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Talk-in on nuclear power

By Walt Patterson

The young mavericks of British Columbia's NDP government have been at it again. On Saturday 1 December they staged a day-long bear garden at the Hotel Vancouver to sample public response to the notion of "Nuclear Power - An Option for British Columbia?" Six panellists, representing a broad range of nuclear advocacy and opposition, faced an audience of up to 1000 enthusiastic, bemused or irate citizens, and, in the course of the proceedings, virtually every facet of nuclear policy came up for scrutiny.

The nuclear proponents were led by Dr W. Bennett Lewis, father of Canada's nuclear programme and something of a legend in the industry. His exchanges with Dr John Gofman, battle-scarred veteran of numberless nuclear confrontations were acrimonious in the extreme, demonstrating vividly the bitterness which now pervades so much of the reactor controversy. Lewis was supported by Dr George Griffiths and Dr Michael Pearce, both nuclear physicists with extensive experience in Canadian nuclear R&D; the opposition also included Dan Ford, of the Union of Concerned Scientists, whose recent publication points out the problems arising in "The Nuclear Fuel Cycle", and Canadian Walt Patterson of British Friends of the Earth, author of "Nuclear Reactors".

The province's public utility, BC Hydro, has been showing signs of wanting to diversify from hydroelectricity into nuclear power; although there is not at present any detailed proposal under consideration, senior utility executives have been looking longingly at possible reactor sites on Vancouver Island. However, unlike the previous BC government, whose Premier, W. A. C. Bennett, named a huge dam after himself, the NDP incumbents are reluctant to build additional generating capacity without detailed discussion beforehand. The proceedings of the nuclear forum were recorded and video-taped, and will be made available to all interested parties; and a questionnaire was circulated asking for public input to the deliberations. As an exercise in public participation in a major policy decision with technical, economic and social implications it seems unparalleled. Perhaps Mr Heath will invite Mr Boardman, Mr Weinstock and Mr Hawkins to tell a British audience what they are up to, and why? It might not be illuminating, but it would be cathartic.

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