

Nuclear-waste politics

A UK View by an environmental journalist. (I think that is one that doesn't use paper!)

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The short-term attention-span of politicians works against the long-term environmental thinking the issue of nuclear waste needs.

It's the timescales that are so daunting. Take plutonium-239, for instance, created by nuclear reactors with a half-life of 24,100 years. A sizeable lump is going to take hundreds of thousands of years to decay.

Looking backwards, that takes us somewhere before the dawn of humankind. Looking forwards, we are into the realms of science fiction. Put the problem to a politician with a tenure of five years or less, and it's easy to see what will happen - nothing.

That, in brutal summary, is nuclear-waste policy in most countries. The nuclear industry's creation of radioactive wastes - so dangerous that they've got to be isolated from the environment for unimaginable reaches of time - inevitably produces political paralysis.

Hence the United States's twenty-three-year-old plan to dispose of spent fuel from reactors at the heart of Yucca mountain in the Nevada desert has been delayed by fierce political and legal opposition. Progress has not been helped by a scientific scandal over the falsifying of geological data.

Japan is looking at possible sites but does not expect to open a repository before 2035. A European Union proposal that nuclear-waste sites should be operational by 2018 had to be ditched because most member-states haven't a hope of meeting such a deadline.

Even the two most advanced countries - Sweden and Finland - are still more than a decade away from actually putting any radioactive waste down a hole. Sweden is hoping to choose a site in 2011 and open it by 2017, while tunnels are being blasted at Olkiluoto near Turku in Finland with the aim of having a repository in 2020.

But the paralysis is most obvious in one of the countries that first let the nuclear genie out of the bottle - the United Kingdom. More than fifty-five years after military reactors at Windscale in Cumbria first started producing waste, it is still in temporary stores with no final disposal in sight.

The "deep disposal" solution

The nuclear-waste problem was first highlighted in Britain by the royal commission on environmental pollution in 1976. "It would be morally wrong to commit future generations to the consequences of fission power on a massive scale," it said, "unless it has been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that at least one method exists for the safe isolation of these wastes for the indefinite future."

Since then three separate government programmes aimed at finding sites where waste could be buried have been abandoned - in 1981, 1987 and 1997. The last two attempts,

both of which were rejected in the run-up to general elections, were masterminded by the nuclear industry radioactive waste executive (Nirex).

Despite this, Nirex has survived. In 2005 it ended more than two decades as a creature of the nuclear industry by annexing itself to government. But it remains wedded to what it calls its "deep disposal concept" – the idea that the UK's nuclear waste will, sooner or later, end up in a hole in the ground.

Recent revelations suggest that Nirex may have been somewhat over-enthusiastic in its pursuit of this goal. In 2004 it was trying to work out its approach to a new body set up by the government to recommend disposal options for the UK's 470,000 cubic metres of waste – the committee on radioactive waste management (CoRWM).

A draft media and public affairs strategy from that year, released to Greenpeace under the freedom of information act, has been posted on the anti-nuclear website, nuclearspin.org. It revealed that Nirex was considering exerting "third party pressure" to win CoRWM round to the idea of deep disposal.

The strategy listed more than sixty "suggested targets" including leading politicians in London and Edinburgh, political advisers, councillors and journalists. Oral briefings with key figures would enable Nirex "to engage in a more candid dialogue about CoRWM", it said.

But it was with government departments that Nirex had "experienced the greatest amount of frustration", the strategy disclosed. Civil servants were accused of "viewing Nirex as a 'problem' and seeking to keep us wrapped up". So, it argued, "heavy political pressure needs to be brought to bear".

Worse, Nirex was advised by a consultant, Allan Rogers, to "enlist" politicians sympathetic to its cause and to "isolate" those who were hostile. "We have to be sure that opinion leaders are carefully recruited and groomed", he said.

The aim was to convince "target groups" that deep underground disposal was the best way forward "otherwise there can be no future development of the nuclear industry", Rogers argued.

Although Nirex claims it didn't use these tactics, three years on it seems to have won the argument, raising questions over whether it warped the process. With only one dissenter, CoRWM has now issued draft recommendations in favour of deep disposal.

As a result the government will be left with little option other than to restart the search for a disposal site. In other words, after three decades of discussions and investigations, British policy is exactly back where it began.

The British prime minister, Tony Blair, will try and use CoRWM's final report, expected in July, to help clear the way for a new nuclear-power programme. But this would be an abuse, with even the committee's chairman, Gordon MacKerron, stressing that its recommendations should not be seen as a "green light" for building new reactors.

So far no one in government looks likely to draw the obvious conclusion, which applies worldwide. As there is still no solution to the problem of nuclear waste, there should be no new nuclear-power programme. What was "morally wrong" for the royal commission in 1976 is still morally wrong in 2006.