

Point of view

Coal power for whose benefit?

by D. Wijesinghe

We have read a large number articles written by people of various strata in society not excluding professionals on the subject, university lecturers and others who have had experience in different countries such as Australia etc. I have also attended over 3 seminars conducted at Vidya Mw, Colombo 7, one by Dr. Tilak Siyambalapitiya, another presided over by Dr. Mohan Munasinghe, where Drs. Tilak Siyambalapitiya and Janaka Ratnasiri spoke.

I also followed a lecture conducted by a lecturer from University of Moratuwa, one Dr. Fernando, where he should have said how best we could use hydro power to the benefit of the country. This method is not in practice at present. To my mind this subject is the most debated in this country, apart from NE war it is indeed a very healthy sign, so that, the country would be in a position to benefit to the maximum out of these views.

In my opinion, the sum total of all this is the Ministers in charge, Presidents or Prime Ministers, Ministry of Planning and Ministers in charge, all

Chairmen and top officials of the Electricity Board, Electrical Engineers and their union have to fairly and squarely take the responsibility for the present plight. I do not want to elaborate on how each category is responsible than to say that from about 1975, they have all shirked their responsibilities. In one of the articles I read how power cuts amounting to 9 such cuts have been effected, despite completion of much spoken Mahaweli scheme this substantiates my earlier statement on responsibility.

While this subject is being debated there is a notable feature one could see easily Viz Dr. Tilak Siyambalapitiya and Engineers union have spoken of Coal power as the only viable solution to the problem. I think their pronouncements are against professionalism. What does a govt. or people in the country expect from professionals in finding a solution? To my mind they are expected to give different options available and their pros and cons, so that, the laymen who are decision makers have a wide area of study and take most appropriate and advantageous solution for the benefit of everybody.

In this instance this has not happened. This is a pathetic

situation. Today we pay very high rates for electricity therefore in formulating proposals one has to bear in mind that price escalation, which should be a basic factor, and suggest means by which relief too could be provided. It is pertinent to mention that villagers in Deraniyagala, without any knowledge of electricity has achieved this objective with the assistance of an NGO, a Rotary Club and their counterparts in Japan. They had obtained a bank loan and once the loan is settled the villagers in that group will be supplied electricity free of charge. What an achievement. It is not COAL the only solution. There are far better and economical solutions to the problem. We have been gifted by nature in so many ways one is water for hydro-power thanks to late Mr. Wimalasundera, then the sun for solar power and WIND for wind power. Dr. Fernando from University of Moratuwa explained in detail how best Sri Lanka could benefit out of Hydro Power.

His lecture was limited to Only Hydro Power as a solution to the power problem, it is a pity that views of such knowledgeable gentlemen have no recognition in our country.

Though the sun has been over our heads for long, long years we had not used our heads till recently, and that also the private sector in a small scale. Wind has not been put to any energy till about a year or two back, and that too in a negligible scale. Though on a small scale it has proved very good and results are commendable, I was told by some CEB employees. A 20mw private sector project is yet to receive the green light. It is relevant to make a comparison on coal and wind. Coal will take according to IIESL - President minimum of 6 years, but wind power could be generated within one year.

The coal has to be unloaded at a given distance in the sea into barges to prevent pollution, no such cost is involved in wind power. Coal has to be imported involving foreign exchange, with probable escalating prices.

Whereas in wind power no imports are required and hence foreign exchange is saved. Coal power plant cost of maintenance will be very much more than wind power tower.

Coal has resulted in increasing respiratory problems and the incidence of asthma. In wind power, the noise will extend up to around 30-50

metres. Wind power tower could be installed off shore, may be a more costly, but power is assured.

There is a terrible advantage in utilising sun and wind, where cost per unit is concerned. It is only the initial cost and maintenance thereafter. Once the cost is recovered in full the price per unit in electricity could be drastically reduced. This can be described as a step in Meaningful Development, as the ultimate beneficiaries should be people of Sri Lanka. As for wind power already feasibility studies have been made and knowledgeable engineers have explained methods of achieving in one year. According to Engineers of NEG Micron and Vestas it is fast spreading in Europe.

From minimum of 50mw per tower to higher amounts provided required conditions are met. We could install towers even in Nuwara Eliya.

It is very likely that coal will be debarred by universal declaration owing to Pollution. I have read articles written by Dr. Janaka Ratnasiri on pollution and costs where coal is concerned.

They remain to be replied to. One could now see that if power and its board had been

well managed with a vision and foresight we could have saved the enormous amount of foreign exchange spent on generators, not to mention about the hardships people faced along with set backs to the economy.

One has to realise that people in Sri Lanka cannot afford to pay very exorbitant rates for electricity.

On the other hand it is bound to affect the industries and the exports as well. This is a function that will fall within the ambit of a Govt, to examine where relief is possible to be granted to the people. Since independence no development project has brought the desired benefits and reliefs to the people. On the contrary it is burdens that are being placed on the people.

All in all it is crystal clear that coal power project will not bring any benefit to the country. On the contrary we will need more hospitals to treat more patients, for asthma etc. and will end up as a nation full of patients. Already it is reported that asthma is dangerously increasing and 15% of children suffer from asthma (*Daily News* headlines on 14.05.2002.) So coal power will bring benefit to whom, I wonder.