

JET

Stalling point

RIDING on the back of a busy day in Brussels last week when the Councils of Energy and Environment Ministers both met (see opposite), the controversial issue of the EEC's Joint European Torus (JET) fusion project blew up again, as it was always destined to do. JET itself has not yet blown up, and for many that is some comfort. But the possibility nevertheless remains, and the absence of a decision on a site for the project, which is and always has been the crucial issue, now symbolically represents all the current problems of cooperation that the EEC would dearly like to avoid.

The background is familiar. Of the original sites proposed for the project, four stood out: the EEC's research establishment at Ispra in Italy; Cadarache in France; Garching in Germany; and Culham in Britain. Italy held out for Ispra until its future was more or less guaranteed through judicious deployment of the EEC's joint research programme for 1977-80. France held out for Cadarache, with CERN as an alternative, until it could do so no longer—which was effectively until it could secure a better deal to present back home. That left Garching and Culham.

The character of that 'deal' is not so familiar. But it was crucial to the failure of the 29 March meeting of the Council of Research Ministers at which the whole matter was to have been finalised. No one talks about deals in the 'open' Community, so even the most popular theories are speculative. But basically the idea seemed to be that Britain would at last have the Community project it wanted by receiving JET, that the project director would be German, and that France's proposed management structure would be used. Agreement would then have been possible on a majority vote.

But something went wrong. The small countries, already apparently miffed at the failure to agree on farm prices earlier that week, objected to the ostensible collusion. The majority shifted and the arrangement, inasmuch as it existed at all, began to fold. Details of the proposed management structure, which apparently involved the creation of a JET board of managers with a degree of detachment from the European Commission, also became an issue, making a decision on the site seem pointless.

At the same time, however, final

approval was somewhat surprisingly given in a separate vote to the joint research programme. Until then the issue was inextricably linked to the matter of the JET site; now the link seemed broken. In fact it wasn't, because there was still the all-important matter of releasing the agreed funds for the programme. This Britain has since refused to do, maintaining that it got its fingers badly burned in March when, in the Energy Council meeting on the same day as the Research Council, its concessions on the Euratom loans scheme unexpectedly failed to yield agreement on a minimum safeguard price for oil. Agreement on that issue had been expected in turn to encourage the intended agreement involving JET and the research programme.

All this left the Community with a need both to finalise details about the management of JET and, as usual, to try to reach an understanding on the site before the next Research Council. Meetings of officials proceeded accordingly. But no meeting of the council was set for before the end of June because it was only then that Britain's chairmanship, by now under suspicion, was due to give way to Belgium's. That spelled trouble, because contracts on which the JET design team at Culham were working were also due to expire at the end of June.

Although the Commission was given the authority in March to extend the project beyond June, and presumably has whatever money it needs to do so (the team's salaries are in fact paid by their own home laboratories), a decision on the future of JET before the end of June could only come in a meeting of the Council of Foreign Ministers which was due this week, on 21 June, or next week, at the heads of government meeting on 29 June. Hence all the activity last week, even though JET was not the business of the Energy Council, nor, strictly speaking, the regular business of the foreign ministers or prime ministers.

The sudden burst was typical of the way the Community conducts its business. Guido Brunner, the Energy and Research Commissioner, on the day before the Energy Council, warned that the absence of a decision before the summer recess—at the Foreign Council or heads of government meeting, in other words—would amount to an abandonment of the

project. He was responding to a telegram received from the JET design team expressing concern over the problem; he had also reportedly received a telegram from Ispra staff complaining about the hold-up in research programme funds which they thought was threatening their jobs.

Then JET came up as a spin-off from the Energy Council when at a press conference afterwards the UK minister Dr Dickson Mabon reminded people of Britain's strong desire to have JET. A parliamentary question in the House of Commons later produced the answer that, although remaining differences had recently been narrowed, if discussion was still in progress by the end of June, "we hope the Commission will again extend the contracts of employment of the design team".

On top of this came allegations in the European Parliament, which were spurned by the UK official there, that Britain's hold-up of research funds amounted to blackmail. The official had admitted publicly that two separate issues were intimately tied together as a political package. But he assured listeners that there was enough money for the research centres to continue work and pay salaries until the autumn.

Then later last week came reports that behind-the-scenes contacts were under way between London, Brussels and Bonn involving third party mediation, perhaps from the next country to hold the chair, Belgium, in an effort to secure a solution before the end of the month.

That must be the fervent hope of all those who want to see the project survive. Yet it remains that the lack of trust Britain has felt over JET since the March débâcle is now almost fully reciprocated by other member states on this as well as other issues. Both sides now want impossible guarantees of a *quid pro quo*, and refuse to move until the other does.

Meanwhile a date for the next Research Council had at the end of last week still to be set. If nothing is achieved by the end of the month, then what is called an "orderly winding-down" of the project will begin. In other words, like the other European project, Dragon, which died last year in such ignominious fashion, JET too could be cancelled for lack of interest.

Chris Sherwell