

KAZE, July 2018

Japan's distorted energy policy

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More than ten years ago, I was invited to speak at a meeting of the Nuclear Energy Council of the Government of Japan. The title of my speech was "Let's put nuclear power generation to a national debate to facilitate communication for prevention of global warming". It was a few years before the FUKUSHIMA. At that time, I already had the question; why matters related to power generation are decided without public discussion? Energy issues are directly related to our everyday life, so I thought it should be openly discussed before any decision is made by the government. Therefore, at the meeting, I pointed out that the energy issue is prevented from open discussion, and said that the government seems to presuppose the nuclear power generation to accommodate the increasing demand of energy. I also pointed out that energy education is not provided as needed and energy information is biased and lacking. I tried to advocate that we need to have a national discussion on how to control energy demand of this country and on how to supply clean energy based on fair, balanced and clear information.

Then came the Great East Japan Earthquake of 3.11 (11 March, 2011). Minshu-to (Democratic Party of Japan) was in government at that time. They held public hearings in many places in 2012 to listen to the voices of the people about the desirable ratio of nuclear power generation in 2030. There, 87% of some 89,000 people chose "No nuclear power", so based on the result of the public hearing as well as on some newspaper polls, the government agreed on the basic direction that nuclear power generation be abandoned by 2030. However, the succeeding Abe Government of Liberal Democratic Party, conducted few "real" public hearings, but a few several fake meetings.

Not surprisingly, the New Strategic Energy Plan¹ presented by METI

¹ New Strategic Energy Plan (the 4th version of the Strategic Energy Plan):

https://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2018/pdf/0703_002c.pdf

Related METI website: https://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2018/0703_002.html

(Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry) seems to have been drafted only among those concerned and here again the process was not clear. The Plan is titled “New”, but Minister Seko, to our surprise, stated that it is the revision and it does not intend to review the bone of the Plan because the previous one was formulated only 3 years ago. It is hard to believe that Minister of METI said this! It clearly shows that they completely ignored the Paris Agreement of 2015 and the resulting big global trend toward de-carbonization. It is a pity that METI, the ministry administering Japanese industries under intense global competitions, lags far behind the other developed countries in this respect.

Above all, it is quite strange that the review of the New Strategic Energy Plan was discussed separately from the discussion of mid- and long-term plan to address the requirements of the Paris Agreement. Climate change issues and energy issues are closely related with each other. To address climate issues, it is quite important to discuss what kind of energy we choose and how much we can use. Why do they intentionally separate climate issues from energy issues? My guess is that it would be because METI does not like other ministries to interfere with their jurisdiction of energy issues.

They have long kept this fixed attitude of eliminating other ministries from the discussion of energy issues, which has been/is reflected in their choice of the membership of their expert councils. Those pro-business professors and academic experts make up the vast majority of the committees and there are few who speak for the prevention of climate change and global warming. No wonder that quite a lot of comments for the revival of nuclear power generation were made at their meetings in the past. It seems that they believe in technology innovation as a panacea of any problem. I do not object to technology innovation at all, but it will not bring about the decarbonized society only by itself.

To overcome climate challenges and build a really sustainable and decarbonized society, we have much to do other than technology innovation. We will need to create new values transforming from the current social and economic system placing “growth” above anything else. In this regards, roles to be played by education will be enormous for the future generation. These views

should have been referred to in the above mentioned New Strategic Energy Plan at least in its preface.

On this Plan, METI had a thirty-day comment period last May/June, but it was quite doubtful that people read through the document of more than 100 pages and submit their opinion when they were not sure of the impact of their voices. People knew that, at the time of the public hearing, the Plan was mostly fixed and there was little room of new/adverse comments were reflected to it. As we have seen many times before, the public hearing was used as an evidence of having heard “public voices” before the government made the final decision which have already decided at the time of the public comment period. It is lamentable that the public hearing system itself does not function as originally intended for equity and transparency of public administration.

Chapter 2, Section 4 of the New Strategic Energy Plan is entitled “Enhancement of communication with all levels of the society”. There, “transparent policy planning process and enhancement of two-way communication” is clearly declared in addition to “deepening of understanding of all levels of the society” and “promotion of the provision of energy-related information by a third-party organization through enhanced access to objective information and data.” However, the method and process of policy planning described there is the same as before, and neutrality and impartiality of the council members are not referred to. Furthermore, it does not mention the need of national debates or integration of energy policy into climate-related policies.

Therefore, with growing concerns over the climate policy trend in Japan, we, Kanbun, made an urgent proposal of “Let’s Straighten out Japan’s Energy Policy Distortion!” in May 2018. Our proposal is composed of the following three points.

- i) Policy processes related to national energy issues should be transparent and more open to the public establishing a system of reflecting views of future generations. Government should make more opportunities of hearing public opinions on the current draft of the New Strategic Energy

Plan, holding open meetings in various parts of Japan.

- ii) The Government should start examination of establishing Ministry of Energy and Environment.
- iii) The energy and climate issues should be given the highest prioritized in the policy agenda and should be seriously discussed as the most important and pressing issue both among the ruling parties and the opposition.

It seems that the current government of Japan led by Prime Minister Abe does not understand what is really needed for making our country sound and sustainable. Now, we have to terminate the era of old policy making where energy and environment issues are decided only among those concerned/business stakeholders. The energy and environment issues are closely and directly related to people's everyday life. To protect our lives, we will continue to appeal the importance of reflecting people's voices to national policies and the pressing needs of discussing energy and environment issues openly among general public.