

*Open discussions on nuclear energy organized by the Commission of the European Communities, Brussels, 29 November-1 December 1977*

## **The inability of nuclear energy to keep its promises**

Presentation by Walt Patterson - Friends of the Earth

Dr Brunner, ladies and gentlemen. As a Canadian I must first apologise for speaking English in Brussels. But the issues are already sufficiently complex in my native tongue. I have however been a British resident for seventeen years. If what I shall say this morning sounds somewhat severe I hope it will be understood as the view of one who is a European by choice.

I was invited to speak on the inability of nuclear energy to keep its promises and I am bound to say that there is neither time nor space here to consider that question in its full dimensions. We should be here until Christmas.

However, the entire history of the civil nuclear energy programme in Europe as elsewhere is one of a failure to keep its promises, in respect of forecasts of capital costs, performance and fuel cycles. Listening to Dr Guck and Dr Moore, I had a feeling of *deja vu*, because I have heard this story before and if you look at the historical record you will find that the story has been retailed for the past twenty years that things don't look so good at the moment, but tomorrow they will be wonderful, and that by 1985 the capacity factor and the unit generating costs and everything else is going to be beautiful.

Now I would prefer to look at the historical record. I should be delighted to follow through a line-by-line discussion of Dr Moore's contribution. I am not at the moment intending to do so. If anyone would like to give me the opportunity in the question period to do so I would be happy to.

I would at this stage simply put one question. If nuclear energy is so advantageous to society why has it relied to such an overwhelming extent on public money? Why for instance does the European Investment Bank have to play such a substantial role in finding capital for nuclear investment? Why do the domestic nuclear industries in Europe and elsewhere rely on lavish export credits provided by their parent governments in order to be able to export their technology, because they cannot sell it at home?

There is in the United States an old expression, and it is a question that I would put to Dr Guck and Dr Moore and their colleagues: if you are so good why aren't you rich? The suggestion that the technology is now a mature technology strikes me as indefensible. It is to me a technology whose characteristics are more those of a spoiled and demanding child being indulged by its parent governments.

Now, I propose to devote my attention primarily to the role played in this issue by the Commission and I would like to start by reminding you as I have in the published paper that not everyone is entirely satisfied with the quality of policy material that the Commission has thus far put forward on this subject.

The Select Committee of the British Parliament specifically responsible for the European Community commented in 1974 on the basic set of energy policy papers presented by the

Commission. That evidence suggested that the British Government does not consider the Commission's documents to be of high quality, in view of doubts about the statistical basis, the vagueness of the language and the neglect of important factors. This is an opinion which the Select Committee shares, and furthermore, they added that the Committee believes the Commission's reliance on the nuclear answer is mistaken. I share the opinion of the Select Committee.

The Commission then, this summer, produced three documents relating to the fast breeder reactor, to radioactive waste and to reprocessing.

Mr Cheshire has already commented on some of the drawbacks of the policy paper on the fast breeder reactor. I, in my published paper, have drawn attention to one particular internal inconsistency which I think has been insufficiently stressed. This is the Commission's feeling that security of supply must play a powerful role in the structure of their energy policy, to which end they intend to lay great emphasis on the fast breeder reactor - only, however, to concede that the fast breeder reactor will have no significant effect on security of supply for perhaps the next fifty years.

Little in the Commission's record to date in nuclear matters gives any basis for confidence in its pronouncements about the 21st century.

As to the question of reprocessing, I spent some two and a half months in the summer of this year at the Windscale enquiry in Britain. This is an enquiry into the plan of British Nuclear Fuels to build a 1200-tonne oxide fuel reprocessing plant. The inspector's report on that enquiry is due at the end of this year and the Government's decision on the plan is expected early next year. It was the most exhaustive enquiry of its kind that has ever taken place anywhere in the world. However, as a corollary to the Commission's document on 'Points for a Community strategy on the reprocessing of irradiated nuclear fuels', the Commission has also put forward a draft resolution which is based on this paper and which will be considered on 13 December by the Council of Ministers. Let me first quote briefly the passage on page 7 of this Report entitled 'The present position with regard to reprocessing - the difficulties'. It says: 'The industrial development of reprocessing is at present hampered by problems in perfecting the technology, financing problems, problems associated with the industrial application of technologies concerned with radioactive waste, difficulties with regard to public acceptance, and by political circumstances in the United States'. A footnote at the bottom points out that the economics of reprocessing and the associated operations are subject to a considerable margin of uncertainty, ranging from profitability to a heavy burden of costs depending on the hypothesis selected.

