

ENERGY

When ecology collides with economy in infrastructure projects

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Infrastructure projects become controversial when ecological values collide with economic development. This results notably from the introduction of a new set of political institutions that involve public participation.

Authorities around the world', according to Daniel P. Aldrich, 'must balance rising needs for energy and infrastructure facilities against increasing resistance from civil society.' (Aldrich 2008: 6) Aldrich's statement resumes the situation of Quebec public office holders in two contested energy infrastructure projects.

The Champigny project, planned by Hydro Quebec, a provincial government owned electricity company, was to build dams in the Jacques Cartier River Valley. This project was abandoned in the early 1970s. Protest groups were opposed to the construction of dams to produce power presumably needed in the future. Later on the Rabaska project has been launched by a private consortium made of Gaz Metro, Gaz de France and Enbridge. The consortium has planned to build and operate a liquefied natural gas terminal on the bank of the Saint Lawrence River. Although the project has been approved by both provincial and federal governments, it remains for now opposed by citizens who point to the hazards linked to this infrastructure.

Despite the time gap between the two cases, we can compare public policies that raise similar issues in regard to economic development versus ecological values. Moreover we can bring out socio-political changes that significantly modify the course of action in protesting public infrastructure projects. We base our observations on an extensive review of the press coverage of the projects. In addition we made eleven interviews with people, from project developer to member of the opposition coalition via elected and non-elected public office holders. Additionally we met two non-elected public office holders and a journalist to

discuss the projects from a broader historical angle.

Some general reflections

In our cases and others alike, if we take at face value the issues at stake, the conflict puts the economy and ecology into play. More precisely developers claim they are serving the general good by creating jobs, making up for energy needs, coping with social problems for instance. However such public goods do often become public bads since the concrete projects typically 'provide benefits for the majority of citizens but negatively affect certain areas more harshly than others. Such projects bring with them *diffuse benefits but highly focused costs*' (Aldrich 2008: 4). Then the opposition is commonly associated with the Nimby syndrome which used to characterize citizens as 'overly emotional, uninformed, and unscientific in their opposition[, ...] motivated by narrow, selfish interests[, and ...] obstructing policies that would provide for the collective good' (McAvoy 1999: 3). Such presumption is magnified in contemporary information societies at a time when expertise is a major factor in legitimacy.

In that regard, resistance is often framed in a technical-social dualism which presents 'public critique as lacking legitimacy to the extent social criticisms remain the oppositional strategy of the lay public,' thus obscuring 'the fact that both experts and the lay public make discursive use of similar sets of resources' (Durant 2007: 30). This perception is accentuated by the fact that 'experts have largely set themselves off from the mass citizenry. Instead of facilitating democracy, they have mainly given shape to a more techno-

cratic form of decision making, far more elitist than democratic' (Fischer 2000: 7). On that basis, as appearances show 'in many policy domains, politics more and more becomes a struggle between those who have expertise and those who do not' (Fischer 2000: 23).

To be sure, developers and opponents as well try to anchor their own credibility to scientific and technical arguments. However citizens tend to be suspicious of the other party's experts: because the latter are waged, their advices cannot be but presumably biased by contrast with those prepared by the experts who disinterestedly form an alliance with protest groups.

Citizens are increasingly expecting opportunities for democratic deliberations about the different aspects of infrastructure projects.

So expertise alone remains inadequate to define legitimacy which, to a great extent, also depends on the process of decision making. Thereby citizens in organisations are increasingly expecting more opportunities for democratic deliberation about the different aspects of infrastructure projects at their different stages, from conception to implementation. At this point, a summary description of the projects we have studied is required before making additional general reflections on these questions basic to the management of infrastructure projects.

