

# **THE ENERGY DEBATE IN FRANCE**

## **A Discussion Focused on Nuclear Power**

A Brief Overview  
of Government and Political Party Statements and Policy Implementation  
since March 1997

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France has placed itself in a very peculiar, unprecedented situation regarding its energy policy, for it is now at the same time:

- part of a minority of countries in the world that have developed to a great extent a nuclear industry for the production of electricity – and indeed France has gone further than any country in that direction, reaching an almost 80% share of nuclear energy in the national production of electricity (second world-wide behind Lithuania) and a total 62,4 GWe installed capacity of nuclear power plants (second behind the United-States);

- part of a minority of countries among democratic nations that is governed by a coalition including strong opponents to the use of nuclear energy for the production of electricity – with participation of the French main Green Party (called Les Verts) in the Government.

This produces important changes, if not yet in all decisions over French energy policy, at least in the declarations of the different players and the orientations of the political and public debates. Also some policy implementation measures have had profound impact on the long term nuclear policy making (for example the decision to shut down the world's only industrial size fast breeder reactor, the Superphénix at Creys-Malville).

### **1. A turning point in the political context**

This present context is the result of the general elections in June 1997, when the left-wing parties won these elections called by right-wing French President Jacques Chirac (that had dissolved the Assemblée nationale). Socialist Party (PS) leader Lionel Jospin was designated French Prime Minister and formed a Government where the other contributors of the electoral victory joined in (namely the Communist Party (PC), the Green Party and the Mouvement des Citoyens (MDC), a satellite of the PS). This coalition is referred to as "majorité plurielle" (plural majority), which is not just another fashionable name but describes the fact that, on many subjects, some of them hot issues, there are strong differences between the components of the majority.

Among those subjects, and one of the more strongly discussed, is the energy policy. It is the first time since the beginning of the nuclear programme (in the late 40s for the first steps, and in the early 70s for the launch of the "tout nucléaire" – all nuclear – strategy) that a party opposed to this policy enters the Government. The parliamentary and government

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<sup>1</sup> WISE-Paris is the World Information Service on Energy in Paris. WISE-Paris is entirely independent of other organisations operating under the name of WISE. An original organisational link between organisations in various countries, WISE-International in Amsterdam, has been legally dissolved.

"consensus" in France on nuclear choices, based on the strong attachment to a principle of energy independence supposedly reached through development of nuclear energy, is thus broken : although it has lost, slowly but surely, support in public opinion (as latest opinion polls show), the nuclear programme had never been really discussed on the political scene at institutional level, as a result of a general agreement of the traditional "ruling parties" (the gaullist party Rassemblement pour la République (RPR) and the Union pour la Démocratie Française (UDF) for the right wing, PS and PCF for the left wing).

The support and participation of the Green Party in the Government were not without conditions. On the contrary, the alliance between the PS and the Verts was based on a pre-electoral agreement that enumerated very precisely what measures should be taken by a Government with Green participation. Among the main themes was the nuclear question, which the Greens put out as one possible cause of a breaking the alliance, should the Government not respect some of the points listed below – and also some that are not, like the creation of a laboratory site for research on deep-ground storage of nuclear waste, that the Greens totally refuse (preferring the concept of surface or subsurface intermediate storage):

- Excerpt from the "Verts-PS" [Greens-Socialist Party] Joint Political Declaration, in March 1997, Prior to the Legislative Elections:

“ Reorient the energy policy in establishing a moratorium on the construction of nuclear reactors and on the fabrication of MOX [plutonium fuel] until 2010, while strongly increasing the financing for energy efficiency and for renewable energies. This policy will notably be achieved through the closure of Superphénix, the reversibility of the storage of nuclear waste re-balancing the research budgets in a real application of the Bataille Act [passed in 1991, concerning research for solutions for management of nuclear waste]. Reprocessing at La Hague will be reviewed, which implies additional monitoring of the site and a new research effort; furthermore, no new reprocessing contract will be signed. An energy act will be voted on at the latest in 2005. ”

The decision of Lionel Jospin to place ecologist leader Dominique Voynet at the head of a Ministry of National Development and Environment ("Ministère de l'Aménagement du Territoire et de l'Environnement" or MATE) more influential than any Ministry of Environment before is thus a strong symbol, and will probably reveal in the coming months or years to be a watershed in French energy politics, as the present paper tries to show.

