



did you say

YES?

by Robert Knight

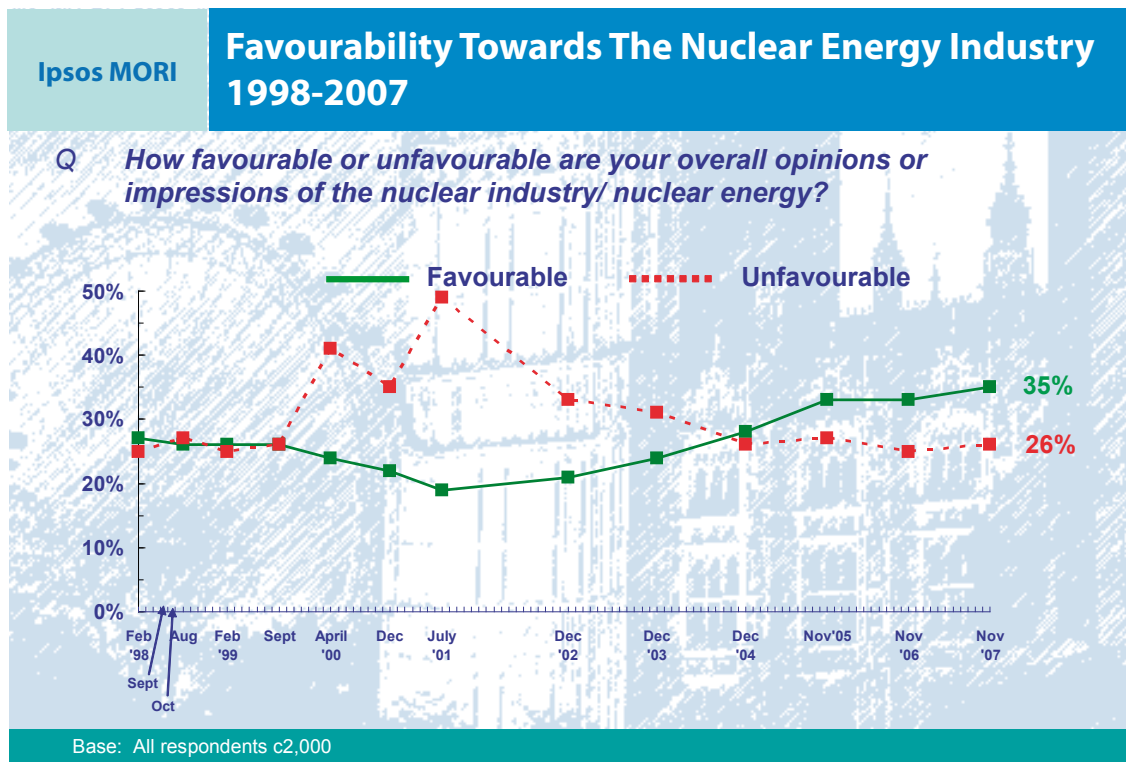
Opinion polls show that Britain is closer to public acceptance of new nuclear plants than it has been for years. Yet, this support remains fragile.

The reputation of nuclear energy in Britain has improved greatly in the first years of the 21st century and now, apart from an enduring hard core of opposition from a minority, there is broad acceptance of the need for nuclear new-build to meet the twin challenges of energy security and climate change, provided this is presented to the public in an appropriate way. It has been a rocky ride for the industry, which has seen a difficult first 50 years in many respects. It has recently been greatly assisted by two critical factors however: the worldwide recognition of man made global warming and the consequent need to reduce fossil fuel use; and the transformation in the industry's own attitude to its communications and openness.

As one of the original nuclear powers, Britain has a long history of nuclear weapons development stretching back to British scientists' involvement in the WW2 Manhattan Project. The close links to national security through the Cold War years were eventually to become an obstacle to the public's consent to the industry. In the 1950s it was a common view that the scientists and the Government knew best, and the urgency of the Soviet threat made the speed of development essential, under a cloak of necessary secrecy. Little consideration was given to the social responsibility of the fledgling industry; its safety, the disposal of waste or the inevitability of decommissioning. Even the Windscale fire of 1957, in a weapons-producing reactor, did not seriously dent enthusiasm for the "white heat of technology". The 1960s, however, brought a change in the public mood, particularly among younger people. Though while this period saw popular marches to Aldermaston to protest over nuclear weapons, there was no serious groundswell of opposition to nuclear energy. Instead, the industry (together with successive Governments) engineered its own decline in public enthusiasm by its choice of technology for the second generation of British reactors — the AGRs. Each was effectively a first-of-a-kind because of its radical difference to the others, and the consequence was overspent budgets and repeatedly missed deadlines. For a decade, the news about the AGRs was gloomy. Public interest in the industry waned, then turned downright negative after safety concerns were highlighted by the Three Mile Island incident in the USA in 1979.

Further to this, the Chernobyl fire of 1986 marked the nadir of the industry's fortunes worldwide, and it took many years to start to recover.

