

Opinion

# The other side of Kiggavik

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In the past year two people who really ought to know better have made statements about the environmental assessment review process (EARP) of the proposed Kiggavik uranium mine which simply don't fit with the facts.

Dave Nickerson, former Tory MP for the Western Arctic and a former chair of the NWT Water Board, recently (April 17, 1995) published a column in *News/North* entitled "Diamonds won't wait forever," in which he stated:

"The Kiggavik uranium mine venture at Baker Lake was shot down by an environmental assessment review panel that just could not do its job and come to a decision. As an excuse for its own ineptitude, it kept demanding more reams of information so that, eventually, the sponsoring company got fed up with spending time and money with no end in sight. It pulled the pin and a project which could have revitalized the economy of the entire Keewatin was cast into a dungeon from which it might never recover... a window of

opportunity was opened and then inexorably closed as government dithered, procrastinated and finally missed the boat altogether."

This is nonsense. It was the company behind the proposal—Urangesellschaft Canada Ltd. (UG)—which was inept, not the environmental assessment panel. The panel (which included northerners Bob MacQuarrie of Yellowknife, and Tom Kudloo of Baker Lake, among others) carried out their responsibilities in a calm and professional manner. After inviting northerners and federal and territorial government agencies to make suggestions as to how the company should describe the projected impacts of their proposal, they released a set of environmental impact statement (EIS) guidelines which the company found perfectly reasonable.

However, UG and its consultants proved quite unable to prepare a competent EIS. Once their EIS was released, northern organizations, and federal and territorial government departments, prepared

reports which detailed just how inadequate it was.

For example, in GNWT Press Release 90-042, Nellie Cournoyea (then Minister of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources) stated that information was "either missing or incomplete in areas such as socio-economic structure, camp arrangements, renewable resource use, worker health and safety, public health, effects of change caused by the mine, risk management, tailings management, site decommissioning, monitoring and post-project analysis." UG responded by acknowledging that its EIS required a "comprehensive review".

It was not until months later—after more than 90% of the people of Baker Lake voted to oppose the project—that UG asked for an "indefinite delay" in the review process. The concerns expressed in the panel's deficiency statement "must be addressed if the project is to proceed," UG admitted. Rather than doing so, they chose to shelve the proposal.

Nickerson can't blame the EARP panel for the failure of the Kiggavik

proposal—or for the state of the Keewatin economy—and expect to be taken seriously.

Last July, Gordon Wray—formerly MLA for Kivallivik, and now the "new Dave Nickerson" at the NWT Water Board—was interviewed by a *Nunatsiaq News* columnist. He stated that people opposed to the proposed mine brought in emotional arguments about "deformed babies." People wept at public meetings: "We knew we had lost control when that happened," Wray said.

"Lost control"? Does Wray really think that he was "in control" of an open and public EARP process? "Deformed babies"? Does Wray really think that Joan Scottie, Louis Pilakapsi, Tagak Curley, Peter Ernerk and others would deliberately try and scare their fellow Inuit?

Baker Lake wasn't exactly flooded with objective information at the start of the review process: no one had prepared straightforward information in Inuktitut about the health risk of ionizing radiation, and no one had bothered to

inform the people of Baker Lake that there is fundamental disagreement between scientists over just how dangerous exposure to low levels of ionizing radiation truly is. (This disagreement explains why the federal and Saskatchewan governments believe that uranium mining is an "acceptable risk" while it has been banned for public health reasons in British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Vermont and New Jersey.)

Misinformation and lack of information only fueled fears that the proposed mine was going ahead whether people wanted it or not: a UG employee told residents of Baker Lake that the mine tailings would be so safe that he would go swimming in them, an official of the Atomic Energy Control Board was observed distributing Canadian Nuclear Association pamphlets at public meetings, UG took every opportunity to express its absolute certainty that the project



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would be approved, etc. As the Northern Anti-Uranium Coalition (NAUC) asked in one flyer, "Who's scaring whom?"

I remember many long meetings where concerned community folk struggled to find ways to communicate complex—and, yes, sometimes disturbing—information in an understandable, non-threatening manner in both English and Inuktitut. Charges that people were told that pregnant women would have "two-headed babies" if the mine went ahead have been made before; if Wray has a shred of evidence to support his claim I trust that he will publish it. I doubt that he'll find any in the carefully researched fact-sheets NAUC produced, one of which has since been distributed across the country by Energy Probe.

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