

**Birmingham Policy Commission:
The future of nuclear power**

**Afternoon session:
New build – Waste - Liability – Threats – Public opinion**

Forgotten virtues: Ethics in nuclear decision-making

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A common thread

- **Waste and liabilities.**
- **Public confidence in the nuclear industry.**
- **Threats to the public.**

All these issues touch on profoundly ethical issues and our views on how to address them will depend on our personal values.

Ethics, principles, and values

- **Ethics are sets of principles concerned with behaviour and wellbeing.**
 - What is good and bad, right and wrong.
 - We define what is acceptable according to our values.
- **Some key principles:**
 - Respect for life and wellbeing.
 - Justice.
 - Dignity.
 - Liberty.
 - Respect for others.
- **These principles may sometimes be in conflict.**

Ethics, principles, and values

- **What may be politically or publicly acceptable at a societal level is not necessarily ethically acceptable.**
- **What may be the best solution according to scientific, technical, or economic reasoning is not necessarily ethically acceptable.**
- **Ethics are particularly important in nuclear decision making because nuclear power poses potentially severe hazards to people and the environment into the far future.**

Waste and liabilities

Radioactive waste is an ethical issue because making a deliberate decision to create radioactive wastes presents risks which extend into the far future.

Equity – fairness:

- Between groups within our own generation (how should risks and benefits be distributed?).
- Between generations (should we deal with the problem now or leave it for future generations to deal with?).

Sustainability (taking into account the natural, as well as human, environment).

Public confidence in the nuclear industry

The conduct of the nuclear industry is an ethical issue because decisions made within the industry will have far-reaching impacts on people and the environment.

Integrity - behaving in an honest and trustworthy manner.

Legitimacy -

- Openness and transparency (public right to know about costs, benefits, and risks they will bear).
- Informed consent of society – based on reliable and trustworthy information.

Threats to the public

Potential threats resulting from nuclear power, and the response to these threats, are ethical issues because they have an impact on the wellbeing and freedom of people.

- Loss of institutional control.
- Proliferation of nuclear materials.
- Accidents, malicious acts, and terrorism.

Precaution – the use of complex, risk-inherent technology when less risky options exist.

Liberties – the kind of society we want to live in.

Some key ethical questions

- Do we know how we will contain and manage radioactive wastes safely in the long term?
- Do those who will bear a disproportionate share of the risks posed by nuclear power consent to this?
- Have we exhausted all less risky alternatives before deciding to adopt nuclear power?
- Can we be sure that in 100 years time society and its institutions will be able to manage high level radioactive waste safely?

Committee on Radioactive Waste Management

July 2006

“CoRWM considers that the social, political and ethical challenges relating to any new nuclear build, and waste generated, could be greater than the technical challenges”.

“The public assessment process that should apply to any future new build proposals should build on the CoRWM process, and will need to consider a range of issues including the social, political and ethical issues of a deliberate decision to create new nuclear wastes”.

Consequences and conclusions

- **No evidence that this is being done.**
- **Ethical consideration is absent in decision making on nuclear new build – yet essential for public acceptance.**
- **The consequence is a lack of legitimacy that allows nuclear decisions to be contested.**
- **Ethical questions must be addressed at every stage in the nuclear decision-making process.**
- **This means involving the public, social scientists, and ethicists, not just engineers and civil servants.**

**Thank you, friends ...
enjoy the debate!**

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