

'The end of the "war of nuclear reactor systems": the lessons to be learned' from Europe (19 November 1969)


Caption: In his editorial of 19 November 1969, Emanuele Gazzo, Editor-in-Chief of Agence Europe, expresses the hope that France’s decision to stop using natural uranium in its reactors will revive Euratom on the back of a more Community-based approach.

Source: Europe. Agence internationale d'information pour la presse. dir. de publ. RICCARDI, Lodovico ; Réd. Chef GAZZO, Emanuele. 19.11.1969, n° 453. Bruxelles. "La fin de la "guerre des filières": la leçon qu'il faut en tirer", auteur:Gazzo, Emanuele , p. 1.

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URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_end_of_the_war_of_nuclear_reactor_systems_the_lessons_to_be_learned_from_europe_19_november_1969-en-4dd2d82d-a361-4079-8ade-519398baaf95.html

Last updated: 05/07/2016



The end of the ‘war of nuclear reactor systems’: the lessons to be learned

Our readers are aware of the decisions the French Government has taken on the reorientation of its nuclear energy policy (see, in particular, last Monday’s bulletin). The main aspects of the new approach are: (a) the famous ‘French system’ based on natural uranium has been virtually abandoned; (b) a large-scale programme for the construction of nuclear power stations that use enriched uranium (American patent) will be undertaken; (c) research into fast neutron reactors will be stepped up.

This is a realistic decision that finally puts a stop to a development for which there was no longer any prospect of success, at least from an economic viewpoint. Nevertheless, reactions in France are varied and sometimes negative: the Communist Party speaks of the abandonment of national independence. The trade unions have also shown their discontent with the government’s decision, which coincides with a restructuring of the Commissariat à l’énergie atomique (CEA) that involves large-scale redundancies. Furthermore, the nuclear industry must now be restructured urgently in the light of new factors, some of which we have mentioned in our bulletins and to which we shall have occasion to return.

It would be out of place to recall that this option is precisely the one which Euratom recommended ten years ago and which France then strongly opposed. It is too easy to see with hindsight what should have been done ten years ago. We must nevertheless remember that this difference of opinion between Euratom and the French Government was the source of the French Government’s officially declared hostility to Euratom and the people who ran it. On 3 July 1961, Euratom’s Council of Ministers adopted by a qualified majority the programme of participation in power reactors fuelled by enriched uranium submitted to it by the Euratom Commission. Mr Guillaumat, representing the French Government, had announced that France would vote against the programme and had called in vain for application of the principle of unanimity. The President of the Commission, Mr Etienne Hirsch, declared publicly that the decision should enable the Community’s industrial firms to acquire the necessary technical know-how, and emphasised that the fact that it had been taken by a majority showed that the Community institutions were working properly. That was the truth of the matter, but Mr Hirsch had signed his own sentence. A few months later, his term of office was not renewed and he was replaced by Mr Chatenet (who led Euratom into its present situation). That is what we need to remember today. In 1961, Mr Hirsch was right politically, and he paid for it. Today, France has recognised that he was also right technically. Yet as late as 1964, in its memorandum on nuclear policy, Paris complained that ‘since 1958, the common programme has put the emphasis on enriched-uranium technology’ and argued that it was ‘logical for the Community to promote the development of natural-uranium systems in the medium term’. It was fortunate that Euratom did not heed that advice, otherwise where would we be today? But in spite of everything, only a few months ago the French Minister for Technical Research (Minister for Posts and Telecommunications in the present government) referred disparagingly to Euratom as a ‘harbinger of American technology’.

We must let bygones be bygones, but there is a lesson to be learned. And that lesson is: we must return to Community cooperation, stop denigrating the Community’s institutional machinery, and recognise its validity.