

For God's sake get on with the power plants

For those who are familiar with the electrical power situation in this country and for those who have bothered to read newspaper articles by Dr Siyambalapitiya and others it should be very clear that this country is fast heading towards another serious power crisis somewhere in 2003/2004 - a crisis compared with which the previous crises in 1996, 1982 will pale into insignificance. Next time it will be more of a man-made crisis and power cuts of ten hours or more and sharp increases in power prices are predicted. To be fair by the CEB and the Ministry, I think it should be stated that adequate warning has been issued and plans and projects have been already prepared by them. But it appears that the government keeps changing its mind and postpones critical decisions.

I refer to the recent decision not to proceed with the proposed coal power plant at a site close to Chilaw. This is due to pressures brought by various groups which have either failed or refused to understand the problem and its implications. It is also likely that these groups are driven by other vested interests. Given that a power station needs at least three years to build, it is clear that time is fast running out. However official indecision and inaction / wrong action has resulted in the country slipping headlong into an unprecedented power crisis.

The saga of the coal power plant has made two things clear. One is that the so called environmentalists and other do-gooders who chased away the Coal Power Plant from two earlier sites (Trincomalee and Mawella) and now from Chilaw, act in an irresponsible manner in lobbying for changes in policy in a matter of great national importance. I say this because they have failed to propose a viable alternative. The non-practicability of all their suggestions on alternative methods of power generation has been conclusively proved by Dr Siyambalapitiya's articles appearing in *the Island* of 30th April 98 and 2nd September 1999 among others. (Is it feasible to go in for Solar Power at Rs 31.73 per unit and wind power at Rs 8.98 when coal

power is available at Rs 3.00. If we adopt the former, how are we going to compete in world markets and how are we going to make electricity available to less affluent sections of the people?) Therefore, the behaviour of these groups is childish and anti-national to say the least. This is not to argue from the position of 'to hell with environment'. I am myself a person who feels strongly about the need to protect the environment even if that means paying a little more for our power. But the pseudo environmentalists and other community / religious leaders who gang up against coal plants simply refuse to understand that cleaner and safe methods of generating power using coal are available now and many countries use them and continue to build improved coal plants. Can they all be wrong? On the other hand, not building the plant now will lead eventually to a situation where many emergency measures will be taken that will result in even greater damage to the environment. This is exactly what happened in 1996.

Or is it the position taken that 'oh you can have a coal power plant. We also want to benefit from it, but please do not build it in our district'. This is again childish and irresponsible. If all citizens of Sri Lanka adopt that attitude (most certainly they will if we create this unhealthy precedent), where are we going to build it?

The second issue is the vacillation on the part of the decision makers. The decision to abandon the Chilaw site clearly indicates that the government is giving higher priority to its short term political interests rather than the long term national interest. It is clear now that it is bent on making the same mistake that the previous government made in abandoning the Mawella (Galle) site. In this issue and also in the Upper Kotmale Hydro Power Plant issue, the government should have been more firm and exhibited good leadership. What is actu-

ally happening now is that instead of leading from the front when the occasion demands, they have yielded to pressures and meekly reversing good decisions for the sake of protecting votes. The timing of this decision clearly shows that. When the things go wrong they will start blaming the officials. This is not good governance at all. Surely the country deserves more.

Let me reiterate that a power crisis of the magnitude predicted by the experts ('Lights will go out in 2004' - Siyambalapitiya) will be an economic disaster. Our economic growth which is already at a historical low will surely become negative and all the gains made in reducing unemployment and lowering inflation will disappear overnight. Furthermore, it will be an environmental disaster. The plans recently unveiled for the 21st Century may become pipe dreams if these are not backed by correct decisions. Decision to abandon the Chilaw site after so much initial work, we can be pretty sure is one hell of a wrong decision. The worst part is that the people responsible for the wrong decisions may not be there in positions of power to be held accountable when the disaster strikes. This is the tragedy of populist democracy.

Therefore it is time that ordinary responsible people who can understand national issues, the investors who have already committed large amounts of resources for income earning projects, the business community and other civil society organizations were united to issue the call in no uncertain terms that "We want action on the new power plants and we want it now"

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Opinion