Europe's nuclear debate (1)

Austria: a case study

Helmut Hirsch and **Helga Nowotny** assess
Austria's nuclear energy information campaign

NUCLEAR energy has become a topic of interest in Austria much later than in other countries, so her politicians and scientists have been able to study the development of the issue for some time. It has also come at a time of social stability, when even a small disturbance would not go unnoticed. This, and the manner in which the authorities control and institutionalise conflicts, help to make Austria an interesting case-study. For unlike the experience of other western countries, Austria's nationwide nuclear debate was initiated by the government. It organised the *Informationskampagne Kernenergie* (nuclear energy information campaign), and from being a topic important only to a few environmentalists and dwellers near proposed reactor sites, the subject became a national concern drawing more and more citizens into action groups.

The first steps were taken in July 1975. The Federal Chancellor's Office was responsible for the organisation, and a committee of civil servants, chaired by the head of the Energy Section of the Ministry for Trade, Commerce and Industry, Dr W. Frank, took over the scientific preparation. An exhaustive catalogue of questions was compiled, divided into well-defined subtopics embracing economy, safety, environmental and biomedical questions. In accordance with frequent practice and to avoid suspicions of manipulation, the cooperation of nuclear energy critics was sought, among them the Austrian Nobel-prize winner Professor Konrad Lorenz, and Doz. B. Lötsch, the head of the Viennese Ludwig Boltzmann-Institute for Environmental Sciences.

Each of the subtopics was to be dealt with by a group of experts, consisting of critics and promoters of nuclear energy in equal numbers (about three of each). This pro–con classification later proved to be an over-simplification: many scientists don't fit into either category, many more belong clearly to one side but refuse to admit it. Preliminary discussions would clarify as many points as possible, while the open problems would be left for the public debates. Finally, a report was to be produced containing relevant information, answers to questions on which consensus was reached and recommendations for further research. Although the organisers believed scientific controversies arose simply because there was not enough data (unless they concerned an issue that wasn't a real scientific problem), this later proved a rather naive conception as controversies also exist about which data can be regarded as relevant and about the appropriate framework for their interpretation.

Votava

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Chancellor Kreisky: his office organised campaign

Emphasis on independence

Strong emphasis was placed on the independence of the experts. People employed by electrical utilities, the nuclear industry, or concerned with the licensing of nuclear power plants participated only in internal debates as consultants. Civil servants were also excluded as experts from the various ministries because they would have to contribute in subsequent parliamentary debates. Thus, the government could remain non-committal, not being responsible for what independent experts choose to say or write. For the same reason, politicians from the governing Socialist Party participated little; their frequent absence from the debate was often criticised.

Promoters of nuclear energy felt that the campaign would emphasise the disagreement between experts and only increase public fear and suspicion. But most critics failed to appreciate the genuine attempt to avoid the errors made in other European countries. Hence the emphasis on sub-groups working on different topics—too often discussions had remained superficial and disorganised; and the attempt to balance the expert groups between pro and con—too often 'information' had proved to be only state-sponsored propaganda.

The government took the final decision to initiate the campaign on 17 February 1976. As there were ten subtopics, ten moderators for the expert-groups, mostly university professors, were selected by Dr Frank. As every expert has a personal opinion or a professional bias on the subject, it was impossible to choose strictly neutral moderators. Nuclear physicists and economists specialising in energy problems tended to be pro-nuclear, whereas the rest were critical or at least suspicious. Most felt ill at ease in their positions.

The internal debates, organised and conducted by the moderators, started in June 1976. No questions were excluded from the public debate because it was impossible to define clearly solved and unsolved problems.

To prepare the public, the Federal Press Service issued a booklet providing basic information, *Nuclear Energy—A Problem of Our Time*. Although controversial issues were reserved for the subsequent debates, disagreement among the authors (mainly the moderators) was considerable and many passages were tentative and non-committal. Nevertheless, both critics and promoters of nuclear energy voiced negative and positive opinions: one group of critics requested that all copies of the booklet be destroyed, while another wanted 2,000 copies for local distribution and complained about the small number printed (15,000).

The experts and organisers, at least the pro-nuclear ones, imagined that the public would listen eagerly and trustingly to the specialists' lectures in spite of strong fears about nuclear energy. The majority of anti-nuclear experts saw the audience as a concerned population with legitimate claims. The possibility of changes in the concept of the campaign as a result of effective, well-organised public action was ignored by the organisers as impossible to incorporate within the chosen framework. This indicated little flexibility in the organisation and an unwillingness to accept active public participation.

The main features of public reaction to the campaign became evident during the first public discussion in Vienna on 14 October 1976. There was strong resentment at the idea of listening passively to a panel discussion and only being allowed to submit factual questions in written form; the public demanded open discussion and it soon became apparent that the rules would be impossible to enforce. Massive distrust was expressed in the campaign: there was some surprise in the first debate when it became apparent that three of the panel experts were nuclear energy critics as opposed to mere propagandists.

Lack of consideration for the political viewpoint was another source

of provocation to the public: while general problems concerning nuclear power were being discussed, Austria's first plant was nearing completion. The decision to build had been taken long ago and the construction proceeded throughout the campaign. Pressure was exerted to stop the plant going into operation and a resolution was passed to this end. Finally, the concept of having separate topics for each evening, in different towns, was criticised; although the theme of the first, general social and economic problems, was sufficiently broad, some of the subsequent ones were of little interest to the public which was anxious to discuss the more crucial issues.

