The French 'nuclear war'

Les écologistes are gaining a voice in French politics. Alexandre Dorozynski outlines their growth

THE French government is currently faced with a political issue it would doubtless have preferred to keep out of the public forum: that of its "all out" nuclear power development programme and, more particularly, of the fast breeder Super-Phénix reactor at Malville, near Lyon. The issue has become political as the campaign preceding the nationwide legislative elections to be held in March next year has got underway. Polls indicate that the election may well give the Socialist-Communist coalition an edge in the National Assembly, and it now seems likely that the 'nuclear weapon' will be used in the forthcoming 'battle'.

Socialist leader François Mitterand has already suggested that a national referendum be held on the nuclear programme. And a loosely-knit group, termed somewhat vaguely and sometimes disparagingly as *les écologistes*, are beginning to represent a political power to be counted with. Under a programme termed *Écologie '78*, they are to be represented at the municipal elections next year. Seven ecological groups will put forward candidates.

Les écologistes first emerged as a political group in 1974 under the leadership of agronomist René Dumont, who received 1.34% of the votes cast during the presidential election that year. Since then, their numbers have increased rapidly: during the municipal elections earlier this year, they mustered an unexpected 10% of the votes. So far, they have refused to support any of the existing political parties, but if they decide to throw their weight one way or the other, they could well alter the balance between right and left.

But who are *les écologistes*? According to the Ministry of the Environment, created in 1971, there are nearly 15,000 ecological associations in France. They

include such groups as the National Federation for the Protection of Nature, created in 1968, now with a membership of about 100,000; the Association for the Rights of Pedestrians (15,000); the French Association for the Protection of Water (about 1,000); and smaller, regional and special interest groups such as the Friends of the Trees of the Loire (500) and the Committee against Atomic Pollution of La Hague (150). Some of these associations overlap, and total membership is probably no more than two million. The first associations were started with specific, sometimes narrow goals, but interest gradually grew to include more general issues concerning modern life; consumerism, means of production, housing, and so on.

Nuclear power concern

One of the major issues now concerning *les écologistes* is the nuclear power programme and the construction of Super-Phénix, which was the bone of contention of some 50,000 marchers who converged on the farming region of Malville, 40 miles from Lyon and 30 miles from Geneva on Sunday 31 July. They clashed with a few thousand police and a paratrooper unit in what has been called the first battle of the French 'nuclear war'. The battle had its casualties—about 100 wounded and one dead. The dead man, Vital Michalon, was a quiet, young teacher of physics and chemistry (and a reserve officer) whose death has been variously attributed to heart failure, to the explosion of a concussion grenade used by police, or to that of an amateurish explosive device put together by the less peaceful *manifestants*.

The 'march on Malville' might have been dismissed as the kind of incident likely to occur during a hot summer (even though the summer was cool and the marchers were soaked by rain) but public polls, in which Frenchmen participate eagerly, indicate a mounting popular concern which the government cannot dismiss. In 1974, three-quarters of representative samples of Frenchmen were "very much in favour of or rather in favour of" the development of nuclear energy. At the beginning of this year, the percentage in favour had fallen to 50%, while that against had risen from 17% to 41%.

A poll carried out for the weekly news magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* after the 'march on Malville' showed up the somewhat conflicting views of the French on the nuclear issue. Although nearly 70% considered an

Sorry, for copyright reasons some images on this page may not be available online

Popperfoto

Malville: the first battle

increase in energy consumption to be indispensable to the improvement of their way of life, nearly 50% would be "willing to change their consumption habits and way of life if this could stop the construction of nuclear power plants". A majority (56%) approved of Mitterand's suggestion for a referendum on nuclear power. Of those questioned who identified themselves with the Communist party, 76% approved of the proposed referendum, which Georges Marchais, the Communist leader, has since vigorously condemned.

It now seems impossible to keep the public debate from spreading, and politicians, right and left, may be called upon to take sides. The Ministry of the Environment is bound to go along with the government's pro-nuclear stand, especially as Michel d'Ornano (he is the one who lost the Paris mayoralty to Jacques Chirac), now Minister for Culture and the Environment, used to be, as Minister for Industry, one of the proponents of the "all nuclear" power plan. And the importance of the forthcoming debate has grown in the light of recent talk of a moratorium on the construction of new nuclear power plant in Germany.

So what do the ecologists really want? Few of them will deny that, in view of the poverty of French resources in oil and coal, and the built-in limitations to the development of hydro-electric power, some of France's energy should be nuclear. But most consider the intensive programme unreasonable, and the development of Super-Phénix risky. The government, on the other hand, views nuclear power as a means of stopping the outward flow of currency, and the fast breeder as a major trump to play in case of uranium scarcity in the future (and, also, as a potentially marketable technology).

Michel d'Ornano, environment minister

French embassy

It is certain that without intensive development of nuclear power, the 'official forecast' of 370×10^9 kWh of electricity by 1985 will not be reached, by far. But is this a forecast or a policy statement? Less than half of 370×10^9 kWh of electricity was produced in 1975, and less than one-tenth of that figure in 1950. Ecologists do not fail to remark that Eurodif, Europe's first uranium enrichment plant, at Tricastin, is itself expected to consume some 30×10^9 kWh a year, which is almost as much as the total electrical energy output in 1950. And they also argue that a less spectacular increase in energy production may not mean, as hawks have hinted, a return to the Middle Ages.

