

The coal power plant issue: Questions and Answers

This concerns Dr. Tilak Siyambalapitiya's response (in the 'Island' of 05.4.2000) under the title: "Lanka needs 05 coal power plants") to my letter (Island of 22.3.2000) where I asked 03 Questions of the "Coal Plant at Norochcholai now" adherents such as Dr. S. The 03 questions were briefly the foll:

1) Is continuity of coal supplies guaranteed over an economically viable period of time vis-a-vis expenditure involved, in the context of increasing resort to nuclear power by coal producers?

2) Is Norochcholai safe from possible terrorist attacks?

3) Will the Palk Straits deepening project by India have any adverse consequences on the Norochcholai sited plant?

Dr. S. must be thanked for his responding to the queries. Also I must say that I am coal supported and consider Norochcholai an acceptable site in principle, and from my layman's viewpoint. Dr. S. seems however while setting qualms over question (1) at rest, to have glossed over questions (2) and (3).

To Q2 his answer is that any plant needs protection, even in USA or UK, and that the designers would have taken adequate safeguards against acts of god or man! We may for now accept his assumption of safeguards as correct say. Yet isn't the possibility of terrorist attacks still a factor? The Army and Navy have taken "adequate safeguards" (presumably) against terrorist attacks but how many Army camps and forts heavily fortified were nevertheless overrun, how many ships blown up etc? The simple fact is that siting any plant today in terrorist prone areas is a huge risk. While the Army, Navy etc. can counter attack within reasonable time, can a plant which is attacked, and perhaps repeatedly attacked resume response to power needs within reasonable times? And is the cost of constant repairs

worth such siting? Would'nt this send costs of electricity to consumers up? One cannot merely say that we have to assume that "adequate safeguards" have been taken and go and take the plunge, regulars? To Q3, Dr. S's answer is that "it is a subject to be studied" by the CEB and the Ports Authority". (Italics mine). "To be studied" implies that no study has yet been made. Dr. S. does not say that the Indian Project is irrelevant to this issue or should be ignored. I presume he therefore implies that it could have some effect or consequence to Norochcholai whether adverse or otherwise. How then can he give the green light to Norochcholai now if the Indian Project's effects need to be studied? Since the Indian Project has on Dr. S's own admission now entered into the equation and not been cancelled out as irrelevant or immaterial can Norochcholai be given the green light as yet.

Despite the urgency of a new plant to ward off power shortages soon, would it not be folly to go ahead with an installation that may due to this Indian project have to be dismantled wholly or partly, or be modified to what extent God knows, in the not too distant future, and perhaps well before any benefits have been reaped and its costs recovered?

Dr. S. appears to justify Norochcholai now on the rather glossy "save all" answer that we will need 5000mg in the next 30 years and hence all three canvassed sites (Trinco, Noroch and Mawella) must be commissioned. No grouse against that. The point is whether in that context and in the context of the submissions I have stated requestions 2 & 3 above, it is not wiser to develop Mawella. Now, and put off Noroch and Trinco for better times when the terrorist problem and the Indian Palk Straits project have been dealt with. Since as

Dr. S says we will need the other two Noroch can be put on hold for now, as is Trinco, and Mawella gone full speed ahead with. This site has little or none of the regressive factors that at present affect Noroch and Trinco. I do not think that by saying that we need more plants and that all three currently canvassed plants need to be commissioned in due course can disguise or gloss over the wisdom or otherwise of going ahead with Noroch now and today. While all power plants the world over needs protection as Dr. S. says, does Mawella need that heavy degree of protection as will Noroch? Is Mawella today as vulnerable to immediate and deadly terrorist attacks as Noroch is now, a sitting duck well with in the ambit of terrorist forces. So why not put it off for better, less terror ridden times, and till we know the full effects of the Indian project? The extra time that may be needed to revive Mawella may ultimately be time well spent rather than the time and extra costs that may have to be incurred in repairing, heavily protecting and perhaps largely modifying Noroch if that is undertaken now. Besides, Mawella would have another national benefit over Noroch. The Army and Navy will not have to protect it.

The views of Dr. S the CEB and other experts would be useful. I need hardly mention that one fully respects Dr. S's views. The above comments are made bona fide and inquiringly because the Noroch now scheme is troubling in the light of the submissions mentioned above. These are not influenced by any environmental concerns or the Catholic Church's objections. The latter I think are hardly worthy of attention, being based largely on very selfish motives bereft of national concerns.

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