

22nd Feb. 2006 "Island"

News_COP_2006-13.pdf

Norochcholai — Will John do a Karu?

It was disgusting and annoying to see and hear over the electronic media and read in the press that the Minister for Power and Energy Mr. W. D. John Seneviratne was addressing a workshop for the Wayamba Provincial Councillors and Parliamentarians of Puttalam District, to educate them on the benefits of the Coal Power Plant at Norochcholai, and specially the objection on environmental pollution. There has never been a National Project which has had as wide exposure to the public as this project; all because of the lack of political will and national interest.

What was the need for this workshop? One doesn't know. Perhaps the Minister is unaware of the massive propaganda carried out by the CEB since the year 2000, during the UNF regime and subsequently by the former minister of UPFA, Mr. Susil Premajayantha. It was during the UNF regime that enormous work was done by the CEB, supported by the then Minister Karu Jayasuriya. Unfortunately, due to, it is reliably learnt, that a John in that cabinet along with his Choristers, pressed Karu Jayasuriya to abandon the project, thus letting down the energetic and enthusiastic staff of the CEB. To name - Mr. D. C. Wijeratne, Dr. Susantha Perera, Shavi Fernando and consultant on Energy, Dr. Tilak Siyambalapitiya and also the eminent Energy Advisor to UNF government, in a honorary capacity, Dr. Mohan Munasinghe. Added to this the Institute of Engineers in Sri Lanka conducted a very successful seminar in March, 2002, convened by the then President of the Institute, Mr. B. R. O. Fernando, where professionals, experts, representatives of Chambers of Commerce, Industries, common consumers were present and overwhelmingly voiced their approval for the immediate undertaking of the project. Mr. Karu Jayasuriya was the Chief Guest at this well attended seminar. With all these, Mr. Karu Jayasuriya, the former Minister, under pressure, caved in, giving frivolous excuses, such as "public is against," "some cabinet members are not in favour" and ultimately on "a policy matter" although the Bishop had withdrawn his objection.

This was vehemently refuted by the Bishop of Chilaw in a letter to the press. Apart from the propaganda carried out, as stated earlier, Minister W. D. John Seneviratne, should have studied the Ramboll's report which clearly states that all objecting parties, including the Bishop of Chilaw, the common man etc. were consulted and their arguments were satisfactorily met. Special mention must be made where the report says that the Provincial Environmental Authority, Kurunegala too was contacted and their approval had been obtained. This shows the wide range of discussions that had taken place. Therefore a workshop at this stage, when all, arrangements are made for funding by the Chinese Government has been finalised, seems unwarranted and meaningless.

It is strange that the Ministry is dragging its feet on this project when Cabinet Approval was granted in July, 2004 and the Chinese Government pledged financial support. The minister laments the loss of Rupees 4 Million (CEB's estimation is Rs. 40.0 million) a day and the urgent need to have the plant commissioned at an early date. But what action has he taken to expedite? It was reported that ceremonial laying of the plaque was to be on 9th Nov. '05 and later it was put back due to security reasons. Later the Ministry stated that work would commence in Dec. 2005, then again to Jan. 06 and now to Feb. 06. We are almost in the tail of February, 2006 and yet the consumers, who have now been informed of a 20% increase in the tariff, cross their fingers and wait.

If the Minister was keen in pleasing the Provincial Councillors of Wayamba and the Members of Parliament in Puttalam district, there was a simple and effective move. He should have offered them a trip to India or any other country where Coal plants are in operation (they would have preferred a western country) along with Bishop's representative and Hey Presto! there would be a spontaneous nod.

Is the John trying to do a Karu at this late stage?

**G. A. D. Sirimal
Boralesgamuwa**