## 2. Changes in decisions over energy policy

Many observers of the French energy policy analyse the effect of the arrival of a Green Environment Minister on the only ground of the decisions taken by the Government. This is of course important, as there is no point in being in office for doing nothing.

The evaluation of the decisions about energy policy in the last 18 months is not easy, though the balance sheet is quite clear. Key decisions taken in that period on nuclear and energy matters have been made public on three occasions: the general policy declaration of Prime minister Lionel Jospin in June 1997, and two interministerial committees in February and December 1998.

- Excerpt from The General Policy Declaration of Prime Minister Lionel Jospin before the National Assembly, Thursday 19 June 1997

“ In the field of high technology, where sometimes great risks are involved, I wish for inspection measures to not be confused [or merged] with those which concern operation. If the nuclear industry is an important asset for our country, it must not exempt itself from

democratic rules, nor pursue projects of excessive cost and uncertain success: this is why the fast-breeder reactor which is called "Superphénix" is to be abandoned. "

This was nothing more than the translation of electoral promises from the PS in answer to the ecologist pressure (an electoral agreement had been signed between the PS and the Verts, which is detailed below). A general policy declaration can not go into details on every subject. Neither can it tackle every theme and needs a selection of priorities.

It is thus interesting to note that from the very beginning Prime Minister Jospin put an emphasis on nuclear matters, with a particular concern on transparency and democracy, which was one of the directing lines of his general policy speech.

In this context, the closure and decision to shut down the only industrial size fast-breeder reactor, Superphénix, (a decision long asked for by environmental groups and considered as not acceptable by industry) can be seen as a strong sign given both to reassure his ecologist allies and to warn the industry of a new situation, where politics can go against the will of the nuclear lobby.

- Excerpt from Nuclear Policy and Energy Diversification: Governmental Orientations, Prime Minister Press Service, 2 February 1998

" [Nuclear energy] has reached maturity today. The time period of intensive construction is now terminated and no large replacement programme is envisaged before 2010. However, [nuclear energy] has now to deal with an increase of the stocks of nuclear waste. This pause-period must be used to prepare for the 2010 time-line and enable France to reinforce its energy choice capability. Analysis and studies should be carried out in order to enlarge the range of energy choices and to give each one of them all of its necessary assets.

Economic efficiency and the application of the precaution principle imply that France diversifies its energy resources. The government is therefore decided to strongly and with determination re-launch the rational use of energy and the development of renewable energies, which during the last years and the counter-oil-crisis were not considered a national priority. "

" In the nuclear field, this policy will attach great importance to the following issues at stake: the solution to the problems of the backend of the fuel cycle, which means radioactive waste and spent fuel, the quality and transparency in the control of this industry, the independence and pluralism of expertise, and last the international co-operation. "

This is an important step, as it is the first time ever since the large nuclear power programme was launched in 1974 that such a position is expressed at the Prime Minister level. The 2010 time-line referred to corresponds to the period when the bulk of the power plants (a total of 58 PWRs were put into operation between 1977 and 1999) will start to reach the end of its economic life time and will have to be replaced, either by new nuclear plants or by other means of production for electricity or by energy savings.

This declaration of governmental orientations on nuclear policy was also the occasion of confirming the decision of closing Superphénix, which provoked angry or bitter comments in both majority (by some of the socialists, and the MDC, but above all by the PCF) and opposition. The previous Secretary of State for Industry, Franck Borotra (RPR) understood very well the importance of this decision when he stated in the National Assembly: " *You have, for the first time ever, broken the nuclear policy of France* ", accusing the Government of " *closing Superphénix for political reasons only* ", an argument that has been used by many players opposed to that decision, and shows actually how much this situation, where a Prime Minister doesn't follow the industry's experts good advice, was unusual.

This was undoubtedly a victory for environmentalists which caused a great deception even to some members of the Socialist Party: Christian Bataille, a socialist MP that is regarded as the father of the French policy on the problem of long-lived nuclear waste (he wrote the 1991

bill about research on radioactive waste management) regretted at that time that “ the Government policy is more and more of anti-nuclear inspiration without saying it ”.

