

PUBLIC OPINION AND NUCLEAR WASTE

Surveys and opinion polls regularly reinforce the belief that nuclear waste is one of the general public's greatest fears. Their results reflect the way this theme is handled by the media, often in a negative or controversial light. Closer examination of these surveys, however, reveals that the apparently delicate situation of nuclear waste in public opinion deserves a more subtle, qualified approach.

Waste finds itself in an odd position in the nuclear world, as well as in the more general area of health-related and environmental issues, as perceived by public opinion. Every now and then, an opinion poll puts the nuclear waste question at the top, or almost, of the French public's environmental concerns, or a survey substantiates the belief that waste is one of the population's greatest fears. These survey results reflect the way this theme is handled by the media. Analysis of the press shows that the tone of articles addressing the topic is at best neutral (simply factual), very often negative, or at least echoing the controversy that has been built up in recent years. Positive elements are seldom to be found.

A cursory glance at these phenomena could lead to the impression that there is a constant fear and distrust of nuclear waste in the population. In fact, there is majority support for the current policy and organizational structure of the reactor system, and closer analysis clearly shows that the apparently delicate situation of nuclear waste in public opinion deserves a more subtle, qualified approach.

An odd position in public opinion

The issue of nuclear waste is seen in an odd light by public opinion, for it occupies an unfavorable position in an area where a predominantly favorable consensus has been reached.

A few figures will help to define the position of waste in the nuclear world more clearly. In an international survey carried out in March 1999, 71% of French respondents declared that they tended to "distrust" nuclear-waste management, this response being similar to that observed in Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom. This distrust should be set against the trust that most respondents (66%) expressed with respect to the safety of nuclear power plants and facilities. The unique position of France stands out clearly in the example of this inter-

national comparison: while the French seem to experience the same doubts as their neighbors with regard to waste, they definitely appear more confident than most others when it comes to nuclear plants.

When a representative sample of the French population is questioned about its concerns regarding a number of different risks, nuclear-waste disposal does appear among its foremost fears, and is even number one, with 56% of respondents declaring themselves "concerned", if industrial fears are considered alone (source: Nuclear Barometer 1999). Nuclear waste comes behind themes concerning other areas: road accidents (67%), aids (64%) or delinquency (62%). Fears relating to nuclear-waste disposal are on a par with food-related risks (55%), in front of chemical waste (52%) and the transportation of hazardous materials (50%), and well ahead of BSE (41%), asbestos (40%), and indeed other nuclear facilities (31%).

The difference between issues relating to waste and those relating to nuclear plants is striking in many respects. If this difference were to be summed up briefly, it could be said that waste gives rise to fears, whereas nuclear facilities elicit a feeling of relative trust. Of course, public opinion does not only see advantages in nuclear power stations, but it at least recognizes the significant benefits offered, such as the economic benefit, the advantage of having an independent energy source for France, and even (symbolically) in the fact that these plants give France some kind of great-power status in the world. On the other hand, the French have great trouble finding the slightest interest in waste and waste management. Lastly, nuclear plants have managed to win over public opinion, gradually and patiently, over the last few decades, while waste is only just starting out on a road patently strewn with obstacles so far.

In order for public opinion to be formed, debate on this theme must begin and questions asked. In the brief history of the nuclear world, waste-related issues emerge well after

those concerning plants and electricity generation. In reply to the question: "Do we need to find a disposal site in France for our radioactive waste?" less than 50% of the population gave an positive answer in the 1980s, compared with 65%–77% in the 1990s. Between those two periods, the debate took shape, and the French came to a broader awareness of the advantages of disposal sites, as they realized for the first time that nuclear waste existed.

However, although most people agree that a disposal site must be found (since waste exists), the question of its location raises a more difficult problem (so long as choices have not been made). And, when asked what type of facility they would be afraid to live near to, people often put waste-disposal sites at the top of the list and, in particular, well above nuclear power plants.

How questions are asked and impact measurement

No matter what questions are asked about nuclear waste, there always seems to be a negative response. Casting a quick glance over results, the casual poll-reader might well feel that there is a "nuclear-waste problem" in public opinion, and believe that the population lives in constant fear of this problem. In fact, this is not the case at all and – this point is crucial – what appears as one of the most dreaded industrial hazards, when put in a question, is remarkably almost absent on a day-to-day basis from the minds of those questioned.

Thus, when a representative sample of the population is asked to state quite spontaneously environmental issues of major concern, nuclear waste appears to be just a marginal issue (1–3%), far behind air and water pollution, oil slicks, food-related problems, etc., and also behind the problem of domestic waste. If the same spontaneous exercise is repeated on the subject of nuclear activities, waste-related issues trail well behind power plants or military activities in respondents' replies.



This discrepancy between survey methods can be explained. As stated earlier, the population rarely thinks about nuclear waste. For a wide variety of reasons – geographical location, economic importance, information on the theme, spectacular nature of accidents in a nuclear facility – public opinion pays greater attention to nuclear plants and electricity generation, in particular. The same is true of military nuclear applications.

If, however, the type of facility is mentioned in the questions asked, particular semantic and symbolic factors come into play, based on a simple addition: “waste” + “nuclear”, i.e. a combination of two terms with negative connotations. On the one hand waste, which public opinion perceives as synonymous with death, putrefaction, and uselessness, too. On the other hand, the nuclear industry and all the related concerns. When the nuclear becomes “useless” (as is clearly the case of waste in the eyes of the general public), its negative power and the fears it inspires are reinforced. Waste is symbolically opposed to power plants, which produce energy, giving them a symbolic link with life. Asking direct questions about nuclear waste therefore mechanically elicits a large proportion of negative opinions. This should not, however, dissuade us from proceeding along this path as it does reflect how reactions change over time or as a function of specific events.

From controversy to mobilization

One possible key to understanding the problem of waste from the public opinion viewpoint might be found in the present phase of searching for and building disposal sites. The very firm position of the population in other areas, such as nuclear power plants, is known: every year, a large majority of French people (about 70%) expresses the

opinion that “*no more new plants should be built, but the existing ones should be operated*”. Nearly 20% of the population adheres to the more radical view of *shutting down all nuclear power plants*, whereas only 10% view the construction of new plants favorably.

Putting a complete stop to the construction of new plants thus responds to the overriding demand for a *status quo* in this area. Given this situation, the antinuclear protest movement has understandably lost at least some interest for this almost traditional cause of political and social mobilization. It now sees more benefit in taking over the political arena in new areas (laboratories, **storage** or **disposal** sites), where it seems easier to weigh upon choices.

In this way, the debate has gradually integrated the theme of waste, against a backdrop of controversy, influencing public opinion at the same time.

Moving towards a less heated debate

The situation is now at an *intermediate* stage. Waste (and its related activities) elicit a certain feeling of distrust. At the same time, it really comes very low on the list of industrial hazards of concern to the French public. The main point is whether information, communication and consultation can be used to cool down the terms of this debate and then enhance the image of waste in the eyes of the public. Or, as was the case with nuclear power plants, will opinion gradually change over time, so that sites considered sensitive today will come to be seen as just “any other” facilities in the future? ●

Patrick Klein

Deputy Managing Director
Ipsos Opinion