international news

Canada answers her nuclear critics

from David Spurgeon, Ottawa

PRIME Minister Pierre Trudeau has defended Canada's sales of CANDU nuclear reactors to developing countries on the grounds that she cannot withhold from them the advantages of nuclear technology. In an address to the annual meeting of the Canadian Nuclear Association (CNA), he said: "We are a society which has not forgotten its frontier origins. We are a people who have experienced the torment of need, who understand the benefits of sharing. It is inconsistent with that experience and that understanding that we should now deny to the less developed countries of the world the opportunity to gain a handhold on the technological age . . .

"Surely, if we are ever to eliminate the immense disparities which now separate the living standards of rich and poor, it will be necessary to make available to the disadvantaged every technique at our disposal."

It would be unconscionable to deny to the developing countries the most modern of technologies as assistance in their quest for higher living standards, the Prime Minister said. "But in a world increasingly concerned about depleting reserves of fossil fuels, about food shortages, and about the need to reduce illness, it would be irresponsible as well to withhold the advantages of the nuclear age—of power reactors, agricultural isotopes, cobalt beam therapy units."

As a result of the explosion by India of an underground nuclear device last year, which was made with material from a reactor supplied by Canada, the Canadian government has come under criticism from both within the country and without. Critics have suggested that such an event should have been foreseen by Canada, and prevented.

Since the Indian explosion, the federal Cabinet has done some soul-searching and has tightened its nuclear safeguards policy—but it has also confirmed Canada's intention to go on selling nuclear reactors abroad. This decision, too, has drawn criticism.

In an obvious reference to such criticism, Mr Trudeau said: "We can be proud, as Canadians, of our co-operation with India. The decision taken by Prime Minister St Laurent to enter a nuclear assistance programme with India was a far-sighted and generous act of statesmanship."

Nuclear 'transfers' should always be subject to safeguards, however, said the Prime Minister. Canada has now raised the standards of her safeguards "to the point that they are the toughest in the world [and] we refuse to engage in nuclear cooperation without an explicit exclusion of explosive uses."

Mr Trudeau said he did not pretend that the present system of inspection and detection of nuclear cheating was foolproof, and he was "painfully aware that the NPT [Non-Proliferation Treaty] is yet far from universally supported." But he reminded critics that the statute of the International Atomic Energy Agency (of which Canada is a member) charges the agency to spread peaceful applications of nuclear energy throughout the world, "bearing in mind the special needs of the under-developed areas."

(The latest element of the Canadian safeguards policy was announced May 4, 1975, by the Secretary of State for External Affairs at the NPT review Conference in Geneva. It provides that future Canadian bilateral nuclear commitments will be undertaken solely with countries that are parties to the NPT. Also, ratification of the treaty will be an important factor in Canada's decisions on provision of government financing in the nuclear field.)

The existence of some adverse public opinion concerning nuclear matters in Canada was acknowledged at the conference at which the Prime Minister spoke. The CNA's public relations committee said in its report:

"A number of new groups opposed to nuclear power developments have formed in Canada in the past year and there have been modest attempts to form a federation of such groups across the country, which suggests a new phase in the industry's relations with the public may be beginning."

The association's President, J. M. Douglas, President of Babcock and Wilcox Canada Limited, said that although the Canadian government and nuclear industry believe the CANDU system can give great benefit to Canada through domestic and export markets, "if the opinion of a good majority of Canadians is not in accord with that of government and the utilities, our country's position with regard to the generation of electrical power in a few years' time could be put in jeopardy—as is happening in some other countries."

This seems to be happening because positive, factual information has not been made available in a clearly understood form, Mr Douglas said. "Small, but well organised, environmental groups have used information which is incomplete or inaccurate or misleading, to produce scare stories."

Too often this information—in the absence of factual information supplied from an informed source—has influenced fair-minded people against nuclear power, he said. "We must not let this happen in Canada. And it could. We must greatly increase our efforts to communicate factual information to those who seek it . . ."

Plans already have been made to do this, with a seminar to assist member organisations to communicate with various publics, and a new booklet.

In a review paper, J. S. Foster, President of Atomic Energy of Canada Limited (AECL) said Canada today has 2,500 MWe of nuclear electric generating capacity in operation and a further 6,000 MWe under construction. An additional 7,000 MWe is either committed or at an advanced stage of planning. By the end of the century there will be about 130,000 MWe produced by nuclear plants in Canada.

● L. J. Schofield, of the CNA's Economic Development Committee, says that there is a significant advantage for nuclear power generation in Canada if coal prices escalate at 8% or more a year; such rises would be offset only by sustained capital cost escalation rates in excess of 13% a year. At low coal price escalation rates of 5%, however, the competitive advantage of CANDU stations is small, and could be completely offset by double-digit inflation of capital costs.

"Double-digit inflation," says Schofield, "is a factor to be reckoned with today by the Canadian nuclear industry . . . If the costs of fossil and nuclear stations inflate at equal rates, then the advantage of nuclear generation due to lower fuel costs could be progressively offset by the increasing differential in capital cost." □