

Where is Najib's study on nuclear policy?

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In yesterday's parliamentary sitting, Energy, Green Technology and Water Minister Peter Chin continued to sell nuclear power as the government's preferred option.

peter chinThe minister (right) argued that dependency on coal and gas will lead to a rise in electricity rates due to scarcity and market volatility. He then claimed that the operation cost for nuclear power was low compared to coal, oil, and gas.

It is true that both coal and gas prices have been rising in recent years. However, the same is true of uranium, the fuel needed for nuclear power plants.

The Minister has to be aware that overall cost, and not just operational cost, needs to be considered in the decision to go nuclear.

The total lifetime costs of nuclear power are very high, and are uncompetitive compared to gas-power. This is a strong reason why the nuclear industry has been in worldwide decline for over a decade.

Massive hidden costs

Chin stated that a 1,000-megawatt (MW) nuclear plant could cost between US\$2 and US\$4 billion (RM6.4 and RM12.8 billion respectively). In comparison, the 1,300 MW Lumut gas plant cost only around RM4 billion to build.

nuclear power plant reactor fusion 040309 02Based on construction costs alone, a gas plant delivers more than twice the value per MW compared to a nuclear plant.

Gas-powered plants enjoy an efficiency of between 41 - 50 percent. Nuclear efficiency hovers at around 33 percent.

If dependency on coal and gas will lead to a rise in electricity rates then I cannot see how adding a single nuclear power plant – which is facing rising uranium prices, lower value per MW, and lower efficiency – is going to help the consumers' bills.

Malaysia also maintains a 40 percent reserve power margin, double the target of 20 percent. Why shouldn't more efficient management of the reserve margin lead to lower rates and remove the need for a risky technology such as nuclear?

Nuclear power also incurs costs for the treatment and storage of radioactive waste, which needs to be kept secure for thousands of years.

Additionally, security measures must be put in place to prevent sabotage or illegal trafficking for weapons production.

The government is therefore only showing the Malaysian public a fraction of the costs involved with nuclear power. Clearly, this area of nuclear economics needs more study.

Risk of child cancer

Indeed, Prime Minister Najib Razak has, in his 1Malaysia blog, called for a "comprehensive study" before going ahead on nuclear.

nuclear technology 100806 core reactorWhy is Chin sending out a message of "no alternative but nuclear" before such a study has been done?

The minister also said that the plant would not be a threat to the environment, and the government would undertake road-shows to educate the public on the safety of nuclear power. "We hope we can influence public perception through the programmes," he said.

In the absence of the prime minister's "comprehensive study", on what basis is he making such a bold claim?

The prime minister's study should also be aware of another study, that the German government commissioned and accepted, on the connection between cancer in children and proximity to nuclear power plants.

The KiKK study surveyed all nuclear plants in Germany and their surrounding populations. They found a strong link between child cancers and proximity to nuclear plants.

No Malaysian, child or adult, should be exposed to such dangers.

No confidence in safety

Safety of nuclear power relies heavily on good maintenance culture. Malaysia unfortunately historically suffers from a poor maintenance culture, as well as poor construction for official projects.

dams hydroelectric dams 290609Look at the state of Putrajaya and our collapsing stadiums. The Federal Government is also fond of official secrecy. These factors combined do not generate any confidence for nuclear safety in Malaysia.

Malaysia has outstanding targets on renewable energy capacity that have not yet been fulfilled.

The Minister needs to answer why government performance in this sector has been so poor. Since we have the option of safe and reliable technologies, we should not be rushing ahead on risky, costly, and under-researched options such as nuclear power.

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