since publication have made reasonably likely.

A Race Against Time is an impressively well organized and presented report, colourfully illustrated and intended to be a "primer" on nuclear power as well as a judgement on its merits and hazards. It is marked by an honest and largely successful attempt to present the basic issues and positions of the nuclear power debate "in explicit context of electricity generation and use." It is thus a unique and worthwhile addition to the literature on the nuclear controversy on these grounds alone.

But what stirred the greatest interest were the most important of its 70 "conclusions", which were listed separate from the text in a compendium at the front of the report. On CANDU safety, the Report concludes that "within reasonable limits, the reactor is safe." However, with respect to the crucial issue of the size of Ontario Hydro's nuclear programme, the Commission concludes that "the maximum number of additional nuclear stations to the year 2000 should be three" on the basis of a "moderate" annual rate of growth of 4% in the electrical demand—a figure far below the numbers projected by Hydro in the 1974 long range planning study that helped spark the establishment of the Commission. The Commission also came down hard against the reprocessing of spent fuels, a conclusion that takes on additional significance when added to the conclusion that "neither the currently known uranium resource base . . . nor the projected maximum production capabilities likely to be available for Ontario use are sufficiently secure to guarantee the long term viability of a large 'once through' nuclear power programme". As well the Commission expressed considerable concern over the disposal of both reactor wastes and radioactive mill tailings,

recommending that the future of the industry be tied to progress on solving these major problems. Finally, the Commission expressed concern over the economic viability of the nuclear industry as a whole.

Among the reactions to the Report from the industry, only AECL managed to find a "bright spot" in the gloom, the "conclusion" that their reactor was reasonably safe. Environmentalists were pleased that the Report was something other than an industry-promoting whitewash, and that, after years in the political wilderness, an official body had legitimized their activities and recognized the merits of at least some of their arguments. Even where the Report reached questionable "conclusions", as on reactor safety, it left much room for debate on the basis of the contents of the Report itself.

However, for all the courage the Commission has shown in recommending a tight cap on the growth of the nuclear industry and in exposing the necessity to put an absolute ceiling on the industry unless waste problems at both ends of the fuel cycle are quickly and definitively eliminated, the political power of the nuclear industry in Ontario is evident in the Report. The Report accepts far too uncritically the assurances of the industry complex about in-place technology such as the CANDU reactor and tempered reasonable skepticism about optimistic speculation on future technology. Very disturbing was the tendency to accept at face value the "independence" of the Atomic Energy Control Board and the value of highly questionable documents such as the Hare Report on waste management. Utterly inadequate consideration was given to wider ecological problems associated with the fuel cycle—a reflection of the general ignorance of the ecological effects of nuclear power generation. Finally, the Commission did not draw out or explore the sharply different futures envisioned by proponents and opponents, a sidestepping of the whole range of questions about human needs, values and political choice the Commission emphasized at the beginning of the Report.

Some of the weaknesses in the Interim Report have been highlighted by events since its publication. Foremost among these events must rank the near catastrophe at Three Mile Island (TMI). Although the design of the TMI reactor is different from our CANDU (but only as different as DC-10 is from L-1011), the failure of the TMI plant points out a simple fact: that combinations of human error, mechanical failure and design limitations make accidents in such complex devices as nuclear re-

actors, waste disposal sites, or airliners virtually inevitable or, at the very least, highly probable over time. The "highly improbable" nature of serious reactor accidents are public relations formulations and self deceptions; the shift by industry apologists to "we must learn to live with accidents and pay their costs" is a sign their previous position is untenable. Since the part of the text of the Interim Report dealing with reactor safety is by no means as pronuclear as the "conclusion", it can be hoped that the Final Report will contain second thoughts about the

safety of the CANDU system. Recent exposure of problems with the emergency core cooling system in existing CANDUs and the remarkable revelations about the problems at the old NPD plant near Ottawa should strengthen this tendency.

