Issues: Another contentious issue, another phony consultation

*Nuclear Consultations*

Ricardo Acuña / ualberta.ca / parkland

Why bother? Does anyone in Alberta really believe that "consultations" and "expert panel" reports generated by the provincial government are ever anything more than attempts to whitewash contentious issues and unpopular policies? Yet the government continues to spend millions of dollars on these public relations exercises, and continues to try to pass them off as genuine and objective consultations.

The latest supposed information gathering and public consultation effort launched by the government is no different. When Albertans responded loudly and angrily to a proposal from Ontario's Bruce Power to build up to four nuclear reactors in northern Alberta, the government sought to quell the outcry by assuring us that they would not take a position on nuclear power without first studying the pros and cons in depth and fully consulting the public.

As always, the first step in this process was the appointment of an "expert panel" to produce a "comprehensive and balanced" research report, which would look at the environmental, safety and myriad other issues related to nuclear power generation.

Unfortunately, the panel itself was neither comprehensive nor balanced. The panel is chaired by Harvie Andre, a former Conservative MP who remains closely allied with pro-nuclear Conservatives, including Stephen Harper. Also on the panel is John Luxat, who is a past president of the Canadian Nuclear Society, and a current board member of Atomic Energy of Canada Limited (AECL). Rounding out the panel are Joseph Doucet, an energy policy professor from the University of Alberta, and Harrie Vredenburg, a prof from the University of Calgary who has done work in the past for energy companies holding a direct stake in Bruce Power.

Missing from the panel were any environmental researchers, any health professionals and generally anyone who might be critical or provide a different perspective to that being presented by the nuclear industry. In fact, when Dr. Helen Caldicott, one of the world's leading researchers on the health impacts of nuclear energy, was in Alberta recently she offered to meet with Harvie Andre and the entire panel, but her offer was refused by panel chair Andre.

The panel finally released its long-awaited report to the public at the end of March. As was expected given the composition of the panel, the report was also neither comprehensive nor balanced. This is even less surprising when one considers that the organizations contracted to prepare the report were the Idaho Nuclear Laboratory (INL), a researcher, builder and operator of nuclear reactors, and the Alberta Research Council, which has signed a memorandum of understanding with INL to explore uses of nuclear power in the tar sands.

The panel's report heavily downplayed the environmental and health impacts of nuclear energy, focusing instead on nuclear energy as a low-carbon-emission source of electricity. To achieve that claim, the report ignores the full life-cycle emissions of nuclear power, which includes mining and transportation. There was no mention in the report of peer-reviewed studies from Germany citing higher cancer rates in children living near nuclear plants, nor was there mention of the issue of radioactive emissions from reactors, including tritium. The
risk assessment in the report was based on a small 800 megawatt reactor, despite the fact that what is being proposed in Alberta is up to 4000 megawatts of generation. The costs of nuclear generation were also downplayed, focusing only on the direct costs of generation and not including the full life-cycle costs of plants, including construction and decommissioning. These are the costs that have Ontario citizens still paying a premium on their monthly electricity bills to subsidize their nuclear power plants, which have never actually run at any near 100 per cent of capacity.

The Pembina Institute recently released a report highlighting that all of Alberta's future electricity needs could be met by renewable electricity generation. Interestingly, the panel's report fails to consider this research, and seems focused on the need for increasing non-renewable capacity. Finally, the report focuses on existing reactors and completely ignores the fact that the reactors proposed for Alberta have never been used anywhere before and have had numerous problems in their development phase.

In short, the panel's research report reads like a public relations document for nuclear power that would make Mr. Burns of The Simpsons proud.

The government is now using this report as the foundation for its public consultation exercise. The consultation consists of a workbook that can be filled out either online or in print, and returned to the government. Because it's based on the findings of the panel, however, the information and questions in the workbook suffer from the same lack of information. The leading nature of the questions is also problematic. Questions designed to highlight Alberta's future energy needs, compare nuclear emissions to coal emissions and reassure Albertans that radiation emissions would be within international guidelines make it clear what the government hopes to get from this survey.

The other aspect of the consultation is a by-invitation-only series of focus groups to talk through these issues and gather opinions from Albertans. The government claims to have selected this option instead of public town hall meetings because the town hall process tends to bring out people with strong opinions about the issue. Instead, the government wants to hear from "average" Albertans.

Ultimately, it was clear from the initial appointment of the expert panel how this process was going to end up. Another contentious issue, another phony consultation, another case of the government doing what they want while ignoring the wishes of Albertans.

Nuclear energy is an issue that demands public discussion, input and dialogue. It is an issue that requires an understanding of all the risks and implications. To tackle this issue by way of a glorified public relations campaign and consultations with predetermined results is an insult to Albertans, and does significant damage to the public interest. Let them know you see through it. Let them know you demand real information and research. And let them know that you are far too concerned with your health and environment to let them slip this one through as they have with so many others.

Ricardo Acuña is executive director of the Parkland Institute, a non-partisan public policy research institute housed at the University of Alberta.