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Mr. Premier: Take renewable energy out of Nova Scotia Power's hands

RALPH SURETTE
Sat. Jun 27 - 4:46 AM



THE MERITS of a proposed forest-fed biomass power plant at the Strait of Canso is being disputed before the Utility and Review Board. We should not miss the larger meaning of this event: It gives us another glimpse into our failed alternative energy policy, and should remind us that changing it is as big a challenge for the new government as fixing health care.

Nova Scotia Power is desperate to get some production going — by burning the forest or otherwise — because it's failing to meet its deadlines under the

2007 renewable energy regulations: five per cent renewables by next year, 20 per cent by 2013. It's failing because its wind power strategy is failing. That's failing because NSP chased most windmill contractors out with its command-and-control strategy.

The recession is no doubt part of it, as NSP claims, but one source in the industry tells me Nova Scotia has gained a reputation elsewhere as one of the worst places for wind entrepreneurs to do business.

The root of the failure, however, is deeper. The real culprit is government. The MacDonald government especially, but others before it, had no energy policy beyond regulations and up-to-date buzzwords. Real energy policy was entrusted to NSP, which was privatized some 15 years ago and whose obligation is to its shareholders, not to the public interest.

Here's my first suggestion for the Dexter government: Get rid of the renewables deadlines, and let NSP off the hook. NSP knows nothing of alternative energy, didn't want it to begin with, and all it's doing in its desperation is making things worse.

If NSP fails to meet its targets, it will be fined \$500,000 a day. And what good will that do since, as a regulated monopoly, these fines will presumably be paid by you and me on our power bills?

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More importantly, take back energy policy and control of renewables. Create a body to develop alternative energy and conservation as one, and an overarching power authority to mesh these efforts with NSP, which will be left to do what it knows best: run the power plants and the grid, adjust the transmission system to the requirements of new alternative power sources, and negotiate with Newfoundland and New Brunswick power people on Atlantic-wide grid issues.

Check out how they're doing it in Ontario and other out-front jurisdictions, where "feed-in" laws or "standard offer contracts" are in effect — in which the utility is required to take power produced by entrepreneurs at a fixed rate, no haggling. Wherever it's been tried, there's been an explosion of energy entrepreneurship and new jobs.

The NSP system of calling tenders one project at a time didn't work elsewhere, and it hasn't worked here.

Indeed, its critics accuse NSP of wanting to fail and drive out the wind entrepreneurs so it could take over wind energy itself, thus extending its monopoly over alternate energy as well as regular energy. This authority was actually given it by the MacDonald government a few months ago.

The NDP did promise feed laws, but without enthusiasm. I heard Premier Darrell Dexter say, a few weeks ago, that he was worried that feed-in laws cause power rates to rise.

This is true; but wherever it has happened, surveys show the public is happy to pay a couple of dollars more a month because the positive effects are so visible: pollution down, conservation increased, jobs created, rural economies stimulated, energy imports reduced, small entrepreneurs multiplying.

As for the New-Page/Bio-Gen biomass generator at issue at the Strait, the problem is not so much the project itself as that it's being rushed without any policy direction.

The main objection to it is based on what it will do to the forest (and we've just been dinged as the worst clearcutters in the country by a national forest institute, Global Forest Watch Canada), although some environmentalists say it might be supportable at half the proposed size (30 megawatts instead of 60).

And there's the timely point made by Dalhousie energy expert Larry Hughes: Making electricity from wood is wasteful. Wood, in pelletized form, would be far more valuable as home fuel than as electricity, as we await new oil price blowouts.

Finally, here's a specific example of what's not working. Marwood Inc. is a wood products firm that I wrote about April 18. They have enough wood waste to produce two to three megawatts to power their three plants; but to be viable, they have to be able to sell the surplus to NSP.

But NSP has no time for small stuff. "It would be nice to get a contract similar to what New-Page is being offered," sighs manager Fenton Travis, as he awaits NSP's call that doesn't come.

That call has to come — but from a new public energy authority.

(rsurette@herald.ca)

Ralph Surette is a veteran freelance journalist living in Yarmouth County.