The 1990s saw opponents of nuclear energy as numerous as its supporters, and often much more vocal. The public enquiry over the construction of the PWR at Sizewell was held up for many years by the strength of protests and the willingness of opposition groups to fight on every front possible. Originally intended as the first of a new generation of PWRs, Sizewell B was eventually the only one built. Then the reputation of the British nuclear industry suffered its heaviest blow since Chernobyl. In 1999 its reputation was hit by the scandal over the



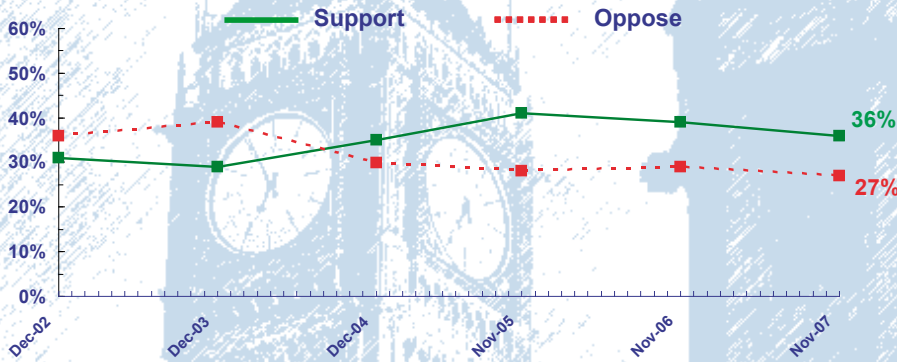
falsification of MOX fuel records at BNFL's Sellafield plant, and the subsequent rejection of the fuel delivery by the Japanese customer. Unfavourable views of the industry peaked in July 2001 before the MOX fuel was finally returned to Britain amid a storm of negative press and triumphant environmental pressure group activity.

But since 2001, global energy trends towards higher prices for oil and gas, concerns about security of energy supplies, the imminent closure of the older nuclear power stations and above all the paradigm change associated with the recognition of the effects of man made global warming have all provided a fair wind driving the resurgence in acceptance of the industry. At the same

Ipsos MORI

Support for Replacement Newbuild 2002-2007

Q To what extent would you support or oppose the building of new nuclear power stations in Britain TO REPLACE those that are being phased out over the next few years? This would ensure the same proportion of nuclear energy is retained.



Base: All respondents c2,000


time, with no new incidents of concern, there was a sea change in the nuclear industry's attitude to the public and to the media. Freed from the old policy of Decide Announce Defend, a new atmosphere of openness pervaded the industry, together with an overt acknowledgement of the need for public consent and social responsibility. With all of these forces working in the same direction, the result was a recovery in the industry's reputation, to the point where, at Christmas 2004, favourable opinion overtook unfavourable opinion. In the latest (2007) survey, the proportion favourable to the industry (35%) strongly outweighs the unfavourable proportion (26%), though a key feature of the research is the 39% who are undecided either way. This group has held the balance of the argument for some years and continues to do so.

Since 2002 we have also been measuring the British public's more specific support for replacement nuclear newbuild. This again shows 2004 as the pivotal year, when support overcame opposition, before peaking in 2005 on 41%. Since 2005, however, the volume of information and opinion available to ordinary people about energy options has mushroomed, and though we have plotted a tentative rise in familiarity with the industry, the key outcome of this has been an upsurge in confusion about energy and specifically nuclear issues. With so many authoritative figures openly disagreeing, the public are less sure what to think. This has particularly affected those whose initial gut feeling was positive. The result has been a slight fall in

support for newbuild since 2005, while opposition remains firm, though less numerous.

Our question has been carefully worded to relate only to replacement newbuild, since that was the most likely (and most acceptable) scenario for the future. Recent Government speeches have suggested enthusiasm in Westminster for net expansion of the nuclear component. We have measured views of this only once, in 2005, when it received a resounding rejection by the public, at the same time as there was record support for replacement newbuild. This is therefore a dangerous communications strategy for the Government; probably aimed more at demonstrating its commitment to the industry itself than showing sensitivity to fragile public acceptance.

The way a nuclear energy strategy is presented can undoubtedly affect its reception by the British public. While 35% are favourable to the industry and 36% support replacement newbuild, 65%, an overall majority, agree with the statement that "Britain needs a mix of energy sources to ensure a reliable supply of electricity, including nuclear power and renewable energy sources." Just 10% disagree. Linking nuclear energy policy to renewables has a persuasive effect on its acceptance, as long as it also implies that it is part of a planned national strategy (something few have perceived Britain to have in recent years)

We can conclude that Britain is closer to public acceptance of nuclear newbuild than it has been for some decades, though this support is fragile and sensitive to the actual messages received. Communicating with the British public on this issue is notoriously difficult, particularly for the current Government, whose credibility on nuclear issues we recently measured as very low (2007). The nuclear industry has done much to rehabilitate its Cold War past, but is still held back by the British scepticism for companies and private profit generation, particularly profits made out of public utilities, and by the growing obsession with risk aversion in all areas of life. Furthermore, the environmental NGOs are united in their opposition to nuclear energy having any role in future energy policy. 

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