Champigny project

In mid-1972 Hydro Quebec, the public corporation in charge of developing and distributing hydroelectricity, announced its project to build a power station in the Jacques Cartier River Valley. Almost spontaneously, residents from local communities at the outskirts of the

site created the *Comité pour la conservation de la Jacques-Cartier* (CCJC) to prevent the destruction of a unique natural heritage site still relatively unknown to people other than conservationists. By an effective media campaign, these few activists, with a university biologist as their spokesman, made every effort to give the impression that the public overwhelmingly rejected the project. Thereby thousands of citizens signed a petition.

In December the opposition got an unexpected stroke of chance with the leakage by a non-elected public office holder of a secret document showing the state corporation's longer term plans to erect up to seven dams. Thereafter things moved faster: more than fifteen other groups declared positions similar to those of the Committee, and municipal authorities in the region asked the provincial government for protecting the area against developments that would jeopardize this natural heritage. After Hydro Quebec's controversial plans were made public, the government formed a committee to examine the project which, theretofore, had been discreetly discussed between the corporation and the Quebec Premier. In February 1973 Hydro Quebec was requested to move its machinery out of the valley; but it claimed the project was only postponed.

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In view of the persistent and spreading opposition, the government further held a special parliamentary committee. In May Hydro Quebec openly presented its project and left elected public office holders in a state of uncertainty. Then opponents were in their turn called to explain their opposition to the project; with juridical and technical arguments, they did it convincingly. In July Hydro Quebec announced the withdrawal of its project, while reasserting it would try again sometime in the future. Finally, in August 1975, the minister responsible for parks announced the file being closed for good. In the aftermath, in 1981, the Quebec government created the Jacques Cartier Park, as a part of the Laurentides Park, so prohibiting any future industrial development in the area.

Rabaska project

In January 2004 a liquefied natural gas terminal projected on the shores of the Saint Lawrence River was brought to the attention of the population. Two months later, Gaz Metro, the project developer, roughly identified possible sites and evoked the constitution of a consortium within months. In April Rabaska, the consortium, presented its decision to build the terminal in the boundaries of the municipality of Beaumont next to the city of Levis. Local authorities then set up a committee to advise elected public office holders and deal with citizens' concerns.

For his part the developer held open meetings to brief citizens of the Beaumont-Levis area. From then on, groups of opponents mobilized. In the meantime, Levis' municipal council voted not to welcome Rabaska's project. Five days later, an uncompromising opponent to the project became the new mayor of Beaumont. In November the committee formed to advise Beaumont decision makers concluded that a terminal meant adverse effects. The next month a referendum held in Beaumont gave a 72 per cent refusal of the project. Rabaska found it appropriate to take a break, while stating it would try again to have the terminal accepted by Levis authorities.

In 2005 Rabaska resumed approaches to the council, while demonstrations against the project continued. Against the background of surveys that showed the support of about three out of five citizens, the former leader of the majority opposition became the new mayor of Levis in November. Legally compelled to so doing, the developer published in January 2006 its own environmental impact assessment. This was the starting point of tight negotiations with local authorities, which led to successive agreements in July and October.

However the developer's assessment had to be further assessed by the provincial *Bureau d'audiences publiques sur l'environnement* (BAPE) and the federal Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency (CEAA). The BAPE made Rabaska's assessment public, and the minister of Sustainable Development received fifty requests for public hearings. Between December 2006 and February 2007, 34 public sessions had been held before an ad hoc commission to examine the project with the developer and non-elected public office holders and, subsequently, with other participants who expressed their views and concerns. A

huge amount of 699 briefs (additionally to 15 oral presentations) had been addressed to the commissioners. In May 2007 the BAPE and the CEAA jointly presented their report to provincial and federal ministers. Finally they disclosed their common conclusion in July 2007: the project was declared acceptable.

