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Tasking the Energy Commission

With the new Progressive Conservative government assuming power recently I was glad to hear of a panel being struck to solve what may very well be one of the most pressing conundrums the province faces: NB Power. The panel does not come as a surprise as political observers have correlated the outcome of the past election with recent events surrounding NB Power.

The goal of the panel is to determine how to run the utility more efficiently so as to diminish the associated debt load. A few areas of interest already appear to be on the panel's radar. Notably, whether or not the utility should be reassembled in efforts to reduce duplication, hence costs; and whether or not a second nuclear reactor should be commissioned in the not-too-distant future. Perhaps the panel will discuss the potential sale of NB Power, although I highly doubt such discussions would be made public any time soon. Although these issues are worthy of discussion they represent only the tip of the iceberg of what needs to be addressed.

NB Power came of age in provincial and international political economic settings which do not resemble those it is trying to compete, let alone operate, in today. In a time defined by an increased corporate-environmental integration and awareness; an enhanced need for inter-provincial cooperation which does not yet appear capable of overcoming protective trade barriers and emotions; an increasing global demand for energy tied to increasing costs for natural resources; the development of a knowledge-based economy which is fuelling a technological arms race; and a centralization and general aging of the provincial population, we need to re-evaluate the entire structure and culture of energy provision within this province.

When evaluating the merits of the current system and those of competing options, we must first identify the criteria used to measure success. When I think of a successful energy provision system I see a mixture of energy producing technologies, including fossil fuels and renewables, which combine to reduce the system's aggregate environmental footprint. I see a system which aims to service local markets first and which is integrated with national and international markets second. I see a system which promotes local employment throughout the province and not only at certain central nodes. I see a system which remains flexible and responsive to local and global technological innovations. And perhaps most importantly, I see a system which is profitable and economically self-sufficient, within which ratepayers are provided with predictable and stable charges.

This is not out of our reach. With the various technologies at hand today, ranging from community-based cogeneration mini-plants and even community-based small-scale atomic energy plants; to a full complement of renewable energy sources layered over a base load supported by fossil fuels, with power

travelling over a smart and interactive grid, there is no shortage of options to be investigated and implemented.

Naturally, the new energy commission will have its hands full simply determining whether or not NB Power should be reassembled into a single corporation, and whether or not there is a future for nuclear power beyond Point Lepreau 1. But keeping the commission busy exclusively with these two issues is a lost opportunity. Task the commission with determining the best energy provision system for New Brunswick regardless of NB Power's current structure and culture. Once we know how best to provide energy for the province, then we can determine how best to transition from our current setting to that which is envisaged by the commission with, hopefully, significant input from all who want to be heard.

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