

THE government of Ontario, Canada's most populous province, has started an interesting experiment in communal technology assessment this autumn. It has invited its people to help it decide directly how to provide for their future electric power needs.

At a time when economic growth is no longer sacrosanct, when consumer groups are growing increasingly critical of the siting of power stations, the placing of power transmission corridors, and the trend towards the adoption of nuclear energy, such a gesture by the province can only be seen as significant.

The method being used to gather the peoples' opinions is the Royal Commission. The Order-in-Council establishing the Royal Commission on Electric Power Planning was approved last July, and public meetings began on October 28. The commission has been instructed to examine the long range power planning concepts of the public corporation (Ontario Hydro) that is charged with providing the power needs of the province, for the period 1983-93 and beyond. It has been told to relate them to provincial planning, to the utilisation of electrical energy and to environmental, energy and socioeconomic factors, and to report, with a list of priorities, on the need for certain Ontario Hydro projects at present under consideration.

The chairman of the commission is a former professor of engineering at the University of London, Dr Arthur Porter. Porter, who now is professor of industrial engineering at the University of Toronto but on leave for a year, has long been interested in the broader implications of science and technology on society. Serving with him are an industrialist (Robert E. E. Costello, vice-president of corporate services, Abitibi Paper Company Limited), a journalist (Madame Solange Plourde-Gagnon, who will represent the consumer viewpoint), a farmer (George A. McCague, who has served on the executive of many farm organisations) and an economist (Dr William W. Stevenson, at present a member of the Ontario Energy Board).

Announcing the formation of the commission, the Provincial Secretary for Resources Development said: "The inquiry may well be the most important in this decade . . . [it] should bring into public focus basic philosophies about much of the kind of life we want for the next century and what price we are prepared to pay for its achievement . . . The public needs to know what demands for electricity will be placed upon Ontario Hydro in the long term, how these needs should be met, and what impact this would

have on Ontario's way of life and its physical environment."

During the autumn, the commission will hold a series of preliminary public meetings in Ontario in 16 cities. From these it expects to learn what issues the public wants included in the main inquiry, how and in what format it should proceed, and how it can increase public participation. An attempt will be made, the commission says, "to avoid either an inhibiting or court room atmosphere . . . The preliminary meetings in particular will be very informal."

Canadian diary

from David Spurgeon, Ottawa

Some of the major issues and questions expected to arise are:

- Power demands have been increasing by about 7% a year. Should this rate be allowed to continue? What are the chances of its increasing or decreasing?
- How can energy be used more efficiently?
- What are the benefits, costs and risks of alternative ways of generating electrical power? What are the risks associated with nuclear generation, and the environmental implications? How long can we afford to burn irreplaceable fossil fuels?
- How can the important issues associated with land use be decided? Social, economic and environmental factors must be evaluated to decide where industrial and population growth will occur. How should this be done?
- How well are existing procedures working to guarantee public participation in land-use decisions?

One must assume that the hearings will not be equally welcomed by all involved. Recently, Ontario Hydro asked the government for permission to raise its rates by more than 25% because of the rising costs of electricity production, and promptly found itself under heavy fire from the public and politicians. Before that, lengthy and expensive hearings were held on the subject of the placing of power transmission line corridors. And Ontario Hydro's announced intention to rely increasingly on nuclear power has drawn opposition from various quarters. All this has made the power corporation's attempts to fulfil its mandate more difficult.

Dr Porter says he fears the biggest difficulty will be to get ordinary people, outside the major interest groups, to express an opinion—and in fact to achieve good attendances at the public

hearings. A former woman cabinet minister, now heading an inquiry into violence on television, found that only nine people attended a recent public meeting—in spite of what Dr Porter calls a "fantastic press". "If she can't do it," he asks, "how can we?"

The government's move to establish a commission was prompted, says Porter, by a report from Ontario Hydro on their alternative plans for provision of the province's power needs from now until the end of the century. Even assuming the lowest growth rate of power demand considered, the cost came to \$20,000 million; if a 20% growth rate were assumed, on the other hand, the cost amounted to \$50,000 million. With amounts of money like that involved, the corporation felt it had to draw the public into the planning.

● Another Canadian scientist who is trying to get the public involved in decisions involving science and technology is David Suzuki, a geneticist from the University of British Columbia. Five years ago, he recognised the tremendous potential influence of television, and wrote to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) to suggest that it should carry a television series dealing with science and society.

The result was a locally broadcast programme, Suzuki on Science, and then, last year, a job as host of a new programme called Science Magazine. The show was highly successful, but Suzuki says that because there is no basic constituency for science shows, the CBC planned to withdraw it.

According to Suzuki, the viewers objected: several hundred letters of protest were sent to the CBC, and the show will now return in February 1976 for its second season. Suzuki has also begun this year a weekly series of programmes on CBC radio, called Quirks and Quarks. In fact, he has become so busy broadcasting that he has had to take a year's sabbatical leave.

But Suzuki speaks bitterly about his scientific colleagues' interest in reaching the general public. He is cynical about their motives when they do show an interest in reaching the public, and relates it to their need for research funds for their own projects.

"Basically scientists are public servants", he said in a recent interview about another television programme he hosted, called Earthwatch. "I feel our responsibility is to de-mystify the process [of science] so citizens can participate in setting priorities." He does not portray science as being all good, and attempts to show that the scientist as an individual is a human being with all the feelings of his fellow men. □