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Not much agreement on Swiss energy policy

What happens after the 'pause for thought'?

Where does Switzerland stand on energy policy? What is its attitude to nuclear power, alternative energy sources and energy-saving measures? We take a glance at the moratorium, the Energy Law and 'Energy 2000'.

Even if the future of nuclear energy in Switzerland is extremely uncertain, one thing is sure: without the nuclear power stations today's global demand for electricity could not be covered. At present 44.5% of Switzerland's electricity volume comes from

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nuclear energy plants. It is true that on September 23, 1990, the people and cantons rejected the popular initiative 'For a gradual abandonment of nuclear energy', but the fate of this form of energy in Switzerland nevertheless seemed to be sealed. An unmistakable sign of this was the very costly cancellation of the controversial nuclear power plant projects of Kaiseraugst and Graben.

The ten-year moratorium

The initiative in favour of a moratorium, which was accepted at the same time as the other was rejected, has not so far led to the hoped-for miracle solution to the energy policy problem. Mainly because of the recession which has now lasted for six years and the consequent slower growth in electricity demand, the 'pause for thought' resulting from the moratorium initiative has not yet endangered electricity supply. Capacity should still be sufficient for some time to come, although current does have to be imported in winter. In 1996, electricity consumption increased by only 1.7%, as against 2.1% the year before. These are still fairly low growth rates, which confirm the trend of the last few years.

This means that, since strong growth in electricity demand is not expected at the moment and no electricity supplier is likely to attempt another nuclear energy adventure, our country will have

to content itself with its existing nuclear power stations. In addition, Switzerland will continue its efforts to save energy, and there is little doubt that the increased readiness to do this is also a service rendered by the moratorium.

The Energy Law

Today, economising is being given top priority on the energy front. This is also a result of the referendums of September 23, 1990, a date which was of cardinal importance in the history of Swiss energy policy. It was on that day that the Swiss people and cantons not only rejected abandonment of nuclear energy while accepting the moratorium, but also approved the insertion of an energy article into the constitution, which was intended to invest the period of the moratorium with a number of functions. It required the implementation of measures to promote rational and environment-friendly energy use and supply.

Almost seven years after the article was accepted, the National Council has been debating in its 1997 summer session the Energy Law to replace the Energy Use Decree which is due to run out at the end of 1998. The latter was passed with the purpose of putting the voters' decision into practice more quickly than would have been possible with a law. The debate in the National Council has once more brought into the light of day the stalemate situation which exists in Switzerland on energy policy. The red-green bloc – which is notoriously hostile to atomic energy – voted for stricter environmental conditions and more intensive savings efforts, while the centre-right wanted fewer regulations and more room for the free play of market forces.

A sanctimonious tax demand

Any enthusiasm in the National Council for the Energy Law put before it was

kept within very narrow limits. The draft bill was only just accepted, with 76 votes against 60. In doing so the National Council was agreeing to a new energy tax designed to raise a billion Swiss francs a year to promote renewable energy sources and rational use of energy – although the actual amount remains controversial. The tax idea, which as expected was received with loud applause by the red-green camp, was launched by Biene Liberal Democrat National Councillor Marc Suter. He proposed that a duty of 0.6 centimes per kilowatt hour should be levied on crude oil, gas, coal and uranium.

Putting this idea into practice will require more government red tape and an increase in the price of petrol. But we

are already facing a possible rise in the price of petrol to pay for the new trans-Alpine railways (provided agreement is ever forthcoming to put this project into practice). So it can be predicted even now that this latest tax variant will in the end founder on the rock of economic and social policy considerations.

Save? Yes, but...

There really are no valid arguments against efficient and careful use of energy. But in times of very weak or zero growth the economy must be able to keep on functioning. With its 'Energy 2000' action programme, the Federal Council provided an appropriate follow-up to the referendums of September 1990 and at the same time set the points



Hydro-electric power continues to play a major role in Swiss energy production: Punt dal Gall reservoir in the Engadine. (Photo: MNP)

for energy policy right through the 1990s. Its intention was to promote a series of energy-saving measures, but in the meantime their potential has been virtually exhausted. Whether they like it or not, the greens and the opponents of nuclear energy have to admit that the moratorium period is drawing to an end without their having been able to show any valid alternative to nuclear energy (which was clear to many from the outset).