But apart from that announcement, this declaration is more of promises than operational decisions:

- on diversification, a financial effort is engaged on renewable energies but it stays small if compared to the budgets spent on nuclear R&D. The switching to natural gas instead of more polluting fossil fuels will be encouraged, as well as cogeneration. And “ this is how France will fulfil its Kyoto conference commitments while stabilising nuclear energy ”.

- the closure of Superphénix is presented as problematic for future studies on transmutation in fast-breeders. Thus the Government proposes to restart, after examination by the safety authority, the prototype Phénix, of smaller size than Superphénix but also older to carry on those experiments – although this measure was opposed by environmentalists and Dominique Voynet.

- the Government promises it will “ propose some legal initiative on the mode of control and transparency in the nuclear field, based on the creation of an independent authority ”. The socialist MP Le Déaut is commissioned to propose such solutions before the 31 of July 1998.

No important decisions have been taken between February and December 1998: confronted with the differences of view between its members, the Government seems to defer decisions on nuclear matters. But the pressure from both anti-nuclear and nuclear lobbyists gets stronger all the time, urging for decisions. Some events have, over that period, contributed to keep the energy policy high on the agenda:

- First of all, the scandal on spent fuel transport contaminations, that puts a emphasis on the problem of transparency and control, in May and June 1998 – and provides strong evidence for the Le Déaut report, published 7 July 1998.

- Then, in October 1998, the Commissariat General au Plan, a sort of government planning commission, publishes an important prospective report on energy in France in 2010-2020, which asserts that on one hand, a decrease (fast or slow according to market conditions) of nuclear share in French electricity production is most probable and, on the other hand, that an increase of French energy consumption is inevitable. As a result, France could not, according to the report, respect its Kyoto commitments.

- Later in October 1998, the SPD-Grünen coalition wins the general elections in Germany, which opens the prospect for a radically different energy policy in that country.

On 9 December 1998, the Government issues an unprecedented nine-page statement on various aspects of the nuclear power programme and its management.

- Excerpt of Joint-Ministry Declaration - 9 December 1998  
(Comité interministériel - Questions nucléaires, Relevé de conclusions)  
“ The major lines of the Government's policy are the following:
  - the choice of nuclear energy will be pursued as major component of the national electricity supply; at the same time, it is necessary to prepare a real diversification of the resources, since the share of nuclear power is due to diminish as compared to current levels;
  - this choice requires a strong research effort in order to respond to the questions left open concerning the nuclear fuel cycle, and particularly those related to waste;
  - this choice must be, at all levels, characterised by the precaution principle;
  - this choice must be based on the long-lasting credibility of the system in the eyes of our fellow citizens; to reach this, the mode of control and transparency must evolve in all aspects regarding safety and health impact of the installations. ”

The declaration of 9 December 1998 reflects the pressure put by pro- and anti-nuclear forces on the Government: there are more decisions than in February 1998, and each one is a sign or a satisfaction given to either one or the other side. The decisions taken on 9 December relate in majority to the organisation and research concerning the management of nuclear waste on the one hand - in particular with the decision on the creation of an underground geological storage laboratory at Bures in the Meuse department - and organisation of safety and regulatory authorities which are responsible for nuclear issues - with the renewal of the promise on a nuclear law on control and transparency, this time with a dead-line: it should be presented to the Parliament during the first semester of 1999.

### 3. Opening the debate at higher political level

It is very difficult to draw a conclusion on the performance of 18 months of this Government's energy policy. It all depends, of course, on the point of view of the observer. The Environment Minister has not gained significant progress on some of the issues important to environmentalists like the reprocessing/MOX policy or the development of renewable energies and energy efficiency. But Madame Voynet sometimes suggests to take it the other way round: to measure what she has gained regarding environmental goals, one has just to think of what would have been lost if she wasn't there...

The important change is not on the decision level, but just below: for the first time, the interests of industry and of the protection of environment and populations are really discussed between the Ministry of Industry, actually part of a Super Ministry covering economy, finance and industry (Ministère de l'Economie, des Finances et de l'Industrie or MEFI) and the MATE.

Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the Minister for economy, finance and industry and Christian Pierret, the Secretary of State for industry, are members of the PS and favourable, like all their predecessors, to nuclear energy – and even quite close to nuclear industry interests. But the traditional practice of *fait accompli* from those Ministries towards the Ministry of environment is no longer in current use.

This is confirmed by André-Claude Lacoste, a privileged witness as head of the DSIN (Direction de la sûreté des installations nucléaires), the safety authority which is under the double responsibility of the Ministry for industry and the MATE, of Christian Pierret and Dominique Voynet. He recently said that “ *things are not always easy, but this system, where each minister expresses his sensitivity and the Prime minister arbitrates, guarantees that there is a real debate on a certain amount of subjects* ”<sup>2</sup>.

The accusation against the Government of having decided the closure of Superphénix for “political reasons”, coming from a previous minister for industry, is very significant: it shows that it was not the practice so far that a political debate decides on nuclear matters, but only an experts debate.

The great innovation brought by Lionel Jospin could be there. Because the concerned ministers, on that subject, have opposed views the result is poor: the Prime minister has to take political decisions on which ministry, of MEFI or MATE he favours on one point or the other, and to try to find in this exercise a good balance and to reach a good compromise. Therefore the outcome is a "mild" policy trying not to upset either of the sides. And this is how the ministers Dominique Strauss-Kahn and Dominique Voynet can be both right when they say, in interviews preceding or following the February interministerial committee, respectively that “ *the nuclear policy is not at all questioned* ” and that “ *the all-nuclear policy is past* ”.

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<sup>2</sup> Press Conference for the publication of the annual report of the DSIN, 16 March 1999

#### 4. The extension of the debate to the whole political sector

It would be very difficult, and it would exceed the framework of the present paper, to detail the entire political debate in France on energy and nuclear policies over the last year and a half. There has been too much to sum up in a few pages, and in a way this is the important point: the opening of political debate at government level, and the fact that differences about nuclear policy were not a taboo subject anymore have led on to the opening of serious discussions at various political levels, including the parliamentary and the party levels. The conspicuous expression by a minister of opinions unfavourable to nuclear energy without provoking any governmental crisis is an encouragement to politicians in traditional ruling parties for trying to find out about the energy policy they (or their party) defend.

Two recent examples perfectly illustrate that point.

- The PS National Secretary for environment, Géraud Guibert, presented on 15 January 1999 a report that is a strategic document on the socialist party energy policy. This text is very interesting because it is, globally, more close to the environmentalist views than the PS has ever been on that subject (see excerpts below). The text goes much further than the Government wording on nuclear energy being not more the only axis of French energy policy but staying the main pillar of a diversification policy. It takes as a fact that nuclear energy is there, as the main production capacity for electricity, for at least 10 or 20 years to come, considering the limits of the economic life time of nuclear power plants. It does not attempt to discuss what choices are needed now but, rather, how to prepare the choices of the 2010 decade so that nuclear energy won't still appear as the only solution just because the nation won't have prepared for the others. And, even if he does not say so explicitly, Géraud Guibert seems to think that if we develop other solutions, then nuclear energy won't appear as the best one when the time to choose will come. It is thus a serious inflexion of the PS position on energy policy, which we'll see over the next months if it is developed by socialists members of the Parliament or the Government.

- **Excerpts of "Energy Policy of France: the Choice of the Socialists"**  
**Géraud Guibert, National Secretary for Environment of the Socialist Party**

*" The debate on energy is, we have seen, largely insufficient in our country. Accomplished facts, implicit choices not clearly admitted, energy solutions decided behind the closed doors of the administration and of ministerial antechambers, made the rules too often in the past. While Parliament currently looks in detail each year at the budget of each ministry, an investment of close to 800 billion French Francs was decided in the 1970s for the nuclear power programme without Parliament even being consulted.*

*Absolute priority must be given to energy efficiency and to research concerning energy efficiency.*

*For a country like ours without natural resources, and as long as competitiveness differences [between different energy solutions] are small, resources must be a central pillar of our policy.*

*For today, our nuclear power plants, which are globally largely amortised, have operating costs which are much lower than gas powered electricity generating plants, and there would be no sense in deciding to put an end prematurely to their operation. Nuclear power will therefore stay in the next years an essential component of our energy supply. [...]*

