

# The Electrical Industry In The Community

By J. E. (Elmer) Partaker

The existence of electrical utilities in the community is not new. However the growing criticism towards them is new, and alarming.

I believe the understanding and support of the general public is very important to all of the projects contemplated and undertaken by electric utilities. Appreciation to the ever increasing public resistance to such activities must be factored into our planning and into the decision-making process. On the other hand, the public—the *community* has a responsibility to justify its resistance towards electric utilities which frequently have a precarious foundation of incomplete details, inaccurate facts, personal opinion and personal preference. We in the electric utility industry should recognize that each situation is unique, each region is unique, and each community is unique. Consequently each must be considered its own situation under International, National, Region and Community conditions. This requires a very open-minded attitude by both the utility and the *community*.

Development, generation, transmission and distribution of electric power is not a new service in the community. Most utilities in Canada, and the United States have been involved in the business for about 50 years or more. What is new is an unprecedented level of resistance and criticism towards utilities. It seems that most everyone not associated with the industry has instant answers and immediate "cure-alls" in determining what electric utilities should and should not do.

The general public has become very sensitive and emotional about the activities of electric utilities. This attitude has led to an opposition toward electric utilities which is in direct contrast to the vital importance of electric power to them as individuals, and to the community in which they reside, raise their families and conduct their business. The vital importance of electric power was illustrated by the results of the blackout that occurred in the North Eastern United States and part of Eastern Canada in 1965.

Despite this seemingly clear direction most utilities have experienced that the

need for high voltage lines, (and generating stations, particularly nuclear) is very difficult to explain to the public. To get community acceptance of a major project requires months, even years of planning, public meetings, inquiries and often "eyeball to eyeball" discussion with hundreds of individuals who are ill-informed and overly influenced by others who may be equally ill-informed and biased.

It is perhaps little wonder there is apprehension; utilities may shy away from building facilities to escape criticism. Many utilities have been subject to severe criticism from all sides and official inquiries are common. The result of all of this is, or can be, extreme conservatism on the part of electric utilities. This can result in lost opportunities detrimental to the consumers, the provinces, the states and the national economy.

The situation which utilities are experiencing at the present time dramatically emphasizes a conflict of interests. Put simply, those who have relatively dependable low cost electric power offer great objection to and criticism of future development and transmission of that electric power to serve others. I suggest the community must guard against the "have/have not syndrome." To do otherwise could be the common error of "cutting off one's nose to spite the face."

I suggest also, if one was to visit Alabama, Kentucky and Tennessee and with a magic wand swish away lights, power and recreational areas, people would cry out "no, no." But, by the same token we all know what would happen if we were to attempt to develop another Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) or build a nuclear generating station. Why? I ask you! I suggest again, the answer lies in the fact that the causes by those resisting development are thinly veiled and made in narrow self-interest.

I believe it is necessary for both the utility and the community to assume the appropriate proportions of responsibility and accountability. I call this "*holding the balance*."

In an attempt to "*hold the balance*" between overcoming the concerns of the

general public, interest groups, approval agencies, individuals and particularly environmentalists, and the "bottom line" costs of designing, constructing, operating and maintaining electrical facilities or to delay in having these facilities operational, one is constantly placed on the horns of a dilemma. Do we unilaterally place the facility in service, if indeed that actually could be done? Or, do we allow ourselves to be totally influenced or directed by others? Or do we meet their concerns which are often inconsistent and impractical? Or do we find a position of compromise. A position which requires the utility to design, construct and operate the facilities in a manner somewhat differently than what they would actually prefer while at the same time not entirely yielding to the concerns of the interest groups, agencies, individuals and environmentalists.

Utilities cannot unilaterally move forward without regard for the impact which their facilities will have on the community—regardless of the motive to serve that same *community*. In recent years, this attitude has been demonstrated on countless occasions by all utilities.

On the other hand, utilities cannot and should not be subjected to intensive, restrictive regulation which either impedes the establishment of essential services and/or increases the cost of such service to unprecedented levels. All too often utilities are directed to alter designs, routing or siting, and operating procedures to satisfy some concern expressed by experts, but are relatively unimportant to the individuals most directly concerned. The agricultural expert who objects to a certain routing while at the same time farmers owning the land, over which the proposed right-of-way has been selected, offer little or no objection until some "do-gooders" convince them that they have a problem is an example of this.

Experience seems to indicate that utilities are prepared to alter the design and routing posture to a certain degree, whereas the interest groups and environ-