Attitudes to Nuclear Energy

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A new Ipsos MORI survey of public attitudes to the nuclear energy industry on behalf of the Nuclear Industry Association shows the industry to be favourably regarded on balance, a stark contrast with the position just five years ago. Favourable opinion has reached 35% and unfavourable opinion is 26%; a complete reversal of the position in December 2002, when favourable opinion was just 21% and unfavourable opinion 33%. That was the public opinion background against which the Government framed the 2003 Energy White Paper which concluded that nuclear was "an unattractive option". This more favourable viewpoint is against a background of increasing familiarity with the industry in recent years. Familiarity actually fell after 2002 to a low of 17% (who feel they know "at least a fair amount" about the industry), but since then, as media interest in a possible nuclear revival has placed the issues regularly in front of people, has grown strongly â€” to 27% in 2007.

This improved familiarity with the industry, and a recent more positive view of it has gone hand-in-hand with growing net support for replacement nuclear newbuild. This year's survey shows again the supporters of newbuild outweighing the opposers (36% support; 27% oppose), but it is possible that net support peaked in 2006. Both support and opposition have fallen a little this year, and we can speculate this may be due to increasing levels of confusion over the opposing arguments and the greater volume of information available. The proportion of the public who are neutral, undecided or simply don't know has this year reached its peak. People are less sure than ever of what they believe, and less inclined to give the benefit of the doubt to either side. For the first time since 2002, the upward curve in expectations that nuclear energy will be a major contributor to Britain's energy supplies in the future has faltered and reversed. People are not so sure now, even though they still support nuclear newbuild on balance, maybe because they have seen little progress so far towards new construction their faith is shaken. This may be partly an effect of the successful Greenpeace challenge to the first Energy Review, which delayed progress on a number of fronts and necessitated a hurried re-running of the consultation process.

Despite these interruptions to the trends, however, a decisive majority of the population still agrees that Britain needs a mix of energy sources to ensure a reliable supply of electricity, including nuclear power and renewable energy sources â€” 65% agree; 10% disagree. This, too, is down a little this year; agreement is down seven points, but disagreement is up only two points, implying again a net shift to the neutral or undecided.Further details are available in the report charts pdf, 178KB

Technical details

Ipsos MORI interviewed face-to-face a nationally representative sample of 1,973 adults across Great Britain in the period 9-15 November 2007. The interviews are weighted to reflect the population of Great Britain.