Marching for other issues

But nuclear power is not the 'ecologists' only concern. On 15 August, protesters marched on the Larzac plateau, in the southern part of the Massif Central, against the Army's proposed take-over of more than 10,000 ha of land for training and testing. The expansion was planned in 1970 and would have been completed last year, were it not for the deter-

mined opposition of local farmers, who have succeeded in mustering considerable support. In six years of stubborn but largely peaceful opposition, the farmers have become well organised and have learned many tricks. For example, they published a study of cattle and sheep farming in conjunction with an effective public relations operation which included releasing a flock of sheep under the Eiffel tower in Paris; on another occasion they organised a symbolic harvest for the Third World which opened a debate on malnutrition.

The success of the Larzac farmers, who have joined the loose ranks of *les écologistes*, is measured by the fact that the Army has not been able to acquire half of the land it wanted, and that sheep are still squatting on some of the Army-owned land in virtue of ancient pasture rights. Conscious of public opinion, the Army has seldom resorted to expulsion by force.

Les écologistes have also contributed to the sinking of a proposal to construct a super-highway in Paris (the *Radiale Vercingétorix*, named after the famous Gaul warrior), to preserving some sites from urbanisation, to

promoting legislation against water pollution, to imposing controls on the asbestos industry, and to banning the 2-4-5T defoliant. But it should not be forgotten that they are a variegated group, which includes the scientifically inclined, philosophers, and dreamers who yearn for the unpolluted paths cherished by Jean Jacques Rousseau and probably gone forever.

Many of them, and the public, simply do not recognise the boundary between dream and reality because they are not well enough informed. Most, however, appear to have a genuine concern about the environment as a part of society that has changed irreversibly, and believe, as voiced by Giscard d'Estaing at a ministerial council last July, in "the importance of environmental policy as a factor of transformation of society".

As Frenchmen shift to high gear in their semi-permanent political campaigning, the hope is for a reasonable, informative debate. Perhaps then the traditionally central authority, and the inevitably peripheral, but increasingly concerned, citizen will find a common point. □

USA

New DNA draft

An important new factor has been injected into the long-tangled process of developing legislation to control recombinant DNA research in the United States. Colin Norman reports

WHEN members of Congress left Washington for their summer vacations a month ago, two separate versions of legislation to control recombinant DNA experiments were under consideration. In the Senate, a bill developed by Senator Edward Kennedy's Health Subcommittee was awaiting consideration by the full Senate, while in the House, a bill drafted by Representative Paul Roger's Health Subcommittee was pending before the House Commerce Committee. When Congress returns next week, however, a third version will have to be taken into serious consideration, and the already murky legislative outlook has become even more opaque. In fact, there is now a real possibility that Congress will not complete its work on the legislation this year.

The new version has been drafted by Senator Gaylord Nelson, a Democrat from Wisconsin, in response to concerns which a number of scientists have voiced over the Kennedy bill. Nelson

says he plans to offer his bill as an alternative to Kennedy's when the legislation is brought to a vote in the Senate, and the move will guarantee a full-scale debate on some of the key issues.

The Kennedy bill has aroused some concern because it would establish a Presidentially-appointed commission to draft new rules for recombinant DNA experiments, licence facilities and approved experiments, an arrangement which many scientists view as a recipe for bureaucratic delay. The bill would also establish hefty fines for those who violate the rules and it would allow state and local governments to write regulations which would be stricter than the federal controls. The House version would be less restrictive since it would leave most of the responsibility for implementing controls in the hands of local biohazards committees, and it would also place considerable restraint on the authority of local governments to set their own recombinant DNA regulations.

Until recently, the Kennedy bill was moving through the Senate without encountering much Senatorial interest or opposition, and it was scheduled for a vote in the full Senate shortly before the August recess. It was shunted aside by more pressing legislation, however, and it is still pending. The delay has

enabled a number of scientists to step up their lobbying, and their concerns have met with a sympathetic reception in Nelson's office. Nelson's proposed bill is very similar to the House version, though in some respects it is even less restrictive.

Though Nelson has not actively sought supporters for his bill, his office has been receiving a number of calls from other Senate offices expressing interest. In addition, other Senators, including Moynihan of New York, Eagleton of Missouri and Chaffee of Rhode Island, have voiced concern about Kennedy's proposal to establish a new recombinant DNA commission. In short, Nelson's bill is likely to gather considerable support. Nevertheless, if it is put to a vote and it goes down to a heavy defeat, those who support the Kennedy bill would have their hand considerably strengthened when negotiations begin to iron out differences between the House and Senate bills.

Meanwhile, the Roger's bill is not likely to be approved by the Commerce Committee much before the end of September, and it may then be referred to the House Science and Technology Committee. That would delay passage by the House until mid-October at the earliest, which means that there would be little time to reach a compromise with the Senate version before Congress goes into recess before the end of October. □