

Energy policy

Is self-reliance a myth?

by Blair Mitchell

The wheels of Atlantic Canadian industry have never been able to gather quite as much momentum as their counterparts in the St. Lawrence River Valley or the north central United States. When the North American business system sputters, our factories are among the first to close. When trade elsewhere begins to revive, our plants are the last to be retooled.

It's been that way since before the twentieth century. Atlantic pulp is exported to be returned as high quality paper. Gypsum returns as wallboard. Steel bars as finished, tooled machinery. Exported raw materials carry jobs and industrial development with them. And recently energy has been added to the list.

The debate before Nova Scotia's Public Utilities Board into the provincially owned Nova Scotia Power Corporation's application for a rate increase has been examining power development and distribution alternatives in a depth never before seen in this province. Ramifications flow far beyond its borders. The range of alternatives to present policy is wide and proposed curatives to the highest power rates in the country end in a hopeless tangle. But one thing is becoming increasingly clear: as far as possible energy must be controlled here, according to policies that suit this region.

Dalhousie economist and former NDP candidate Mike Bradfield explains it this way: "Energy is a commodity like anything else. When you are dependent on someone else to help you develop that commodity, or to buy your commodity, or to sell you that commodity, your priorities are being determined by that someone else. Anything that helps to break that dependence almost automatically would promote development here."

Alliance for Power

The agreement on the need for local control of the power industry has produced an interesting alliance between the NDP and regional environmental activists. The NDP has come to be aware of the connection between a quality of life measured in decent housing and jobs, and what is ecologically appropriate.

The roots of the alliance lie in the environmentalists' "small is beautiful" slogan. This idea fits neatly into the Nova Scotia NDP's policy of encouraging local businesses to counter the

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influence of large—and in their view—undependable employers from outside the Atlantic region. These employers do not hesitate to shut down when subsidies run out or wages rise. This gives the party the advantage of a short term political target.

As Marty Dolin, Nova Scotia politician and special assistant to provincial NDP leader, Akerman, puts it: "those dinosaurs at the Power Corporation think that anything that doesn't come from a furnace or a generator—that goes for their own ideas as well—is 'exotic'! Alternate technology (wind, solar, waste produced methane power) is practical; there's no reason it couldn't be produced here."

Dolin advocates small power developments on rivers that are generally thought insufficient to produce hydro power. "Hell, we went out and mapped some of them. They're producing generators in Sweden that are small but could produce enough electricity to keep the town of Bridgewater going."

Susan Holtz, co-ordinator of the Halifax-based Ecology Action Centre's energy committee was one of the prominent members of the centre's team at the PUB hearings. Susan is less voluble than the politician who shares her views.

"I can't give you a picture of what an east coast self-reliant in energy would look like," she said. "I believe that change comes piecemeal and not once and for all."

"But there was a time when these provinces

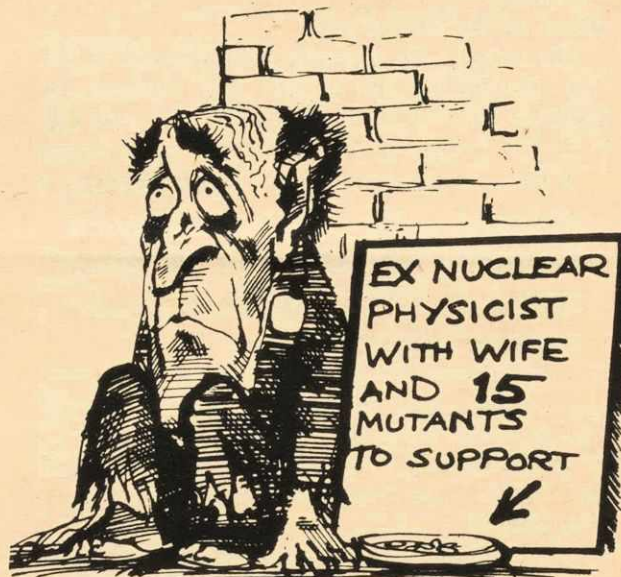
produced all their own energy. If you needed horse power, you raised work horses. We don't propose returning to the campfire and tent, but there are ways of making modern technology fit that lifestyle." There was a time when windmills were used extensively on Prince Edward Island. "There's no reason modern technology couldn't build on that," she says.

Progressive P.E.I.