The 'Energy 2000' action programme is directed mainly towards promoting renewable sources of energy and stabilising electricity consumption, but it also contains provisions for a 10% increase in the capacity of the five existing Swiss nuclear power plants (Beznau I and II, Mühleberg, Gösigen and Leibstadt) and the expansion of a number of hydro-electric plants. But putting these points in the programme into practice is coming up against very stiff resistance from precisely those groups which are against atomic energy, against any new power stations and against any other interference with the environment.

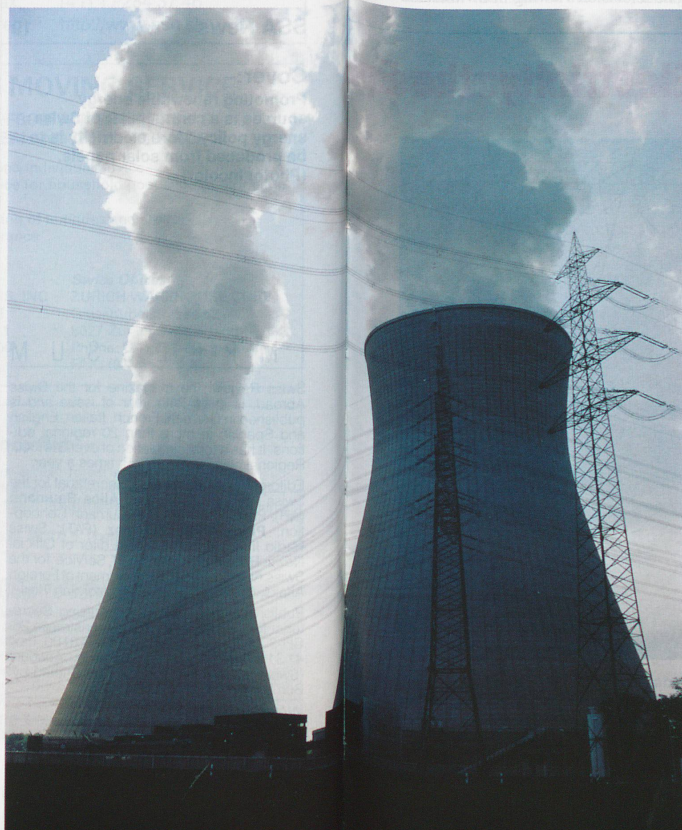
Does this mean there is no way out? That seems indeed to be the case, at least until the time comes when measures are suddenly urgently necessary. Then we shall have to fall back on those

very oil and gas power stations which environmentalists have always condemned as making ecological nonsense. A campaign of obstruction is also being waged on the question of storing radioactive wastes. Environmental groups never tire of criticising the atomic industry for the fact that it has still not found a suitable site for storing its wastes. But at the same time every possible project for solving this problem is torpedoed by the very same groups – true to the motto: 'A solution must be found, but please not outside our front door'.

The energy policy tomahawk may have been buried, but only for the moment. The fronts are just as inflexible as they ever were. One thing can be predicted today with certainty: that no one will ever dare to demand the construction of new nuclear power plants – not even the nuclear energy promoters themselves who abandoned the projects of Kaiseraugst (with a loss of Sfr. 350 million) and Graben (with a loss of Sfr. 227 million).

In the meantime the Swiss energy sky is becoming greyer and greyer, and there is a feeling of uneasiness about the thought, which is not in fact as unrealistic as one might think, that our partners could one day turn the electricity tap off.

More than 40% of Switzerland's electricity needs are covered by nuclear power plants. But the future of this type of energy production is in the balance. (Photo: Incolor)



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