



The Daily Gleaner

May 8, 2010

The Need for Long Term Energy Policy

The past several months have provided a lively discussion on energy in New Brunswick, and regardless of your personal feelings on the subject it has ignited a conversation that has been long overdue in this province. Energy has never really been a dinner table conversation topic, but with a looming convergence of issues facing it, perhaps it is time it should be.

Over the coming decades we are going to have deal with energy production in a carbon constrained world, increasing global energy demand in the face of diminishing supply from traditional sources, and rising prices. In order to be able to supply clean, affordable and secure energy we need to start the planning process now – not just for the next five years, but for the next fifty years.

New power stations typically have a lifespan of at least twenty five years, and often approach forty years, so decisions made today can have an impact for decades to come. That makes it even more important to make the right choices now, or at least choices that leave options on the table.

The current electrical grid system, where large centralized plants produce and distribute our electricity, hasn't always been around. It was first put in place in the early 1900's in the UK, where the grid system amalgamated and standardized a variety of electricity producers who had previously worked independently. It was a great change to the early electricity industry, but not so great that the very idea of it shouldn't be revisited. Do we want or need to continue producing electricity in such a centralized manner, or should communities be looking to become more responsible for (and in control of) their individual energy needs?

We're not going to eliminate fossil fuels from our society any time in the near future, but small scale distributed cogeneration units could provide new communities with both electricity and heat from fossil fuels at efficiencies approaching 90% instead of the 35-45% currently seen in our power plants.

Smart grid technologies and smart appliances show immense promise, and electric cars could become the norm by the middle of this century. When replacing infrastructure today, we need to keep these possibilities in mind so as to ensure that what we build is capable of handling those future needs, while meeting nationally recognized standards. The building code in San Francisco is soon to be revised to require that buildings be pre-wired for plugging in electric cars, and utility companies are already improving infrastructure in those neighbourhoods they believe will be early adopters of electric cars. Making that investment now means quicker adoption and prevents the equipment from having to be replaced five years from now.

Solutions to our looming energy problems exist, but we need co-ordinated and effective government policies, regulation and incentives to get things started. This shouldn't be done in isolation, but in co-operation with neighbouring provinces, states and the federal government. And of course, public consultation must be a key part of this process, but only after a proposed framework for these consultations has been put forward.

It is becoming increasingly clear that to be a true leader in the energy industry we shouldn't merely be reacting to new developments in the energy industry, but instead, designing and fostering an environment that ensures a future of efficient and innovative energy use and production in New Brunswick.

Brian McCain is a consulting engineer in the power generation sector, and Executive Director of The Gaia Project, a New Brunswick based non-profit energy education group. You can visit his website at www.thegaiaproject.ca