The island has become a national centre for alternate energy research. With the help of federal agencies, the province is putting hundreds of thousands of dollars from its small budget into wind and solar energy research. That makes the province the darling of Maritime environmentalists.

The island's Institute of Man and Resources, which supervises the provincial energy research plan, is headed by Premier Campbell's former executive assistant, Andrew Wells. Still widely recognized as Campbell's right hand man, Wells' role in the project gives it a status second to none.

To some people the Institute's activities crystallize all the things that Islanders don't like about the province's development plan. One former government employee has said about this plan, "The government thinks nothing will come of their money unless they spend it on ideas,



experts and products that come from outside. The Institute of Man and Resources is no different."

Ecology activist Holtz disagrees. "Maritimers like anyone else want to see something work before they change their plans. Talk to some people in the neighbourhood of the Ark—an Institute-funded experiment in energy and food self-reliance—you'll find a completely different attitude. People are trying out the things they see for themselves".

If the love affair between one Island and environmental activities is intense now, it wasn't always that way. A year and a half ago, Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia each owned shares in the first nuclear plant to be built in the Maritimes, Point Lepreau. The political furor raised over the development, together with rapidly escalating capital costs caused both provinces to pull out of the project. However, they still plan to buy the power generated by the plant.

Point Lepreau is planned to meet projected increases in power demand for New Brunswick alone. Plans were that the province could offset costs by selling to the United States while waiting for domestic demand to rise.

It was the kind of plan that a few years ago would have met with the approval of the NDP. It is large, it provides construction jobs, and afterwards, well, there would always be some revenue from sales.

Halifax journalist Ralph Surette calls prestige power developments the logical inheritance of pork barrel politics.

"It looks good, it panders to the Bob Coates Chronicle-Herald mentality, and it gives political muscle—in the short run it sounds great. In the long run, the power and the profits are all exported. What's left is bands of construction

workers roaming from project to project."

"Decentralized power production—small power plants, the alternate energy systems—creates more and continuing jobs, as opposed to turbines you bring in from Russia or God knows where." Surette continues. And so it is with Point Lepreau. The New Brunswick government is saddled with the major costs of the development. Federal contributions, originally planned to total half the costs of production, were frozen at the original estimates of the costs of the plant. Now

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the plant is oriented towards the New England market when New Brunswick is already exporting the equivalent of four fifths of Nova Scotia's annual consumption at a cheaper rate than Newfoundland power sold to Nova Scotia and PEI, even if Quebec and New Brunswick transshipping rates are taken into account.

U.S. Control?

There is the danger, of course, that the northeastern U.S. could become dependent on New Brunswick power. There is the potential of a Richard Rohmer scenario," says Ecology Action Centre's Holtz.

But far, far more dangerous is the possibility that the plant now under construction could become a large and very expensive white elephant.

"Power usage in many parts of the United States is declining rapidly as conservation and increased costs take hold. Even the New Brunswick power projections for which the plant was built may never be realized," she continues.

The situation at New Brunswick's Point Lepreau closely parallels that of the potentially costly Fundy Tidal development. As one local writer has characterized it, "Baron de Rothschild would get the profits, the United States the power, and Maritimers the ecological disaster."

Environmentalists view alternate technology, easily produceable here and very simple in design, as an alternative not only to environmentally damaging power development, but as a way of countering corporate concentration.

"I would hate to see what would happen if EXXON got control of alternate energy," says ecologist Holtz, "Imagine every five years equipment breaking down just in time for the latest model change. Decisions about power source design and production should be made where they will be used", Holtz says.

"Above all, whatever programs are adopted, we must do our best to see that as far as is possible, the Atlantic provinces control their own energy development...for themselves."

Whether and how such a development would come about remains to be seen. Large in itself,

"Those dinosaurs at the Power Corporation think that anything that doesn't come from a furnace or a generator—that goes for their own ideas as well—is exotic."

PEI's contribution to energy research is a pittance in comparison with the vast resources of distant governments and corporations. History has shown that it is capital and political power, rather than technological expertise, which are the determining features of development and underdevelopment around the world.

The pattern is no less true here. Whether the emphasis on alternate technology by the environmentalists, and particularly by the NDP, can promote self-reliance remains to be seen.

But whatever the technique used to attain such self-reliance, one thing is very clear: as far as possible, we must control our own power.