

THE LESSONS OF CHERNOBYL: NOT LEARNED BUT IGNORED

Posted by Joan Russow
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April 26 1996 will be the 10th Anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster. Tens of 1000s have died as a result of the disaster. over 6,000 of Chernobyl's cleanup veterans: the liquidators' have reportedly died, Thousands of children and adults in Ukraine and Belarus experienced symptoms of acute radiation sickness. Over 4.5 million hectares of productive agricultural land was contaminated. Over 130,000 residents were permanently evacuated in a 30 Km radius around Chernobyl, while more than 1.2. million still live on lands contaminated by 'low-level' radiation. In addition, centuries of future unanticipated consequences from the Chernobyl disaster could lie ahead.

Many thought that the Chernobyl accident would sound the death knell for the civil nuclear industry, and would lead to a global endorsement of the precautionary principle of science and ethics which embraces the notion that we do not have to wait until there is scientific certainty that human and environmental disasters would occur for the global community to act to prevent the potential disasters—such as those that could occur with the further development and use of civil nuclear reactors. Dr. David Marples of the University of Alberta, a specialist in the social impacts of the disaster in Chernobyl noted on April 18, at a public symposium at the University of Victoria, that “the Chernobyl disaster should have forced us to look at alternatives to civil nuclear reactors.” Dr. Fred Knelman—who initiated a Nobel Laureate Declaration in which there was the call to phase out nuclear energy, concurred, “surely the Chernobyl lesson should have been to phase out nuclear power and develop alternative energy sources”.

Yet since that time the nuclear energy proponents along with sympathetic administrations and regulatory agencies such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), are actively promoting the use of nuclear energy as the solution to the problem of climate change and growing world energy consumption even though the future ecological consequences have not been effectively addressed or admitted. Canada has, through its Prime Minister and nuclear promoters, become an active apologist and vender of CANDU reactors. Dr. David Marples, at the April 18 Symposium, decried the folly of Canada's having sold and continuing to sell civil nuclear reactors to Eastern Europe“. Dr. Marples expressed alarm about the CANDU reactor sales in Romania, and described the sale as a “shameful exercise”, and added that “nuclear power has never justified, the expenditures spent on it” Dr Walter Saimaniw who also participated at the April 18 symposium aexpanded on Dr. Marples remark and added that the purported “benefits of civil nuclear reactors do not outweigh the risks”.

From April 19 to 20,, the G7 leaders met in Moscow to consider, among other issues, a number of proposals related to the disposal of weapons-grade plutonium from dismantled Russian nuclear armaments. There was a proposal on the table described as , the “CANDU option”, an option strongly advocated by the Canadian Government, and other

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Canadian nuclear proponents. The CANDU option involves the transfer of weapon-grade plutonium from dismantled nuclear armaments in Russia in the form of MOX (mixed oxide fuel) to be used in CANDU reactors in Canada. The promoters of this option have developed what they refer to as a “communications strategy” which entails a public promotional campaign claiming that the CANDU option will transfer “Megatons into megawatts” or “Swords into Plowshares” to “enhance public acceptability and support” (R. Tariq).

Dr Fred Knelman, in responding to the CANDU option, has countered that : “ Plutonium should not be used as a fuel for current or future nuclear power reactors. Aside from the fact that such use would tend to perpetuate and support an expansion of civil nuclear power, it would also not solve the problem because some further plutonium would be produced in the process, There would be increased traffic in plutonium either as the mixed oxide fuel (MOX) or en route to and from the mixing plant. A diversion of MOX would permit the separation of weapons grade plutonium”.

Although we do not have CANDU reactors on Vancouver Island, the nuclear issue is of vital importance to residents of Vancouver Island . Victoria has had over the years approximately 160 day visits a year of nuclear powered and nuclear arms-capable vessels in the urban ports of Esquimalt and Victoria. Nuclear powered vessels are floating nuclear plants, and await potential disaster. The Canadian government had been requested to fulfill its responsibility to the protection of the population and carry out a public non-Department of Defence (DND) environmental assessment review of the these visits. Bob Moore Stewart, lawyer for the Vancouver Island Peace Society, revealed that “in 1991, the Federal Cabinet bypassed the process and issued an order in council to permit the continued visits without a public environmental assessment review, relying on an in-house DND assessment that suggests against all common sense that there is no appreciable risk to harbouring these nuclear vessels in our urban harbours”.

Norm Abbey from the Nanoose Conversion Campaign, and Vancouver Island Peace Society, has raised the question:“What if we were to look at Chernobyl ten years BEFORE the disaster. Would it not look remarkably similar to "Whiskey Golf" at Nanoose Bay?

How little we have learned from the lessons of Chernobyl.