

LYNAS SAGA: POLICY BASED ON SCIENCE OR POLITICS?

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Late last December Kuantan based rare earth miner Lynas Corporation Ltd (Lynas) chief executive officer Amanda Lacaze lamented her disappointment to the Ministry of Energy, Science, Technology, Environment and Climate Change (MESTECC) decision to impose pre-conditions on the company if it were to proceed with its operations in Kuantan.

Lacaze said that the ministry's decision came as a surprise and reiterated that it does not follow the agreed process outlined agreed in October 2018 which stated that the Cabinet would look at the Review Committee's report before any decisions were to be made. Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Fuziah Salleh which is synonymous to the Lynas saga welcomed the governments's decision.

It is very intrigued when Lacaze points out that the decision was inconsistent with science, the Lynas Advance Materials Plant (LAMP) executive review committee's recommendations and also contrary to the norm of international best practice. "This appears to be policy based on politics, not policy based on science", said the Lynas CEO as if hinting out that the government decision is wrong and politically motivated.



Lynas factory in Kuantan during construction.

To recap the ministry new requirements deals with two new pre-conditions for the Water Leached Purification Residue (WLP) and Neutralization Underflow Residue (NUF) solid residue, which required Lynas to export the WLP residue from Malaysia by this September. The second condition requires Lynas to submit an action plan on the disposal of NUF. The current approval is valid until February 15 2019 and to date Lynas has already submitted its proposal to the relevant authorities.

Both sides has its own arguments and ironically its does not contradict with each other, meaning MESTECC is within its right in imposing the new conditions and Lynas too is correct defending their side of arguments. But when Lacaze implying that the ministry decision is based on politics rather than science, this accusation is a bit sinister in nature.

It has been argued that science is not political. It implies that it does not belong exclusively to any political party. But science is always in the middle of controversies and the Lynas saga shows it all. Developing a public policy that deal with the people safety and wellbeing issue requires more than science since science is not always black and white.

Take the global warming and climate change phenomena for example. Even though the empirical evidence via science is very clear that demonstrate the world is getting warmer, it is quite difficult to convince sceptical by using data from science only since the change are so minute.

Some said that the polar vortex that brings chilly temperature to the most of the Midwest United States of America few weeks ago is due to the global warming phenomena, but it is quite difficult to prove it by science only. That's the reason why President Donald Trump rubbish the climate change scientific data because the temperature change is too minute.

You need some political reasoning to convince leaders such as Trump! Ironically politics is the main reason why Trump pull out United States from the Paris Agreement except that he is using science as the scape goat.



Some believed that global warming is not happening

So when the Malaysian government put out the two new requirements related to the WLP and NUF, the decision no doubt is based on science and also most importantly related to politics because radioactive materials which Lynas handled every day is a very sensitive issue to Malaysians. The citizens, especially in the area where Lynas is situated, has every right to demand a safe environment and the decision to impose two new requirement is made just to ensure that the rights of these citizens are adhered. Now that is a policy based on politics because the people sentiments played a crucial role and coupled with science, that's when politics and science go hand in hand.