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traispealot wrote:

The NDP won the election on a promise to take the tax off of energy and make it cheaper for the consumer. Wind energy is enormously expensive and promoting wind power is not going to make what we pay for electricity any cheaper. The wholesale price that NSP would have to pay wind producers is higher than they currently sell it for. So who ultimately is going to eat that loss?

danby wrote:

Perhaps it is time to get rid of a monopoly and have the users decide who they want to purchase power from instead of this company and boards making decisions for taxpayers and what they will pay they can no longer pay??Perhaps it is time they paid their own fines and overhead costs from profits instead of fees especially the idea to have users pay for what is NOT used by surcharges now??? What we use only we pay, period.That is the last straw to hear from this monopoly.People are going to make their own choices if they can't afford what they have.We are in recession and you can't get blood from a rock.Let them pay their own investments since they get the profits.Enough is enough renewable or not too many are hurting thanks to their apparent constant increases.People use others sources and power costs still does not go down to reflect it???They will lose money and have to because we as users just can't afford them anymore.That is a given just ike their increases.

dsydney wrote:

You could put a windmill in everyone's backyard and the grid couldn't take it. The grid needs to be upgraded to the tune of a billion plus dollars- Who's going to pay for that- where will Ralph and his NDP friends find that money- One way or another we will pay either through higher electricity or higher taxes. Reality Check here Ralph- you traded Rodney MacDonald for Darrell Hamm- ain't nothing gonna change

Here wrote:

Well like most people I have not the faintest idea about energy. I do know I wouldn't "happily pay a couple dollars more" for anything I don't have a choice in. We are too North for solar, it would be seasonal augmentation at best. The wind blows but not like on the prairies, so that is unreliable, expensive, and mechanical. Burning wood? Yeah that's why homes are full of wood burning electricity generators. What is odd though is that we spend billions getting rid of compostable and biodegradable products, including sewage, that gives off heat and gas. Oddly we never think about oil from algae farms, or burning refuse. I guess it is tidal, at least the tides are consistent. Not as consistent as nuclear but in a luddite society like NS this is likely the way to go. Maybe the province could allow it to be a Halifax city initiative. With any luck, in a couple hundred years, we'd have a consultant's report.

mact wrote:

One of the reasons that NSP has had free rein is due to the fact that they were given it by Donald Cameron's Tories when it was privatized. One of the commitments by Cameron at the time was that investors would be guaranteed a good return on their money. So far to date, we, the tax payers, have paid for NSP twice over. Once when we built it up as a crown corporation, twice with investment money when it was privatized. The money from acquisition of shares was supposed to be used to pay down the provincial debt. That did not happen either. The first budget that Cameron handed down after that he stated that they had miscalculated the spending for the previous year. Now it looks like we will be paying for it again when we will be taxed on our bills for upgrades or when the government subsidizes the upgrades. It looks like the share capital will not be used to cover off capital works projects within that outfit. Its time for some drastic measures to rein in that organization.

rholmes wrote:

Ralph Note today's CH article wherein NB and Que are "initiating discussions etc. to bring Renewable Energy to Atlantic Canada" This is the 21st Century. Past Governments in NS have failed miserably to recognize that RE exists to the West and North, and needs to be connected sooner rather than later. I agree, the rate payer and tax payer will have to cough up. The New Energy Economy will not come about solely from private sector ownership of the Grid, but Good Government is about providing incentives for progress to be made. The economic benefits will be huge. Robert in the Tar Sands

greenearl wrote:

I've been preaching this for years. Pacific Gas and Electric in California has cost the renewable energy industry thirty years of growth. <http://yeswecansolveit.blogspot.com> Know come the big Southern California transmission line peddlers, to N. Cal wanting to displace 6,000 homeowners with 600 miles of power towers...Why? So they can ship coal shale-fired turbine power to the Bay Area and LA areas from rural states like Colorado, Utah, Idaho, and Montana. This is the same GM mentality that bankrupted that company and our nation. Green Earl, Founder American Energy Conservation Group Producing Negawatts....Since 1981

Frank wrote:

Mr Surette certainly got one thing right in this column. Get rid of that legislation that forces NSP to buy into renewables. That legislation ranks right up there with Stephan Dion's carbon tax, and both Rodney and Dion are history, and deservedly so. But renewables do not create jobs. A study by King Juan Carlos Univ. Of Madrid, Spain (researcher Gabriel Calzada Alvarez), found that each subsidized green megawatt DESTROYS between 2 and 5 jobs elsewhere in the economy. Will pollution really be down? By how much? When I look out my window I don't see any pollution and the amount of global warming caused by NSP is so minute that it can't be measured. No one asked me if I would be happy to pay extra for green energy, the numbers they are quoting in the U.S. Is roughly \$1300 per family per year, Obama's Cap-and-Trade plan. The proper energy plan is to repeal the renewables legislation, repeal the prohibition against nuclear and then let NSP provide our electricity within the present regulatory framework. No more, no less.