In spite of the criticisms expressed during the first debate, plans for the next discussion in Linz remained unaltered; it was to be even more strictly controlled from the platform. The reaction was especially vehement, as the topic of the evening, energy policy, did not seem relevant to the people living near the proposed site of the second nuclear power plant. In addition, no outspoken critic was among the panel. Consequently, with almost unanimous consent, about fifty organised critics took over the panel and continued the meeting with their own chairman.

To reduce dissatisfaction with the division into different topics, it was decided to reinforce the panels with 'consultants', mainly experts in the biological and medical fields, who could be called upon if necessary. The next four debates proceeded uneventfully, even when two of the panels, dealing with economic problems, showed a strong pro-nuclear bias. The public discussions became less rigidly controlled and organisers and chairmen held preparatory talks with local opposition groups before each meeting, giving the latter the right to read longer statements or resolutions if they respected the rules of the debate.

The precarious balance achieved by these conciliatory measures broke at the seventh debate, in Vienna, on 27 January 1977. The hall could not seat all the people who arrived but after massive pressure short of violence, everyone was finally allowed in. The first panel statement, made in a provokingly patronising way by a promoter of nuclear energy, was halted by interruptions and a recognised critic among the panelists elected a new chairman. Thereafter, the discussion concentrated on how to stop the construction of Austria's first nuclear power plant.

The following two meetings, held in small provincial towns, were less dominated by the critics; these were comparatively peaceful, although the main criticisms were upheld. The final debate in Vienna, due on 24 March, will probably be controlled entirely by the opponents of nuclear power.

Coverage of the campaign by the mass media has been poor, being limited to superficial accounts of the arguments presented by the experts or the more spectacular actions of the protesters. Opponents have developed the theory that the government is deliberately hindering publicity in order to avoid raising public concern. Although radio and television are not state-controlled, it is indeed debatable whether sufficient efforts have been made to ensure adequate coverage.

At present, plans for the second phase of the campaign are in progress. Representatives of opposition groups, electrical utilities, the nuclear industry, as well as employers' and employees' organisations, will be invited to four symposia. These, to be held in May and June 1977, will be devoted to a discussion of the reports compiled by the ten expert groups. The results, together with a summary provided by the government, will be submitted to parliament, to serve as background for a subsequent decision on nuclear energy, and then published.

From a preliminary evaluation, certain points emerge:

- The organisers exercised considerable control, through their choice of experts, on the political credibility of the debate. But they had no influence over public reaction.
- Considerable differences emerged between public and internal debates. While the latter usually took place in a friendly atmosphere in which disagreements were respected by colleagues, opponents and proponents were extremely conscious of their respective roles in the public debates.
- The public was highly distrustful of expert panels set up by the authorities. There were accusations that experts were being paid by the nuclear lobby and that the government was staging a mere puppet show with political decisions having already been taken behind closed doors.
- The public reaction manifested 'scientific populism' and resentment of establishment science. Dissenting scientists quickly became celebrated as heroes. Although opposition groups sometimes displayed a moving willingness to delve into scientific details, anything outside their pre-conceived notions was unacceptable to them. What they demanded was a 'people's science'—a body of knowledge controllable by them.
- Coverage by the mass media was mostly determined by factors unrelated to the information campaign. It tended to dismiss the protest movement as extremist or based on irrational fears; opposition newspapers automatically wrote in a negative way about the campaign. Only in Vorarlberg, where the population had been made aware by opposition to a planned Swiss reactor close to the border, did the local movement receive strong press support.
- The authorities had not considered the political context sufficiently: the public was expected to consist of 'neutral citizens' only, to whom information would be offered as a public service. This neutral citizen, however, either doesn't exist, or is not sufficiently interested to attend the meetings. □

Traditionally, a large percentage of Austria's electricity requirement has been met by hydropower. The growing energy demands of the country's economy, however, finally led it to consider the nuclear option. In 1971 construction of the first nuclear power station began near Zwentendorf in Lower Austria. It is being built by the West Germany company Kraftwerke Union, although Austrian firms supply know-how and a considerable number of components. The company owning it is half state-owned and half-owned by the utilities in the federal provinces. The station should be supplying electricity to the grid by March 1978.

Public concern grew when talk began of a greater commitment to nuclear energy. The construction of a 1,300 MW plant was originally scheduled to begin in 1976; another was planned for the early 1980s. In the spring of 1975, groups of concerned citizens in Upper Austria —near the proposed site of the second plant—collected over 60,000 signatures in a local petition against the plans.

With nuclear energy a much debated issue in other countries and producing violent confrontations, with the recession (felt only slightly in Austria) reducing the need for greater electricity generating capacity, and with an election planned for the autumn of 1975 creating additional pressure on the government, all decisions concerning future commitments to nuclear power were postponed. Work on the planning of the second and third plants was suspended; construction of only the first plant proceeded normally. Later the government declared that the alternative to nuclear power would be increased use of (mainly imported) fossil fuels or imported electricity. In February 1977, responding to questions submitted by the opposition in parliament, the government pointed out that this alternative was economically feasible, although parliament would have to decide whether it was desirable. This decision is expected at the end of 1977. Of the three parties represented in the Austrian parliament, the governing Socialist Party is divided over the issue, but has a pro-nuclear bias, and the People's Party is pro-nuclear but highly critical of the way the government handles the problem: the smallest, the Liberal Party, is decidely anti-nuclear.

In the summer of 1976, the nuclear energy critics founded a nationwide federation outside existing parties incorporating eight local groups in all but one of the federal provinces. The number has since increased to at least twelve.