

“Planning for the future: The energy question”

Mike Kantey
Environmental lobbyist and Convenor of the Koeberg Alert Alliance

Paper presented at the Harold Wolpe Memorial Trust's 52nd open dialogue

25 May 2006
Leslie Social Science Building, University of Cape Town

In the spirit of Harold Wolpe I can afford to be a dissident ANC member and this is what is now missing in the ANC at all levels. I cannot believe how curtailed debate is now compared to former years. I was once an observer of the student left and I wonder: Do we need Harold Wolpe now more than ever, because many of the things he said are still relevant? It is important to keep that spirit of vigorous debate alive.

I have been engaged for some time in trying to make sense of the energy sector. I know some very fine energy analysts, some of whom are here tonight. There appears to be an unbroken line of commitment to nuclear power dating back to the 1960s, and the origins of our industry date back to 1942 and the Manhattan Project. The nuclear power and weapons industries are Siamese twins, joined at the hip.

For me, the answer to the nuclear debate is political, rather than technical, and centres on the questions of nuclear proliferation and nuclear disarmament. These questions should be a matter of common concern among progressive forces, but I am amazed at how quiet the global anti-nuclear movement has become.

I remember the fever in the 1980s with which these causes were fought in the streets. All the social movements – women's liberation, ecological justice, the peace movement – were all united in one single debate about global capitalism and global oppression, and about people using their money and power to suppress others.

The nuclear debate is thus not an abstract one but rather about whether we want an open, democratic society, or one run by wealthy and powerful people. When one examines how decisions are taken in the nuclear industry one has to look at what Armscor-Denel was doing with pebble-bed modular reactor (PBMR) technology in the late 1980s under the tutelage of Harry Viljoen of IST and how “Pik” Botha introduced the idea to the Government of National Unity in 1993. It was then taken up by Cabinet in an unbroken line to the present and always remained a closely-held view by Cabinet and Cabinet alone.

When, for example – as loyal ANC cadres -- we held a Nuclear Policy Conference in February 1994, the broad consensus among COSATU members, the National Union of Mineworkers, the ANC Science & Policy Desk, the EMG, the Cape Town Ecology Group, Earthlife Africa – all loyal supporters of the Mass Democratic Movement, mark you -- it was agreed we would interrogate nuclear power as an option. From a socialist viewpoint, therefore, there is no history in the ANC of an acceptance of nuclear power.

COSATU even passed a resolution condemning it.

How precisely, then, the President, Cabinet and Alec Erwin in particular can take a fixed position on nuclear energy without reference to the rank and file in this country is something of a political mystery. It questions the whole issue of democracy. How do we take positions as a nation on matters of international and global concern and, most importantly, how can we take these positions without broader consultation?

It is a matter of deep concern that we find ourselves alienated from our own movement that we helped to build by virtue of having a dissident view about nuclear power and about its technical collaboration with one Middle Eastern State that has declared its intentions to use nuclear weapons against another Middle Eastern State.

These questions with such grave consequences for human life and peace on Earth must be subject to a national debate.

I am bitterly disappointed, therefore, that there is not a single face from Parliament here tonight. Perhaps it shows their utter contempt for the spirit of Harold Wolpe and the noble tradition of informed and vigorous national debate.

The only way we can deal with this issue rationally is to look at the issue of coal-fired power stations. They are with us, although they have emission problems. Renewable energy cannot meet the base-load of electricity to the national grid. We have agreed that there should be 20% renewable energy by 2020. That's our target. But what do we do about the other 80%?

People are saying that other forms of energy should help meet the peak demand. And during peak demand it is always ordinary people who have to accept load shedding. Yet we find that industrial consumers are never spoken about in the media. So who are the consumers? What has Eskom done to put us into this plight? They have persuaded municipalities to do away with their own supplies and link to the grid while raising the rates. We have a situation where the REDS can't start because the municipalities will lose revenue. They get a lot of money from their electricity sales.

When we begin to look rationally at the ridiculous situation we face, all of us depending on one line, we realise that we have been hooked into a capital-intensive energy system consisting of one all-powerful supplier, ESKOM. We therefore need to decentralise down to household level, to have our own supplies and be less dependent on outside power. For me, therefore, the solution is neither nuclear or renewables, but a large energy mix.

We have been speaking about these things for 25 years. Israel is a world leader in solar technology. Internationally, we see 26% growth, year on year, of wind power. I wouldn't buy pebble-bed reactor shares if you paid me to take them away.

It is simplistic to say that accidents such as Three Mile Island are not germane to the debate. Scientifically and clinically speaking, it did indeed release a lot of gaseous emissions with a measurable impact on human life.

When it comes to Pebble-Bed Modular Reactors, it is a palpable lie to say that they are clean and safe. The THTR-3000 broke down in May 1986 and spewed out its own radio-active cloud because they could not guarantee the spherical accuracy of the balls, which became lodged in the outlet flue, and caused a build-up of steam. If the Germans can't engineer 300 million pebblebed spheres to 120% accuracy, who can? It is not a technology I would put money into. A new pressurised reactor will also have the same problems that Koeberg has.

There's a lot of stuff in the emissions from Koeberg and we have a problem with community health. Why has there been no study of the pollution of Cape Town around Koeberg? There are many cancers, lymphomas and leukaemia but epidemiological studies have not been done. We have campaigned in Namaqualand and people are uniformly opposed to any further development of that waste dump.

The rest is politics and it is this that bothers me the most. At no point have the people living there been asked about these issues, yet we propose to export hazardous waste to Namaqualand. What is politically right and just? How do we summon the spirit of Harold Wolpe can we ask the authorities to stand firm and say they will throw open their doors and make available secret information and have an informed debate?