wayne moores wrote:

Please stop the madness. Time for people and politicians to tell eco-fanatics like Lizzie May and Suzuki to put a sox in it. Quit spending massive amounts of time and money to solve a make believe problem with make believe solutions. This insanity has got to stop. Now we are going to turn our woodlands into moonscapes and defile beautiful places like the Wentworth Valley with fricken windmills and hydro lines running everywhere. This is nuts. We have three coal fired generating plants in the province while the Chinese are opening a new one every week, and have told Gore and company to take a hike. Time for politicians to tackle real problems like our balloning public debt which is going to kill our grandchildren(not the fairy tale of global warming...oops I mean "climate change", since the Earth, inexplicably stopped warming over a decade ago), and unemployment. God help us from hypocrits who are out to "save the world".

Jacob61 wrote:

danby and mact: Great comments, and in my opinion, very accurate. It's ludicrous to have a monopoly business with a Governmental "guaranteed rate of return" for it's shareholders. Time to either let in additional competition, or have the public take it back.

Walter PPK wrote:

I hope Dexter will find the strength and spirit to take on NSPI/Emera in the best interest of this province and its people. NSPI is essentially a government-sanctioned monopoly where a private company is guaranteed to fill its pockets with our money. For something essential like power production, however, we would be better off with a revenue-neutral government organisation or an end to monopoly; de-privatise the distribution system, and use that to broker between local generators and consumers. Introduce the feed-in tariff which made Germany a leader in green energy economy; as opposition the NS NDP proposed to legislature to introduce the feed-in tariff. I like the idea of creating 'community generated power' (wind, solar, biomass, etc) so that power is produced and consumed locally. This NDP government has realistically 3 years time for the proper changes. Let's see if they have the guts. Else I will be off the grid in a few years.

danby wrote:

dsydney we already pay for access to power which means they need to maintain and update the means of supply and demand to provide the service to the public or expect the public to want different service they get realiability from without paying for nothing too give shareholders profit who must re-invest their money to stay in business not ours. Rates are based on usage and if we find them too high and want to conserve seeing this penilized guess what we as users will demand other means at less cost and that is common sense. Some have already gone off grid so expect more who want better service and personal choice. Where there is a will there is a way and a lot of smart designers out there if you can build big you can build small too. Power companies can use what they want homeowners don't have to use the same if they don't want to.

PureMoisture wrote:

This seems to be a broad topic. However despite the myriad of problems that already exist, I must add another. I am 100% against biomass power from the forest! You have got to be kidding me, renewable energy is good and should be a major focus. However burning the forest is definately the wrong thing to do. We need organic materials period. We should concentrate on tidal and other power including wind. A well diversified energy industry is the key. Instead money should be spent in research. Oh and this monopoly seems to be a complete failure.

mact wrote:

greenearl: Interesting. The Californians are importing coal/shale fired power. From this I gather they, themselves will not be doing any polluting. So, the Californians can still brag about their carbon footprint and point an accusing finger at the states producing the power. It's no wonder that the Californians are touting the electric car.

Forward Thinker wrote:

wayne moores, your attitude sir is the problem...not the solution. there exists no doubt in my mind that you are over 50 years in age and thankfully your attitude will be history with the baby boomer generation. not all boomers think this way but most do...and you will not win.

Clay Davis wrote:

This comment has been edited

Hydro is a renewable energy source,one that NSP uses daily and no one seems to know about that. NSP is everyones whipping boy.Dingy Ol Ralph loves to rail against any private business or industry. Same old argument,if it ain't govt its ----.No one wants windmills any where near them.So whats left in the current stable of renewable energy.Solar?,its great the days the sun shines.Count those up between Nov and May.There are no green technologies or other renewable sources of energy,there are no green jobs.Its a myth told to us by govts and the enviro jedi.We have a tap into one of the world's largest natural gas wells and all we can do is look for ways to sell it to our neighbors instead of using it ourselves. Forward Thinker,Us old guys have been using the common sense part of our brains for yrs.We aren't basing important decisions on emotions like so many younger folks do.We don't cry when our favorite politician gets elected to office.

wayne moores wrote:

Forward thinker. What sound, reasoned arguments you use. It doesn't matter what age you are, only if you can think. Obviously, you can't. You produce no counter facts or argument, merely accuse me of being over fifty. You have fallen for the new religion, ecology. You have closed your mind and have left the field of science just like your new "high priest", the great Suzuki. He has now said, no matter what evidence is shown to him, nothing will convince him otherwise. Thus he has left the scientific field and entered a cult. Just like you. P.T. Barnum once said there's a sucker born every minute. You just proved it. But I guess you don't know who he is because you likely know nothing of history either. Cheers.

