

Shadows of Chernobyl on Swiss energy policy : unease in the aftermath of the disaster

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Unease in the aftermath of the disaster

Chernobyl has set the fronts in the Swiss nuclear energy debate in motion. This was the conclusion reached by observers from the three-day marathon debate in July, devoted by the Swiss federal council chambers to the nuclear accident in the Ukraine and its consequences for our country. An immediate rethink and even a «bailing out» in so far as atomic energy is concerned was demanded by the committed left and by the Greens. Bourgeois voters warned of the consequences of over-hasty measures but not a few of them pleaded for a «pause for thought» and a «halt to the march». Uneasiness and uncertainty were seen to have penetrated far into the ranks of former advocates of nuclear power.

The debate dragged on for over 19 hours and out of 246 National and States Councillors, around 100 asked for the floor. Two members of the government, President of the Confederation, Alphons Egli (as head of the Interior Department) and Federal Councillor Leon Schlumpf (as chief of the Department of Transport, Communications and Energy) gave the people's representatives the accounts which follow.

Egli: Health not endangered

According to President Egli, even under the most pessimistic assumptions, no effects on the Swiss population of the increased radioactive fallout resulting from the Chernobyl disaster are to be feared. The concept of radioactivity-dose measurement (limit: 500 millirems) as applied in Switzerland should guarantee adequate protection.

Mr. Egli conceded that the different limiting values for radiation measurement this side and the other of Switzerland's frontiers, as well as the somewhat less than cleansing, and often contradictory, preventive measures applied in individual countries had triggered a sense of unease among the Swiss population. The Federal Council had therefore

taken the initiative for an international approach to, and harmonisation of, safe radiation levels.

Schlumpf: Lack of alternatives

«Chernobyl is in fact an admonition», said Federal Councillor Schlumpf. All the same, as far as it was humanly possible to judge, the course of a nuclear accident as in Chernobyl can be excluded in so far as Swiss atomic power stations are concerned. Here, we have always been alive to the high danger potential of nuclear energy technology, and from the very beginning had set ourselves the most exacting safety demands and standards.

For the time being, justifiable alternatives to nuclear energy were not available, Mr. Schlumpf explained, and he warned of the negative consequences of a shortage of power on the international competitiveness of the Swiss economy.

Withdrawal or pause for thought?

The debate was marked by the impression of personal bewilderment in the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster. According to political persuasion, however, varying conclusions were drawn from it: for the speakers of the So-

Dario Robbiani (SP, TI)

«I was no active atom-anti, before, but I have become one and I now realize that science does not argue so rationally as it seems».



Albert Rüttimann (CVP, AG)

«For the moment we cannot do without atomic energy, which covers 40 per cent of the demand».

Anita Fetz (Poch, BS)

«There is only one conclusion to draw from what has happened: total abandonment of atomic power with deadline August 1st 1991, the 700th anniversary of the Confederation».



Let's get out of the atom trap; let's give ourselves this birthday present».



Judith Stamm (CVP, LU)

«In spite of everything, pulling out is cheaper than a new disaster».

Heinz Allenspach (FDP, ZH)

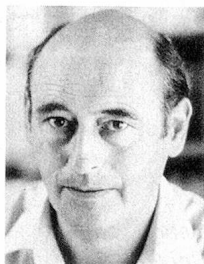
«To shut down our safe nuclear power plants is the most nonsensical demand if, in so doing, we become dependent on the unsafe ones in other countries. It is a



global problem. International safety standards are necessary».

Hans Rudolf Nebiker (SVP, BL)

«Today it is clear to me that the residual risk is too great, even if our plants are 100 times safer than those of the Soviet Union. We need clear energy-policy objectives



which, in the medium term, will get us out of nuclear energy».



Paul Günter (LdU, BE):

«Switzerland has the highest natural radioactivity in

Europe. The Chernobyl accident doubled this, but there is no such thing as harmless radiation. Even the smallest doses can increase the risk of cancer. Experts reckon with 3000 to 10000 additional deaths from cancer within the next few decades».

Willy Loretan (FDP, AG)

«Chernobyl and the de facto moratorium for atomic energy stations in Switzerland should not lead to the extension of hydraulic power plants and the sacrifice of further natural



amenities. The path must be sought with other alternatives».



Alexander Euler (SP, BS)

«Even with us, a major atomic disaster can happen at any time.

The safety of containment is very deceptive, and adequate only in cases of minor breakdown. The people must therefore fight against atom power plants».

cial-Democratic Party (SP), the Progressive Organization of Switzerland (Poch) and the Landesring (LdU party, or alliance of independents), the lesson is clear: opt out of the use of nuclear energy – and that as quickly as possible.

The representatives of the *Liberal-Radicals* (FDP), the *Christian-Democratic People's Party* (CVP) and the *Swiss People's Party* (SVP) expressed themselves more coolly, yet from the ranks of these parties, too, was the call for a future without atomic energy to be heard here and there.

One thing is sure: there is at present no majority in the Swiss parliament for any immediate switching off of local nuclear power stations. In the aftermath of Chernobyl, however, the option of a withdrawal in the medium-term, on the Swedish pattern, has edged into the bounds of possibility. Before long, the Federal Council will submit a report to parliament on this question.

Towards the end of the debate on the aftermath of Chernobyl, in the parliament building, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* also believed it could make out a «whiff of two-fold satisfaction *à la Suedoise*»: satisfaction on the part of the nuclear antis because, for them, the banning of the hated energy source was becoming a distinct possibility; and satisfaction on the part of the nuclear energy champions who are convinced that «getting out» will never be achieved anyway.

Postponement of Kaiseraugst?

Quite a different matter is whether, after the shock of Chernobyl, the construction of the disputed sixth Swiss nuclear power plant near Kaiseraugst is still to be seriously considered. Until the eventual granting of the building permit, i.e. until at least 1988/89, this project is already the subject of a general permit and, in the words of Energy Chief Schlumpf, falls

under a «*de facto* moratorium» anyway. Without any further ado, this can well end up in a «pause for thought» of unlimited duration – until the day the promoters of Kaiseraugst will have lost all interest in their project.

Further vote in view

Even if Chernobyl (like the media-dominating, «dying forests» of a year ago) should in turn soon be superseded by other worries, care has been taken that the theme of nuclear energy shall figure for years to come on the political agendas of the Confederation. At

Forty per cent nuclear power

Five nuclear power plants, with a total capacity of 3000 megawatts, are now in operation in Switzerland: Beznau I (since 1979), Mühleberg and Beznau II (1971), Gösgen (1979) and Leibstadt (1984). They supply 40 per cent of the power generated in our country.

Four further nuclear blocks are planned: the Kaiseraugst (Canton Aargau) and Graben (Berne) projects are ready for building; Verbois (Geneva) and Inwil (Lucerne) are at the planning stage.

the end of June the Social Democrats announced the launching of an *Initiative* for pulling out of nuclear energy. Also brewing is a moratorium initiative of the North-West Switzerland Action Committee against Nuclear Power Stations.

With all this it can be regarded as practically certain that in a few years' time it will come to a new vote on the use of atomic energy in Switzerland. Twice in the past the Swiss electorate gave the thumbs down to anti-nuclear initiatives but today no one dares to prophesy if it will decide likewise in the future.

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