(Re)framing nuclear power in British parliamentary debates: the use of science in legitimating discourses

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• « politics is a struggle for discursive hegemony in which actors try to secure support for their definition of reality »
  (Hajer 2006: 59).

• From « speaking truth to power » to « making sense together »
  (Hoppe 1999).
• **State of the art**
  > Large body of literature on recent discourses over nuclear power identifying *the ecological turn* in argumentation (Pidgeon) = a major shift from simple modernisation towards ecological modernisation (Berg, 2009)
  > Growing popular distrust regarding scientific expertise undermining the previous technocratic model of decision-making while paving the way for a more participatory model of governance (Blowers and Sundqvist 2010).

• **aim**
  Putting the academic consensus over discourse shift to the test in the light of empirical analysis of parliamentary debates using a diachronic approach.
• On which grounds is the nuclear power programme propounded?
• Who is speaking up in favour of nuclear power?
• Which scientific items are being used and how?
• How are the opposing views qualified?
• Which vision of expertise and of the links between science and policy-making pervades?
On which grounds is nuclear power propounded?

Threats to energy security, the balance between supply and demand due to a decline in North Sea oil and gas production and a growing dependence on politically-unstable countries in terms of oil supplies.

Part of the CO-CO-NUKE programme
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- Part of the CO-CO-NUKE programme

On the one hand, there is a Dr Jekyll, a kind doctor who brings his renewable balm to his patients, and on the other, Mr Hyde [...] who personifies the nuclear lobby (22/01/2008, col. 1432, Challen).

On the basis of science and economics, [...] nuclear power can play a large part in helping us meet the challenge of climate change (28/02/2008, col. 1234, Hutton).

- Part of the low-carbon energy transition + keeping the lights on
Who is speaking up in favour of nuclear power?

The House will know that, nearly 40 years ago, I did quantum physics, just over 30 years ago, I was working with scientists at Harwell (25/02/1980, H.Osborne).

The vast majority of my constituents [...] has lived with nuclear power for two and a half decades and has lived with the nuclear industry without fear (25/02/1980, vol 979, McLellan).

It is really important that we grasp the nuclear issue. Having studied nuclear energy for many years, and having visited French, Finnish and British plants (30/10/2006, col. 111, Key)

But I think that I am the only Member present who has worked in the nuclear industry. I worked in this particular field, so I speak from a position of some authority (30/04/ 2008, col.327, Reed)
Which scientific facts / figures / voices are integrated? (1)

Scientists warn us that many energy sources are limited and they will run out. North Sea oil will run out within the next two decades. It will no longer be there in 30 years’ time (25/02/1980, vol. 979, Evans)

The answers to the ‘what if’ questions are virtually meaningless unless accompanied by reference to the probability of an accident. In terms of risks, answers should be given in quantitative terms [...] Much of the technology is tried and tested (01/02/1981, Johnson Smith).
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The science and the economics have changed [...] the simple question [...] whether we want to rule out for all time the possible contribution that a proven, and it is proven, form of low-carbon technology could make [...] that is not just my view but the view of many others in the scientific community and the Sustainable Development Commissions and others (10/01/2009, col. 529, Hutton).
Which scientific facts / figures / voices are integrated? (2)

Repoliticizing aspects which had previously been earmarked as strictly technical:

*There are no technical or scientific barriers to the safe disposal of radioactive waste, only political ones* (17/01/2006, vol.89, Reed).

*The genetic effects of low levels of radioactivity are scientifically unfounded* (16/02/2006, col. 1323, Lord Lea of Crondall)

Name dropping:
Lovelock, Moore …
How are opposing views considered?

Discarded as *scaremongering*, *moralizing* and *doctrinaire*.

= often targeting the media

⇒ undermined as unscientific in nature

Associated with those devoid of environmental concerns or who deny the existence of climate change.

⇒ Undermined as not accepting widely-accepted scientific facts
Pervading vision of expertise within the policy-making?

Having appointed a body of experts to run the electricity supply industry, parliament cannot politically go against their honest technical and industrial judgement (25/02/1985, vol.979, Palmer).

Science and scientists make an essential contributions to society to its material prosperity, it comfort and convenience and to the general well-being and health of the community (14/06/1985, vol. 80, Sir Joseph).
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It is impossible to see how Britain can meet Europe’s targets and our own [...] those targets are rooted in the science. They are **beyond the Government’s reach** (24/02/2009, col. 1483, Lord Birt).

It is essential that we base our policies on **numbers based on the science** (16/07/ 2009, col. 473, Challen).
• **First conclusions – work in progress**

The overall ecological turn in public discourses did have some impact over the way science is invoked and harnessed with parliamentary debates … however, many echoes emerge from one programme to the next:

- Functional authority in political rhetorics: remains and appears even strengthened.
- Strongly prospective in nature (even if not presented as such).
- To a certain extent, still entrenched in a technocratic view of policy-making over technological choices = further questions the reality of a transition towards a participatory system of governance.
Thank you for your attention!