

The power crisis and the public interest

# A 'watchdog' role for professionals?

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In the face of the ongoing Power Crisis which has seen power cuts in 1980, 1981, 1983, 1984, 1987, 1992, 1996 and 2001, and an ongoing crisis right now, in 2002, a total of nine cuts within a 23-year period, wouldn't it be the wise thing to examine the solutions (or lack of them) proffered by the CEB?

Twenty-five or more years ago, in the Seventies, it was recognized that hydropower would not be able to carry the base load. This meant that the country could not depend wholly on rain-fed hydropower to meet its growing needs for electricity. If hydro power carried the base load then, it was seen that it could not do so in the near future and that a change would have to be made to thermally generated electricity. This was when the Mahaveli Hydro Complex was being designed. It was therefore agreed that 1992 at the very latest would commission a 300 Mw. coal-fired thermal plant. This was a wise and logical decision given the imperatives of supply and demand in a developing economy.

Coal was the fuel of choice. It was the most cost-effective fuel available in abundance and the most often used fuel to generate electricity worldwide. It is cheaper than oil and not dangerous like naphtha or subject to hazard like atomic power.

*Somewhere, in the last decade, this proposal was abandoned after millions had been expended in feasibility*

*studies and location evaluations, and so on. That was public money and accountability also enters the picture if that FINAL decision to abandon the coal-fired plant was made by either politicians or bureaucrats or both. Be that as it may, it is a foregone conclusion now that the power crisis will worsen before it could become better because a coal-fired plant would take from three to four years to come on stream from the word 'Go'.*

The consequences, in the interim, are unthinkable simply because the socioeconomic development of the country will be seriously retarded. The outcome of consecutive annual, prolonged power cuts would drive small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to the wall and even gravely affect the financial viability and sustainability of the large industrial units such as, for example, the apparel industry already under threat. In addition to the end of the Multi Fiber Agreement or MFA in 2005 in which we lose our preferential status by way of fixed quotas, the high cost of power and power cuts would send costs beyond any conceivable profitability. The bottomline would be going out of business because the enterprises cannot be sustained financially.

As one of the leading foreign exchange earners and the employer of a significant number of workers, this means that the worker's economic status would be imperilled by closure. The leaders of the apparel

industry are desperate for emergency solutions that do not seem to be forthcoming.

Any reasonably intelligent person would see at once that Sri Lanka's nascent industries need cheap energy in order to stay competitive in world markets.

High-priced diesel-fuelled power is unaffordable and, if resorted to, will drive Sri Lankan products out of hard-won markets.

This is inconceivable in the face of an 18 million plus population in which over eight million survive, barely below the 'Poverty Line'. The social repercussions could be a nightmare of unimaginable proportions as this is a very real, very serious crisis.

Even if a majority of the population does not have electricity in their homes, they still need jobs in order to live. If industrial plants are forced to go out of business because they have been compelled to price themselves out of the marketplace, widespread, deep seated discontent could manifest itself as acute disorder everywhere and especially in the Western Province.

Would this mean that government has to resort to force to quell violence? Ominously, the answer to that question is 'Yes'.

Therefore, it is in the greater PUBLIC INTEREST from now on, that far-reaching decisions such as the decision to delay or cancel the coal-fired plant and so on, first be VETTED by a high-powered committee of professionals who would then professionally advise government on what should be done.

This would be much like what the Supreme Court does when it examines Parliamentary Bills for their constitutionality or otherwise. Thus and therefore, if something is found to be INCONSISTENT with the Public Interest, it could be killed before millions in public money is wasted on pie-in-the-sky exercises by arrogant nincompoops.

Vetting decisions of importance is like sending them to the cleaners. Such a system, acting solely on behalf of the Public Interest (and not on behalf of some VESTED interest) could have, very well, prevented the present crisis from ever happening.

Professionals, as the most highly educated segment of the population, need to be vigilant on behalf of the public and instead of letting self-interest dominate their concerns, take up the Public Interest as their Number One priority. As the most highly intelligent persons in the community, looked up to for leadership by all and sundry, it is their sacred duty to safeguard the best interests of ALL the people. They are the best people to do so and are placed in the best position to do so relative to the rest of the powerless masses.

In fact, the professionals should play the role of a watchdog and guard the people from the imbeciles, idiots and morons in high places who create these problems in the first place because of their ignorant and ill-informed decisions. What better example do we have than the ongoing Power Crisis?