

TOUGH ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL QUESTIONS FOR 2011¹

Rafe Mair[©]

In looking ahead to 2011, I see a very troubled environmental scene. This is because of one thing mainly: with our governments, money talks and big time money talks big time. This will reflect itself in several ways and places. In order to understand this, I think, it must be remembered that corporations don't give a rat's ass about the environment. They would pollute all water, destroy wildlife, and desecrate the environment generally. Every tiny bit of environmental restraint has been and always will be imposed by government and it will be resisted and ignored by the corporate world. Many of my generation and others have been brought up to respect government authority and to assume that the world was full of "good corporate citizens." We, in fact, marveled at the great construction taking place such as Alcan even reversing rivers and creating huge artificial lakes. We developed a public mindset that marveled, uncritically, at development.

There is no question that much of the world will need power; more and more every year. What's interesting is the lack of an intelligent debate on the subject both at a local and global level. We have industry and environmentalists fighting but it's scarcely a fair fight. On the Enbridge proposal to build two pipelines from the Tar Sands to Kitimat and back, industry is outspending the environmental community 100-1. All the magazines I read carry huge touchy feely ads from huge corporations who tell us in full page ads that they are working just as fast and as hard as environmentalists to make all their creations green.

Much of the problem has been created by an uninformed and ill-informed public which refuses to critically consider anything they've been brainwashed into believing or disbelieving. We in the environmental field, me very much included, have decided that certain issues cannot be discussed. These beliefs have become a hardened catechism that brooks no debate.

I have written in the past about nuclear power, for example. This is wrong, we all agree. They explode like atom bombs or melt down. If you live near them or work in them, you'll be nuked. And there are the calamities at Chernobyl and Three Mile Island. In the first case there was a disaster, and at Three Mile Island there was a dangerous near-miss. And these and other scares tell us that if you do nuclear power and don't keep up safety programs it's only a matter of time before you have very bad news. Nuclear plants are hugely expensive to maintain and no one has found a safe way of dealing with the waste. Does this mean that nuclear can never be debated again? Do any of us know what research has been done in recent years? In a moment I'll tell you why this is an important question.

On the other side we're told that wind power is the way to go because it's "green" and that's good. ("Green" is now a weasel word used by polluters to gloss over their destructive policies). The fact that wind power is hugely expensive and invariably set up with taxpayers money, that it is unreliable and environmentally unsound is not dealt with, for this is the reverse of the uranium argument – nuclear is bad and wind power is good, now let's have no more arguments. While we're at it, the future is electric cars and that's that! Never mind asking where the electricity is coming from and how green that source is – this matter has been decided, period!

¹ Common Sense Canadian, December 28, 2010

Right behind nuclear power comes fossil fuel power. This source of power is evil, so no more discussion please. I would advise one read the lead argument for the use of coal in this month's Atlantic Monthly. Here is a pretty strong argument which, in a nutshell says "we're not going to eliminate coal as a source of power for a very long time to come. Isn't the object to lower carbon emissions, so if we have no alternative for coal we should work harder at reducing the carbon footprint of this and other fossil fuels? Are there not, coming out of China for God's sake, new techniques which have dramatically reduced the unhappy consequence of burning coal for power?"

My point is that of a British Columbian who wants to save his province's environment. If I fight on the mantra that fossil fuels and nuclear are bad for the environment so that their use must be eliminated, doesn't that lead to the conclusion that hydroelectric power is the only way to go? Of course we have wind power, tidal, and solar power but until they can supply the world's needs for power, what is left? Do we not see that by saying that other countries must stop all nasty sources of energy we are inviting them to look to us to supply the power from our rivers? The demand for energy must go somewhere and rudimentary economics tells us the demand will lead to and find a supply – and we're it! That demand is going to increase so that every piece of water that moves in BC will become a potential source.

This is the great evil of the Campbell Energy Plan (based largely of private river diversion projects), which has been sold on the basis of our own needs - which is plain barnyard droppings. Not only is it going to outside consumers, it is saying "look, neighbour, don't you worry your pretty little heads about designing your own sources of energy and don't bother for a moment with conservation because there's lots more where that came from!"

I will soon be accused of all the usual sins – Rafe Mair favours nuclear, fossil fuel power, etc. - but I am not. What I'm saying is that our energy policy has us financing, out of taxpayers' pocket, large international corporations who build their plants to produce power for somewhere else. How are we financing these corporations? This is not hyperbole at all. We buy their power at 2-3 times what we can sell it for and that is money in the bank that otherwise would have to be borrowed or used out of the company's assets. British Columbians are, therefore, not giving away power to other jurisdictions so that they needn't make any sacrifices themselves - we're financing the operation! We're saying to American governors: don't worry about your environment, don't fret about how you deal with carbon emissions, don't give more than a passing thought to conservation – BC rivers and streams are yours for the asking!

It's one thing to be a good neighbour but don't you think this is a bit too much!