Too Cheap to Meter What?

50 years ago, at 17:30 hours, 26 June 1954, in the town of Obninsk, near Moscow, the first nuclear power plant sent electricity to residences and businesses. Atomic energy had crossed the divide from military uses to peaceful ones, demonstrating the potential to fuel civilian electric power plants. The milestone is being marked this year at an IAEA international nuclear power conference in Obninsk. Past experience will be reviewed, but the focus is on meeting future challenges.

Though it has come a long way in 50 years, nuclear energy today finds itself in a struggle of the fittest to carve a niche over the next fifty — in the marketplace and in the public eye. Clichés and sound bites tell part of the nuclear story. Visionary talk by nuclear proponents in 1954 was about future energy sources that would be "too cheap to meter", a phrase critics pounced upon. Today in 2004 the "too cheap to meter" phrase occasionally haunts the atom, but pops up more often than not in promotional ads for anything from wind power to web sites. Talk of nuclear energy now is of a "renaissance" and "second wind." New nuclear plants are most attractive where energy demand is growing and resources are scarce, and where energy security, air pollution and greenhouse gases are priorities, IAEA Director General Mohamed ElBaradei points out.

In cities, towns, and villages, reality is different, or too much the same, depending how you see and live it. Cheap or not, nuclear energy today supplies one-sixth of the world's electricity in some 30 countries. Still, it does not produce enough power. Neither does any other energy source. More than 1.5 billion people have *no electricity* to meter whatsoever — not from renewables, solar, nuclear, biomass, wind, coal, oil, gas, firewood, or hydrogen, the publicized promise of tomorrow.

So what will it take? Maybe bigger blackouts or hotter days than the world has seen. Certainly needed are more attention, action, and money. In dollar terms, energy analysts say trillions of dollars must be invested in fuels that are clean, affordable, and sustainable. In Asia, where energy demand and populations are fast rising, nuclear is growing, as in China where plans are ambitious. Outside the region, the story is mixed, with some countries rejecting the option outright on safety and waste grounds.

Whatever the choices, the world can ill afford to ignore bringing more power to people. As eminent Indian scientist Homi Bhaba noted a half century ago, "No energy is as expensive as no energy." Time will tell how long his message resonates.

— Lothar Wedekind, Editor-in-Chief

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