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Book Review

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Book Reviews

MARY R. ENGLISH, SITING LOW-LEVEL RADIOACTIVE WASTE DISPOSAL FACILITIES: THE PUBLIC POLICY DILEMMA. (Quorum Books 1992) [278 pp.], Appendices, index, introduction, references. LC-91-42774; ISBN 0-89930-560-1. [\$49.95 cloth. One Madison Avenue, New York NY 10010.]

This volume presents a well researched and well formatted discussion of the issues surrounding the siting of facilities for the disposal of low level nuclear waste. While the jacket claims the book is a “resource” for policy makers involved in siting such facilities, it is not a text on how to do it, but rather a near-encyclopedic analysis of the social and political factors that shape this specific subject. While this book will certainly appeal to social scientists and risk-analysis philosophers, the reader is still left uncertain as for whom the book was written.

As its subtitle suggests, this work focuses on the conflict among many competing public policy interests and, as the author puts it, the “web of issues” that surround the low level waste (LLW) disposal dilemma. The book begins with a well-written background, discussing the legislative history of the Low Level Radioactive Waste Policy Act of 1980 (LLWPA) and subsequent state actions required by the act. The author keenly notes that a key change in the LLW disposal problem was a shift from the NIMBY syndrome (not in my backyard) to a NIABY philosophy (not in anyone’s backyard). The LLWPA proposed a deceptively simple solution to this problem; each state will be responsible for its own waste. This first chapter so succinctly covers the legal, technical and political factors involved in this rule, one wonders what the remainder of the book has left to discuss.

However, the author then plunges into a series of deeper social factors that underlie everyday problems. These are: (1) the authority required to implement a waste handling program, (2) the trust that such authority requires, (3) risk analysis, (4) the justice requirement, and (5)

the need for legitimacy in any final solution. Each chapter includes an extremely detailed case study to illustrate that chapter's point and to bring it somewhat down to earth. Finally, a significant portion of the book is devoted to appendices providing the full text of the LLWPA as originally passed, its 1985 amendments and a synopsis of a number of state's facility siting programs.

The overall thesis appears to be that more than the superficial legal, technical and political factors must be involved when siting LLW facilities. The author makes a compelling argument that certain social factors must be considered by siting committees and legislatures along with the technical issues before a site selection plan can be successfully implemented. However, to the policy maker confronted with an actual siting dilemma, the book may appear to be too deep to be practical. Yet, if the discussion is intended for social scientists or theoreticians, its scope may be too narrow. Notwithstanding this dilemma, the author presents something for nearly everyone in this exhaustive discussion of an important, contemporary environmental problem. Most importantly, the issues are handled in such a way that no biases were evident. The author is to be commended for the depth and perceptivity of her work.

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