

“Over the past few years, a number of academics have advocated deliberative democracy as a way to mitigate, through rational debate within a wider forum, any abuses of populist democracy. However, the emergence of referendums has only driven us further from this democratic ideal. The questions posed in these referendums ask voters, in a necessarily simplistic format, to either support or oppose a proposition, to the exclusion of any nuance, proviso, compromise, or amendment. Such subtleties are consequently not reflected in the participants’ responses.”

The above is not criticism leveled at Premier Jiang Yi-huah (江宜樺) following his proposal of a referendum on the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant in Gongliao District (公寮), New Taipei City (新北市), but a criticism made by Jiang in 2004 of the nationwide consultative referendum proposed by then-president Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) and held on March 20 that year.

Permeated as these sentiments are with the profound aspirations of democratic values and civic participation, it is all the more inconceivable that Jiang, in dealing with the complex issue that is the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant, would so readily accept the misinformation provided by Taiwan Power Co (Taipower), or link issues such as electricity prices, electricity supply, economic growth and a low-carbon nation with whether construction of the plant continues.

Is this the kind of dialogue one should expect of a society with a robust democracy?

Taipower is fond of reminding the public that almost NT\$300 billion (US\$10.12 billion) has been invested in the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant and that to cease construction at this stage would mean throwing away the equivalent of NT\$15,000 for every person in the country.

However, has it ever mentioned that if the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant goes into operation its operating and combustion costs will come close to NT\$800 billion? Even supposing it runs, without incident, for 40 years before being decommissioned, conservative estimates are that after it has stopped generating either power or profit, taxpayers will need to fork out at least NT\$300 billion to deal with radioactive waste and safely decommission the plant.

Has Taipower ever brought that up?

Worse still is that planning for the nation's energy resources seems to be wrapped up in a nuclear power plant which has serious safety concerns.

It is not often realized that issues of electricity shortages and rising electricity prices are merely estimates based on power demand forecasts, so the key to solving these problems is evaluating whether the government's plans for electricity make sense.

Extrapolating from official predictions of growth in the nation's electricity demand, even if the plant goes into commercial operation, there will still be a shortage of power, and the government would need to construct six more plants to make up the shortfall.

Even with the official line on the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant, it is still not going to enable a low-carbon nation, with forecasts of a 34 percent increase in greenhouse gas emissions by 2025 compared with 2010 levels.

So how do government officials expect to be able to control electricity prices in the future, given the inadequate preparations they have put in place even if the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant becomes operational?

They cannot.

The answer to these problems lies not in the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant and whether it becomes operational, but with whether the government addresses the growth in demand for electricity by investing in energy efficiency, energy conservation and renewable energy sources, and improves load management.

Public must see past nuclear spin

Written by Fang Szu-hung 方素衡

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Rather than reminding the public of the NT\$300 billion invested in the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant, it might be more useful if the government worked out how public money could be used in a more positive way.

One should not forget that there is the unresolved issue of how nuclear waste from the plant is to be processed which, in addition to involving prodigious amounts of money, will affect the environment and social justice, and is an issue Taipower is reluctant to address.

Regrettably, the day after Jiang's announcement of the referendum on the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant, Taipower rushed into a propaganda blitz, trying to intimidate the public with a deluge of misinformation.

The Central News Agency followed suit, releasing a series of reports on the continued use of nuclear power in the international community.

As part of this deluge they made much of the fact that France, which relies heavily on nuclear power, has been able to achieve energy independence as a result, while neglecting to mention that this reliance on nuclear power places its power grid at the mercy of the weather. In the winter France is subject to power shortages and has to import energy from overseas.

Communications provided to the legislature by Taipower are full of this kind of misinformation, and this is then broadcast through the legislature's huge information machine.

We have yet to find out how exactly the referendum on the Fourth Nuclear Power Plant will play out, but if the public continues to let this political manipulation continue, Taiwan will lose a chance to properly debate the nuclear power issue and deepen its democracy, and would forgo an opportunity to work toward a non-nuclear, low-carbon nation.

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