Recent discussions about the AECL's licensing procedures and criticism of the neutrality of some of its studies leave the reasonableness of a blind acceptance of its "independence", and thus credibility as a regulatory agency, in further doubt. This too is a fact the Commission cannot ignore. And finally the

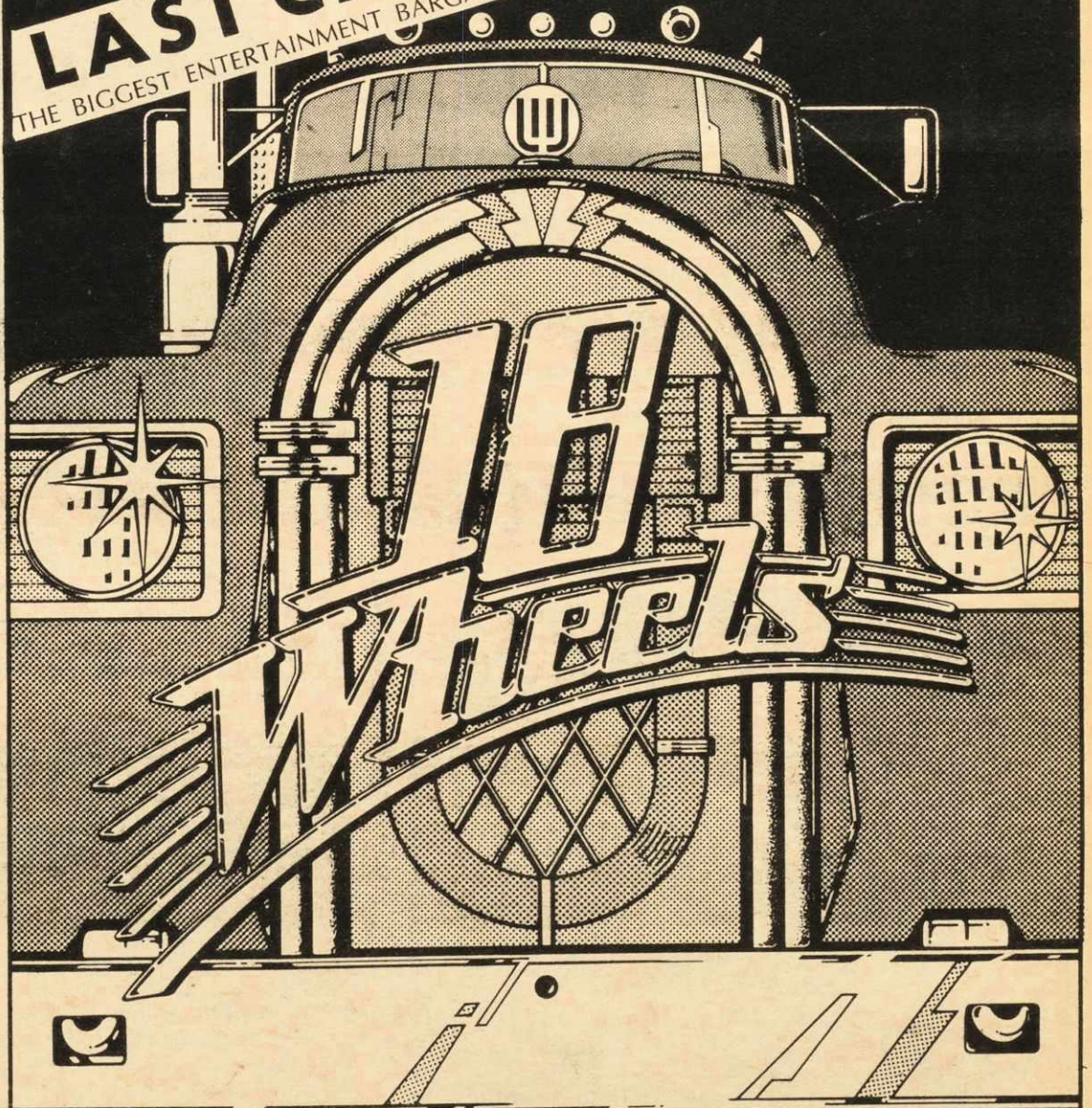
failure of the AECL to secure the sale of a second CANDU to Argentina, because of construction problems with the first and Argentina's fear that new safeguards might make construction of a bomb more difficult, makes the economic future of the AECL gloomier yet.

These events make a positive evaluation of the Canadian nuclear programme increasingly difficult. If the Commission remains true to its efforts to be impartial, the Final Report must be more, not less, negative about the nuclear option for Ontario.

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