*For the future, that is for the 2010 decade, the priority to energy efficiency that we propose should enable us to reduce the need to invest in new standard energy production plants, but*

*this need will evidently not disappear. Will nuclear power then be chosen? No one can decide with certainty, on neither yes or no.*

*Transparency and democracy are required for the future of nuclear power.*

*The back-end of the nuclear fuel cycle is today evidently the weak-point of this energy supply.*

*There is currently no satisfying technical solution to provide a solution to the waste problem. ”*

• On 21 January 1999, a debate was organised at the National Assembly to discuss the Government energy policy. Of course, this should not be such an event, but all political parties have been calling for this debate for many years and still it was not held. The Government did not take any risk, limiting the discussion on its declaration of energy policy to half a day, and refusing to submit it to a parliamentary vote. But the analysis of the debate turns out to be very interesting.

Of course, a change in Government won't change the whole of the MPs' mind, so a great majority of the speakers gave support to the nuclear policy, which was for obvious reasons central in the debate: among 23 orators, only 2 did not say a single word about nuclear energy. The 21 others can be classified in 17 favourable to nuclear energy, 2 openly against it and 2 that have shown themselves doubtful.

The first interesting fact is that the pro-nuclear speakers did not, in general, talk only about nuclear energy but also pointed out the need for renewable energies, or cleaner gas and coal technologies, or cogeneration, and also for energy efficiency and demand side management.

The second interesting point is simply that figure of 4 (2+2) or 17% who did not speak in favour of nuclear energy: maybe there would have been none before the June 1997 elections...

The third point is that only one of them, Guy Hascoët, is a member of the Green Party. Two of the critical MPs spoke on behalf of the PS: the first one, François Dosé, is a PS member and also the representative in the National Assembly of the area of Bures (the site for the deep-underground laboratory); the second one is Michèle Rivasi, previously president of the independent and critical radiation laboratory Crie-Rad, not a PS member but elected with its support. The last one, François Goulard, is member of the parliamentary opposition, and his speech was in a way a very good summary of the whole debate. He explained that he had always been favourable to nuclear energy because he thought it was a safe way of producing electricity at low price and it gave France energy independence, but was, especially after the decision of Germany to give up nuclear energy, very aware of the fact that people outside France had a different opinion, and that he was now doubtful because “ *it is very rare, that one is right against all the others* ”.

It is interesting to see that public opinion seems also to move from a tagging-along attitude in favour of nuclear power to a more reflective attitude which gives a balanced share in the population: for instance, according to a BVA poll in January 1997, 10% of people wanted the construction of new nuclear power plants, 70% just wanted the existing plants to stay in operation and 15% wanted their shut-down (5% had no opinion). In an IFOP poll for the VSD news magazine (conducted on 21 and 22 of January 1999, at the same time as the debate in French Assembly), 51% of people were rather favourable or very favourable to a phase out of nuclear power in France, while 39% were of the opposite opinion (and 10% without opinion).

The only political critique on nuclear energy from politicians has for a long time been the criticism of secrecy and lack of democratic control over this industry. Many agreed that nuclear energy would be good for France and that the technical discussion on industrial decisions had not to become a political one.

The novelty introduced by the participation of environmentalists in the Government and the public positions of the Minister for Environment is that the call for transparency is not enough anymore. Politics, and public opinion, ask today more and more for a real political debate on technical options for the profound reform of French energy policy and for concrete policy implementation.

The reaction of nuclear lobbyists, or politicians traditionally close to the nuclear industry, is to increase the pressure on the Government, particularly on the future of the EPR (European Pressurised Water Reactor) project. This is meant to be the next generation of French nuclear reactors and the industry urges to start now the construction of a prototype to be ready when the time comes to replace operating plants, and many politicians ask the Government to take a decision in the current year to authorise the construction of a prototype.

Dominique Voynet has made it very clear that such a decision from the Government would be a cause for her immediate resignation. The year that comes will thus give the opportunity to check if Lionel Jospin maintains his policy of opening the debate on energy or if the pressure of the nuclear industry is strong enough to close this door that has just open.