

To the Editor, Maclean's Magazine:

In your May 4 editorial ("The Nuclear Waste Muddle") you quote an "opinion piece" in the recent *Bulletin* of the Canadian Nuclear Society (CNS) stating that the safety of nuclear waste disposal "is a matter of scientific determination". You say that this assertion ignores how people "feel" about nuclear waste, which is just as important as "where authorities decide to stash it".

First of all, we wish to clarify that the piece you quoted did in fact point out, in the very next sentence, that public opinion is "equally important" to technical safety. We support the contention of the author, Jeremy Whitlock, that technical safety is amenable to quantifiable evaluation, and thus that public opinion does not **determine** technical safety. On the other hand, it is clear that the "reverse" is true: technical safety is an important factor in establishing public acceptability.

Secondly, your implication that authorities alone will decide where to dispose of nuclear waste ignores the concept of community voluntarism that is crucial to Canada's nuclear-waste disposal concept: the public will play a role in any siting decision. Furthermore, we find the term you used to denote disposal to be a poor description for the cutting-edge environmental technology represented by the disposal concept.

Your editorial was quite correct in labelling the current situation with nuclear waste a "muddle". It is a solvable issue, in which Canada is a world leader, but unfortunately the solution does not appeal to certain groups. We believe, however, that it is unjustified to conclude that the solution "does not have broad public support" in Canada. The Environmental Review panel was not mandated to determine the overall level of public support (which is distinct from acceptability), and did not attempt to quantify this support during its eight-year inquiry. The panel heard from many special-interest groups, but the public at large was generally uninterested, and was never polled for its opinion.

Finally, while it is certain that the Chernobyl accident was indeed a terrible tragedy which caused socio-economic chaos in the region, it must be pointed out that you provided no foundation for the death toll you gave, 3576. This is grossly incorrect, compared to the report of an international conference convened in 1996 jointly by the United Nations, the European Community, and the World Health Organization (see the web site at <http://www.iaea.or.at/worldatom/thisweek/preview/chernobyl/conclsn9.html>), which reported that the known death toll at the time was 34 (31 due to the immediate effects of fighting the reactor fire and 3 due to thyroid cancer). The real tragedy and legacy of Chernobyl are the widespread psychological and sociological consequences, which go far beyond the radiation-induced health effects.

A muddle indeed. One can only hope that truth and common sense survive.

Yours truly
B. Rouben
President, Canadian Nuclear Society