
If nuclear is the answer, how do you deal with the politics?

Editorial article

If nuclear is the answer, how do you deal with the politics?

By Mike Scott

"Climate change is the most severe problem we face today," said the UK's chief scientific adviser Sir David King in 2004 – more serious, he added, than terrorism. If so, we must stop burning fossil fuels – coal, oil and gas – to produce power. But if we do that, it must be replaced with something, otherwise there will be an 'energy gap' as fossil fuel power stations are phased out but demand continues to rise.

There are a number of options available, but at the most basic level, they come down to cutting demand for energy or making energy supply produce less CO₂. Despite the startling results that can be achieved through energy efficiency measures, most focus has been on the latter, where there is a range of technologies, including the various types of renewable energy and nuclear power.

Sir David is one of a number of prominent scientific figures who believe that nuclear power is the answer, among them Professor James Lovelock, creator of the Gaia hypothesis and a revered figure in the environmental community. Many policy-makers also like nuclear because it reduces dependence on fossil fuel-producing nations, many of which appear to be ready to use their oil or gas as a political weapon. Uranium, on the other hand, is widely available from stable nations such as Canada and Australia. Nuclear power can also provide constant baseload power and plug straight into national grids, unlike most renewable technologies, which are intermittent and not ideally suited to the current electricity distribution infrastructure.

The problem for nuclear supporters is that there are so many media-friendly arguments against it – even if used peacefully, the potential for disaster is illustrated by 3-Mile Island and Chernobyl, which remain potent symbols of what can go wrong. And even without disasters, the issue of what to do with nuclear waste has not been dealt with satisfactorily in the public's estimation.

Furthermore, opponents argue that nuclear plants will take too long to build and that the economics do not add up without massive government subsidies. But while many governments seem happy to see a new generation of nuclear power plants, they are reluctant to fund them. Meanwhile, the private sector is unwilling to commit until it gets certain guarantees from governments.

But most importantly, to many people, nuclear power equates with the ability to create nuclear weapons. And there are therefore some states that just cannot be trusted with nuclear power – top of the list at the moment are Iran and North Korea, but that is merely because they are closest to acquiring it. Many of these concerns are overstated, nuclear supporters say – it is not easy to produce weapons-grade uranium or plutonium from the material used in nuclear reactors and there is a comprehensive international inspection programme in place. But while this may catch 99.9% of nuclear activity, the consequences of that 0.1% slipping through the net are horrendous. Moreover, the system relies on the willing participation of every nation – Iran and North Korea have shown that this cannot be relied upon.

Ultimately, the problem for those touting nuclear as the answer is that it clearly is not the only answer.

Nuclear power comes with costs – and for many people, they are too high.

About the author



Mike Scott is a journalist specialising in energy, environment and business issues. He writes on these subjects for a number of publications, including the *Financial Times*, *New Energy Finance*, *Global Investor Magazine* and Brussels-based policy journal *Europe's World*. He also writes and edits reports for a range of corporate clients.

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