Well, I need hardly remind you which hypothesis the Commission has selected. The Commission has selected a hypothesis that suggests that they must press on at full speed regardless of the uncertainties, and that is the content of the resolution which the Commission is putting to the Council of Ministers.

In my view the fifteen pages of this document are an inexcusably inadequate basis for a policy decision which involves implications of such gravity, not least the investment expenditure of thousand of millions of units of account; and here, Dr Brunner, I would ask you directly in this open forum to consider withdrawing this document and the resolution which is based on it, at least until the findings of the Windscale enquiry have been published and considered in an international context.

Dr Moore has returned to a theme which is now well known to me, the theme of the emotional content of the criticism which I and my colleagues put forward in these issues. I have become very

used to having my motives questioned. But in view of the record, in view of the technical and the economic record and the internal inconsistency and inadequacies of documents produced by nuclear policymakers, like those of the Commission, I think it is now time to begin to question the motives of those whose obsessive promotion of nuclear energy cannot be swayed by rational argument.

Four months ago I came across a newly published and in my view remarkable book. As I read it I began for the first time to understand why the European Commission has for twenty years adhered devoutly to its faith in nuclear energy. The book is called *Energy and the European Communities*. It is published in Britain, and it is by a British academic whose name is Dr N Lucas. I strongly recommend it to those of you who, like me, have been baffled by the internal inconsistencies of policy-making at the European level in these matters. Let me read you two brief and telling quotations. In 1955 Mr Jean Monnet, the founding father of Europe, said: 'the United States of Europe means a federal power linked to the peaceful exploitation of atomic energy'; and in welcoming the establishment of the European Atomic Energy Community R V Vibin wrote: 'the key to the future for every European, Euratom is capable of making Europe at the hour of its greatest decline the true continent of the future'.

You will also be familiar, I presume, with Article 1 of the Euratom Treaty, which summarizes the tasks of the Community. 'By this Treaty, the High Contracting Parties establish among themselves a European Atomic Energy Community. It shall be the task of the Community to contribute to the raising of the standard of living in the Member States and to the development of relations with the other countries by creating the conditions necessary for the speedy establishment and growth of nuclear industries'.

It would seem to me therefore, that for the past three days we may have been talking about the wrong subject. I had come expecting that we would be considering the use and supply of energy and the role of nuclear energy in that context. But the Commission's brief is clearly to build nuclear cathedrals for the glory of European unity. This, the building of cathedrals, has historically in Europe been a noble ideal and is not to be despised, but the building of cathedrals is a very expensive and time-consuming enterprise.

We have heard that some countries are more fortunate than others in the matters of energy supply. I would suggest that only such countries can afford the luxury of building nuclear cathedrals. Countries which consider that they have genuine serious pressing energy problems would be better advised to concentrate on taking immediate, identifiable rational measures to cope with the problems they foresee.

The Commission of course is bound by the Euratom Treaty. It is the policy of the organization which arranged for my invitation to participate at this forum, the European Environmental Bureau, that the Euratom Treaty needs to be amended; and I would strongly endorse that suggestion. This would remove the constraint which has led the Commission so far out of touch with reality.

Mr Normanton mentioned a couple of days ago his feeling that it would be desirable to transfer to the Commission authority and competence. I devoutly hope that they will transfer competence before they transfer authority.

In my paper I chided the Commission for what I said was its readiness to plunge blindly ahead in a perversely hazardous and costly direction, worsening other risks and aggravating other situations while promising that it will all work out for the best. My colleagues, my French colleagues, tell me that the French translation of that final phrase reads, 'while promising that the Commission will

strive to do better'; that is not what I meant, but I would certainly endorse the sentiment. And in the sense of the French there are hopeful signs in another Commission paper, which is a very detailed analysis of the circumstances on granting of financial support to projects to exploit alternative energy sources. They start from the premise that this will require detailed examination and I entirely agree.

A great statesman from my adopted country once said that democracy is the worst form of government, except all the others. Similarly, I would say that conservation is the most difficult energy option except all the others. In the meantime, no one should rely on any nuclear promise by the Commission or anyone else. Nuclear promises have long exhibited a very high probability of spontaneous fission.

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