

Nuclear Power: What do MPs and the public think about it?

Report by Robert Freer



The era of commercial nuclear power started in 1956 when the output from the nuclear power station at Calder Hall in Cumbria was connected to the National Grid, but no new nuclear power stations have been built in the UK since Sizewell B was completed in 1995.

There is more activity overseas. Today there are more than 400 nuclear power stations operating around the world and 35 under construction with a total installed capacity of some 360GW and an output of more than 2700TWh. In some countries nuclear power has a dominant position. In France nuclear power supplies 78 % of domestic demand and their national CO₂ emissions from fuel combustion are 30% less than in the UK.

The declining production of indigenous fuels in the UK and the search for carbon-free generation has focused attention again on the use of nuclear power and the need to inform the public and engage them in the decisions to be taken.

To measure the attitude of the general public and MPs to nuclear power in the UK MORI has conducted a series of surveys on energy matters and the results were presented by Robert Knight, Research Director, MORI, at a conference in London on "Energy Choices" on 2 December 2004, in a paper entitled "Public and MPs' Attitudes to Nuclear Energy".

Mr Knight explained the need to focus on specific subjects and the questions asked were about:

- Favourability towards nuclear energy
- Support for replacement new build
- Preferred choices of energy sources
- The big issues: Environment, security of supply, radioactive waste
- What should we be doing?

Whom should we trust in this matter? The results of the latest MORI research in December 2004 showed that public favourability towards the nuclear industry is the most positive, on balance, for some years, with the favourables (28%) edging ahead of the unfavourables (26%). However, around half of those questioned continued to be undecided and did not give an opinion either way.

On the same question, MPs (when questioned last summer) were also almost equally divided in their opinions for and against except that only a quarter of those asked did not have an opinion.

The replacement of existing nuclear power stations by new build nuclear power stations is more popular than ever, though support remains almost matched by opposition. Thirty-five per cent support new build while 30% oppose it, with a further 35% undecided. The trend since 2001 has been for the opposition to new build to be decreasing and for support to be increasing. Those opposed to new build gave safety as their main reason.

Other recent MORI research showed that the "preferred choice of energy sources" are likely to cause problems to energy engineers because the preferred choice by a long way was the sun. And the second choice was wave energy. Unfortunately many engineers consider that neither of these sources are likely to provide reliable and economic energy on a large scale for some years to come.

The fourth question sought to identify what the public considers to be the Big Issues, and what factors should be taken into account in deciding the method of generating electricity. The main concern of the public in deciding the method of generating electricity was the effect on the environment, but some people did not

understand what was meant by global warming. A third of those surveyed thought global warming was related to the hole in the ozone layer or acid rain.

When asked about the effects and consequences of specific sources of energy one half of those surveyed believed that nuclear power does not produce greenhouse gases, and two-thirds were concerned that by 2020 we shall have to rely on imported gas to generate much of our electricity.

The question of "What should we be doing?" and specifically what should we be doing to "keep the nuclear option open" was directed to MPs and popular views were to educate the public, improve the image of the industry or simply to take the decision now to build new nuclear power stations. Doing nothing was only a minority opinion, though one in four favoured closing off the option now.

The final question was intended to find out who is trusted to tell the truth. The result was that the public generally trust doctors, teachers and clergyman. At the bottom of the list those least trusted were business leaders, politicians and journalists. However, over half those questioned were at least fairly confident that the nuclear industry operated in the best interests of society.

In summary it appears that while the public is not unfavourable to nuclear energy, especially if the alternative is relying on imported gas, there is still a major task to be undertaken in informing and engaging the public to help everyone understand the problems facing the energy industry and the possible realistic solutions, but as Mr Knight concluded "deep rooted suspicions of bias disqualify many of the best candidates to lead this effort".