Although ecologist groups themselves seemed to have difficulty in taking common stands, the opponents appeared determined to come hell and high waters. In January 2008 they reunited under the flagship of a new coalition and decided to proceed with ongoing and future litigation actions. In March the federal government approved the project after having dispelled the issue of rights claimed by natives. Apparently Rabaska has got through every obstacle to its realisation. However one last element still impedes the project. Negotiations with the Russian energy company Gazprom to ensure the supply of gas seem to be complicated. A consortium led by the energy company Petro Canada has a project for an approved, less contested terminal in Cacouna, two hundred kilometres east of Levis. The consortium is also looking for the supply of liquefied natural gas with Gazprom. The controversy over the Rabaska project is still ongoing.

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Expertise, media and protest

General observations can be drawn from the two projects. Firstly, as regards public policies, the crucial role of expertise can be evidenced. In the Champigny project, opponents were constantly preoccupied with credibility by arguing in scientific and juridical terms. At the time, Hydro Quebec seemed not prepared to debate since it used to act like being a state within a state. In the Rabaska file, this preoccupation was properly the developer's, partly as a result of the required environmental impact assessment. Conversely the developer attacked the opponents' allegedly weaker and less meticulous demonstrations. Such charges could have been devastating.

However, in view of the 'kind of "techno-pessimism" that is now widely found in Western societies' (Fischer 2000: 29), the 'dualist

strategy [which] institutionalizes a perceived dichotomy between technical and social sources of resistance' (Durant 2007: 3) could appear less efficient. In fact the meaning of expertise has shifted to include, beyond classical knowledge, the social and daily experiences of people. The outcome is the 'politicization of science' which, 'in environmental policy making has caught scientific decision making in a compromised, if not contradictory, situation that has given rise to sharp political conflicts between citizens and experts' (Fisher 2000: 92).

Both cases also show the decisive role of media. CCJC's members openly put their success down to special relations with a few journalists. On the basis of the exposure they were given, coalitions opposed to Rabaska have been perceived as very powerful and well organised. Of course the Rabaska consortium really tried to counterbalance this apparent advantage. In the end, with the notable exception of Hydro Quebec, likely misguided by an overestimation of its strength, every stakeholder in the two projects tried to make media (and journalists) their political instruments. Journalists are not always reluctant to play the game of influential journalism.

The question is to what extent are citizens allowed to discuss the project beyond being given explanations and justifications.

Protest forces against the Champigny project saw the turning point of their campaign in the leak of a document describing Hydro Quebec's 'secret' plans. Today non-elected public office holders appear less involved in such political tactics. They seem rather committed to develop rational policies to 'offset the misperceptions and distorted understandings plaguing uninformed thinkers, particularly the proverbial "man of the street"' (Fischer 2000: 127). Concretely the

terms of this confrontation echo collisions of ecology with economy.

Are there solutions to escape such dead end debates? Conceptually the Quebec Sustainable Development Commissioner urges to look at the 'works of ecological economists [that] proceed from the finding that the [gross domestic product] is incomplete and show that new indicators must consider other factors to measure the real progress of a society' (Auditor general of Québec 2007: 18). In practice it appears advisable to promote a process which, 'by localizing the decision and promoting citizens' involvement from the early, problem-definition stage onward, [...] allows citizens to articulate their partisan interests and for these concerns to help shape the context and direction of policies' (McAvoy 1999: 137). Evidently such approaches are not a panacea. The question, then, is to what extent are citizens allowed to discuss the project beyond being given explanations and justifications.

To conclude, significant changes have occurred between the Champigny project and the Rabaska project. Every of our interviewees unreservedly support the idea of an increase of citizens' participation. Moreover consultations have been systematically institutionalised through open parliamentary committees. In this respect and as another arena, the BAPE has played an important role since 1978 by publicly assessing infrastructures projects (BAPE 2008). It can be expected that Quebec politics will develop in the future so to give increased legitimacy in democratic decision-making processes. (Hudon et al. 2008) This would correspond with the principles and intentions of the Aarhus Convention, signed in June 1998 and specifically related to the question of public participation in environmental decision-making, the final objective being 'to contribute to the protection of the right of every person of present and future generations to live in an environment adequate to his or her health and well-being' (Aarus Convention 1998: Art.1). ★

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