

Energy debate continues

The Dartmouth Library's long running series of panel discussions on contemporary issues are normally just that, well-mannered, even tepid discussions between panel members who sometimes outnumber the audience. But last Thursday night, perhaps egged on by the presence of the representatives of 25 High School debating teams in the near-capacity audience, a discussion over the merits of Nuclear Power turned into a genuine debate, complete with heated rebuttals and pointed interjections.

Despite the heated debate, advocates both for and against nuclear-generated electricity agreed that the process is "intrinsically dangerous" and that these dangers can be reduced to low levels with sufficient safeguards. But this consensus broke down completely over whether or not those safeguards would be prohibitively expensive and whether in fact the Energy Crisis is truly an Electricity Crisis.

Doctor Ewart Blanchard, the head of the Nova Scotia Research Foundation, opened the debate and was the panelist most clearly bullish about nuclear power. He described a recent huge flash and explosion he heard outside his window last week that turned out to be an outage on a 68,000 volt line that cut off power to much of Halifax. Despite this, the only health casualty was one dead crow and he said this was an indication that power utilities, particularly the Nova Scotia Power Corporation, were efficient and safety conscious. He gestured towards the anti-nuclear panelists and said he expected protesters to be out complaining about the one dead crow. He had to admit that Nova Scotia couldn't see for itself how safe his nuclear power really was, because the Province didn't have enough baseload demand to justify a plant for another 10 years.

Susan Holtz of the Ecology Action Centre is one of the best known—and most respected—energy critics in Atlantic Canada and she kept the audience in rapt attention demonstrating how she earned that reputation as she reeled off the results of the latest medical studies from all over the world. The nuclear debate has very much become a debate between medical researchers ever since the chilling discovery that there is apparently no safe threshold for human exposure to radiation. This theory—the Linear Effect—means that human cells are damaged and can not repair themselves with even the smallest doses of radiation. Much of the support for nuclear power has been predicted on old studies that indicated that the chance of a nuclear plant disaster was extremely small.

If Ms. Holtz is correct, even without the nuclear disasters of the Three Mile Island

variety, constant year-in and year-out low level radiation leaks from nuclear plants and even nuclear mines will produce as many cancers among the general population as these 'meltdown' scenarios would produce among a relatively small population. In fact, as a recent mining moratorium in B.C. indicates, many experts feel that mining and exploration for nuclear ore is now probably the most dangerous step in the whole process. Nova Scotia is currently undergoing a boom in exploration for nuclear ore bodies throughout the South Western end of the province.

Doctor David Goble, Dalhousie nuclear physicist, represented the pragmatic side of the pro-nuclear alliance, cheerfully admitting that he personally hankered after solar collector panels. But after reviewing the economic efficiency and probability of health effects for every energy source on a total-system, quantitative basis, he had to conclude that if centralized electrical power was the aim, then nuclear power was still the safest.

Engineer Bill Zimmerman, who has his own small firm in energy conservation consulting, seized upon Goble's qualification that 'nuclear power only made sense if centralized electrical plants were the wave of the future'. Judging by energy projection figures he produced, relying on electricity to solve the energy crisis makes little sense when the major energy growth will be in the transportation of goods and in industry. Zimmerman noted that while nuclear enthusiasts foresaw tiny electrical cars, none expected to see transport highballers powered by batteries! And in industry, growth would be in the low electrical energy-using high technology sectors not in power-guzzlers like the pulp and paper industry. With electricity only supplying 12% of Nova Scotia's energy needs today, and likely to supply even less in the future, Zimmerman wondered if not more effort should be ex-

pected on alternatives in residential space heating and in conservation.

But when he pointed out that PEI already had a lower energy use than Nova Scotia due to such methods, Doctor Blanchard acidly interjected that since 80% of the island's income came from transfer payments, their lower energy use was lower "...because most aren't working..."! For her part, Susan Holtz proved just as tough, using her rebuttal time to interrogate Doctor Goble and forced him to admit his figures came from an outdated 1972 California study.

When time came for questions from the audience, it turned out that most of them were just as knowledgeable—and as opinionated—as the 'expert' panelists.

One man forced Blanchard to admit that the Atomic Energy establishment was worried about the amounts of radioactive Tritium circulating throughout Canadian plants, while two others sharply criticized Holtz for saying that Canada had recently decided to change its policy and now dispose of nuclear waste rather than just store them. While the reality of the change seemed a case of semantics to ordinary observers, it really came down to whether or not you believed it was possible to enclose hot radioactive waste safely for thousands of years.

And this is what the nuclear debate really came down to: can Man successfully dominate Nature or at best only uneasily co-exist with it? The pro-nuclearists, urban and centralization oriented, had boundless faith in technology. Tritium a problem? It would be corrected. Safe storage impossible? A new ceramic container would be invented. Like oil, uranium would soon run out? Not to worry, nuclear fusion (the hydrogen bomb) would be perfected by then. Holtz and Zimmerman, oriented to decentralized rural growth, and decentralized energy approaches, were more sceptical about besting nature.

Men busted

(ZNS)—Manufacturers of contraceptive pills in England have stopped employing men after a male worker began to develop breasts on the job.

Birth control pill dust, which includes female hormones, apparently was being absorbed into workers' bodies through their hands. It resulted in the development of

breasts in one man, and increased blood clotting in some younger women.

Ernest Lester, personnel manager at Thomas Kerfoot,

and manufacturing chemist of Ashton-Under-Lyne, says that the man who developed breasts is (quote) "quite normal now," although he has left the firm. The women, meanwhile, are working their six-hour shifts wearing sealed "space suits", equipped with two-way radios so that they can talk to each other.

In the future, the firm says, it will employ (in the pill section) only women over 45 who have passed through menopause and have no history of varicose veins.

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