

Credible solution on isotopes greeted with silence in Ottawa

February 11, 2010

Jatin Nathwani

Wasn't there an isotope crisis last year? You'd never know it until AECL announced, yet again, a delay in the start-up of the National Research Universal (NRU) reactor in Chalk River. The medical isotopes issue had dropped from the headlines, as was illustrated by the icy silence that met the release of the expert panel report on Dec. 1.

Who could be happier with this turn of events than Stephen Harper? One more bullet dodged; one more pesky problem postponed. Our canny prime minister knows that the media, eventually, move on to another story.

No matter how dire the situation, if you're prime minister, assuming a Sphinx-like posture pays huge dividends. To take action to improve a situation – particularly in a minority Parliament – is a task best left for another day, on a different hill, away from the searchlight. The easier thing is to take a leaf out of Mackenzie King's book: obfuscate and prevaricate.



Just a few months ago, the unanticipated shutdown of the NRU reactor threw Canada's and the world's health-care systems into an unprecedented crisis. Harper then grandly pronounced that Canada was getting out of the medical isotope production business.

In December, the government put the reactor business of AECL on the auction block, again, which shifted the focus away from the isotope issue. Few noticed that the isotope and research side wasn't even in the prospectus. The channel was changed.

Never mind that Canada has had a leadership position in this industry for more than 60 years and there are thousands of high-tech jobs at stake. A few jaded souls gasped, "Not another Nortel!" Tsk, tsk, another example of Canada's woeful record when it comes to innovation.

But roll back a few frames. The government had already deflected attention away from isotopes last May. Foot-dragging by governments of all stripes has been a time-honoured tradition for more than 142 years: appoint a commission or an expert committee to study the problem. The bet being that no one will notice when the final report is submitted. Kudos to the government for playing that hand well. Somebody probably got his bonus that day.

Cynical though this strategy may have been, it worked. No one noticed what was happening. The story had no legs. But one or two of us actually looked at what was in the report. Surprise! The expert panel appointed by the government was, well, expert. These brave individuals – and brave they were – may actually have succeeded in figuring out what this whole issue is about.

The expert panel made a powerful case for a new research reactor to replace the 52-year-old NRU reactor at Chalk River. When the country's research and development infrastructure seems under considerable threat, a major public reinvestment in a new multi-purpose reactor with a mission to secure a future isotope supply is indeed a bold new direction that would also be a valuable tool for industrial and research applications.

The panel report is remarkable for a number of reasons – it cuts through the fog of the isotopes issue and offers a clear and credible path for Canada, laying out the options for a robust supply of isotopes. And it provides a strong rationale for not squandering Canada's leadership position.

The expert panel admonishes the Harper government while simultaneously providing a positive direction for the future. Instead of walking away from the isotope business, the panel said: "the lowest risk path to new (isotope) production capacity is to build a new multi-purpose research reactor" and "we believe a multi-purpose research reactor represents the best primary option to create a sustainable source" of isotopes.

The report addresses several key issues: the MAPLE reactor and production from non-reactor sources, again building on existing strengths in Canadian academic institutions, the medical community and the industry.

An open question is whether the government will reassess its earlier policy pronouncement on the basis of the authoritative advice it has commissioned?

The expert panel report is a lucid and accessible account of the challenges faced by the Canadian health-care system in providing quality care. While many were skeptical, regarding the appointment of the panel was a delaying tactic, the panel has turned the searchlight on issues the government must confront. It is a careful and fact-based contribution to an important public policy question.

Given the stakes, both to the health and well-being of Canadians and the public purse, it would be a disservice to the public interest if the findings of the expert panel were to disappear from view.

You've never heard of the members of the expert panel. Their names are Peter Goodhand, Richard Drouin, Thom Mason and Éric Turcotte. Spare them a kind thought. They've done their country proud even when their country doesn't know it.

The diplomats would say that this report deserves careful consideration and wider discussion. We say: sit up and take notice. Nothing less than the health of Canadians is at stake.

Jatin Nathwani and Donald Wallace are editors of Canada's Isotope Crisis: What Next? to be published by McGill-Queen's University Press this year.