Just the truth please wrote:

Wayne Moores. I'm not picking an argument with you sir, but frankly, one cannot dismiss global warming and environment decay as quickly as you do. That is simply not right and speaks as much of fanaticism among the deniers as among the advocates. The ice caps are changing rapidly and as of yet no one really knows what impact that will have on ocean levels, not to mention salination levels, which could be a real kicker in terms of temperature fluctuation. I think we must all realize that we have done damage to this planet through our greed. All of us. We have lived high off the technological hog for so long, without a care, that we forgot a little thing that we live on called Earth. Climate change is very real and takes a number of forms. Global warming is more than a temperature fluctuation one year and it is inaccurate to dismiss it on the basis of a single global composite temperature. That is misleading. I'm no expert on the subject by a long shot, but I do try to read and what I am convinced of completely is that if we don't make an effort to change our selfish, greedy ways, the generations coming after us will inherit a mess.

wayne moores wrote:

To:Just the truth please. Funny you should bring up the spectre of melting ice caps. On the 6 am morning news today, that bastion of neocon, right wing, denyer thinking, the CBC, before heading off to work, reported how ships that re-supply Nunavut this time of year, were stuck in heavy ice and the coast guard had summoned more ice breakers to try to get supplies through. Today's date is 2 July, I guess someone is in denial, but not me.(love that term "denyer",that's the new religion's catch all term for heretic. And we know what is to be done with heretics now, don't we? Oops can't burn 'em at the stake anymore, would cause global warming. Lizzie May also made the quantum leap of grouping anyone who disagrees with her as halocaust denyers, but once again I digress). As for melting ice caps, I think I will wait just a bit before buying that beachfront property on Baffin Island. Oh, and bye the bye, Big Al, just announced recently that the polar ice caps would be totally gone in five years,(it's on U-Tube, look it up) now there's a whooper we wouldn't have to wait 50 or 100 years to catch him on. Cheers.

Clay Davis wrote:

Wayne,Someone at CBC will be fired a yr from now for allowing that news article you mentioned to air.Al Gore and his band of eco jedi have been predicting the end of the world for 20+ yrs.They have to create the panic to make sure the US Senate passes the cap and trade bill the US house passed a few days ago.That bill is full of things even Cdn politicians never thought of.Its all based off California standards that even they can't meet.CA is writing IOU's because they are broke.The reality is the world is broke and our politicians don't have a clue what broke means.They are hoping to borrow money from those they want to help.Its insane,this is like borrowing money from a hobo while telling him its for his own good.This is what happens when the world thinks Obama is the answer.This guy isn't even the key .All of us in North America will have to let limousine liberals and socialist govern until it all falls apart before they realize the ones they elected don't have a two clues. Its hard to offer up a differing opinion when media allows columnists like this to print their poison week after week.Offer up a common sense response to one of Leger column's.Gone in ten seconds.

Just the truth please wrote:

Wayne Moores. The uncertainty surrounding the ice caps cannot be equated with having to break up ice around Nunavut. I would strongly suggest to you that you are equating two different things really. But in the end I guess I should admit in the face of the sarcasm coming from boomers who are so wise and educated and walk on water, that I must be the one who wallows in ignorance. Ice around Nunavut = no global warming. One complete composite temperature for the entire earth that is stable = no global warming. We got ice and snow didn't you know? Well now if there's ice and snow, there's no such thing as global warming. Silly me. All so simple to understand really when one's head is stuck in a place it ordinarily isn't found. Believe what you want and use whatever evidence you can. Your choice. Your mind is made up and there's no changing the mind of anyone coming from the "me" generation. On that I would suggest there could be full agreement.

Just the truth please wrote:

Clay Davis. If you don't like what you read, comment upon it or don't read it. Your choice. That's called freedom of the press and by the way, common sense is found on all sides of the political spectrum. It is not a monopoly of the right. If it were, this global mess wouldn't exist, for common sense tells us anyway that there is only so much to go around and the growth=more money=more wealth model is foolish. As a matter of fact I would say that common sense can be found at the family level, but is in short supply everywhere else.

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