international news

Exit the Dragon?

by Roger Woodham

THE slight chance that the Dragon international high temperature reactor might be saved at the eleventh hour by the EEC Council of Ministers slipped away last week when the matter failed to come up for discussion at all. The decision taken the previous week in Brussels therefore stands, and the Dragon will be killed off—though not immediately dismembered—on March 31.

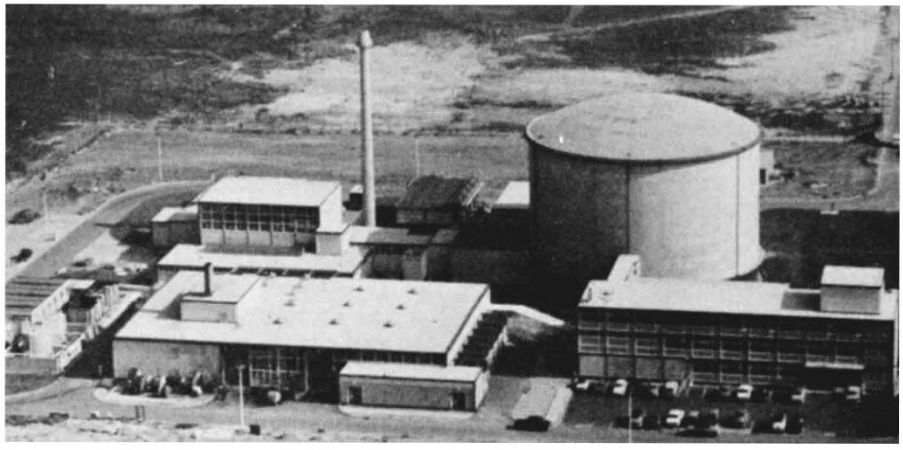
This brings to an end a three-month period during which optimism and pessimism over the future of Dragon fluctuated weekly, with the US Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA) expressing interest in the project without putting any money on the table—or rather on the telex. Any UK agreement to continue the project eventually came to depend on some form of financial involvement by ERDA, and when this failed to materialise, the EEC, representing several of the participants in the project and therefore having the whip hand, decided to finish the project off.

The only real concession achieved in the past few weeks was a stay of execution of three months, from December to March. Fortunately the majority of the 300 or so people who work on Dragon are seconded from the UK Atomic Energy Authority (UKAEA) or its equivalent in the other member countries, or from industry, so they will simply return to their own organisations.

What happens between now and March 31? Certainly nobody is going to start taking the reactor to pieces—the UKAEA doesn't really know how to dismantle a reactor safely yet—and it will simply be mothballed. Late last week the European Parliament in Strasbourg criticised the decision and called for the reactor to be saved, and there is always the chance, of course, that ERDA, which by all accounts has been showing more definite interest even during the past week or so, may come up with a concrete proposal. But the possibilities all seem rather remote now.

Nothing definite emerged from a debate in the British House of Commons last week either. Replying to critical questioning, Alexander Eadie, Under-Secretary for Coal at the Department of Energy, said that the government was conscious of its special place as host, and did not want the project ended if other participants wanted it tot continue. But in that case, why not leave more time for alternative plans to be worked out properly?

It looks as if the Dragon on Winfrith Heath will stand as a monument to 16 years of work which eventually got out of step with the UK's nuclear aspirations. □



The Dragon reactor: now a monument?

University money plea

IN the politest way possible, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of UK universities has asked Mr Fred Mulley, the Secretary of State for Education and Science, to put university finances back on to a firmer footing.

The recently issued statement "Universities in a period of economic crisis" asks the government to do three things:

- provide a planning perspective and a 'real terms funding commitment' extending beyond a year;
- assure universities that beyond the short-term crisis they will be able to resume development programmes with support "at a level in keeping with their national and international standing and commensurate with the burdens they have shouldered", and
- give a commitment that long-term planning and financing arrangements will be restored.

The committee reminds Mr Mulley that universities have been working on reduced resources in real terms for the last eighteen months and yet even so managed to increase student numbers by 7,000 in 1974 and 10,000 in 1975. The number of full-time students in British universities is now 263,000. More growth is forecast in the near future as the population of 18-year-olds has started to increase again and there is a "welcome surge" of applications from women.

Grants to universities are channelled through the University Grants Committee, and academic salaries comprise a little over 50% of university expenditure. Increases in salaries are guaranteed by the government, but the other half of recurrent expenditure (salaries of other staff, maintenance, supplies and so on) is compensated against inflation in rather a strange way. A costs index is used and the government may choose to make appropriate compensation in arrears.

In the calendar-year 1973 costs rose 12%, and the government chose not to supplement at all for the academic year 1974–75. Meanwhile cost inflation was running at 29% in 1974. As a result of deputations, the government later supplemented to the tune of £19 million for the year 1974–75 but, universities claim, this represented only a third of the sum necessary to maintain the grant in real terms.

In response to this universities had to make their own economies, by freezing staff posts (500 are now frozen), by letting non-academic staff go, and by saving of libraries, fuel, maintenance and so on. In terms of physical facilities, the universities now believe they have done all they can reasonably hope to, and in terms of staff cuts, they are now up to a student:staff ratio of 10:1. "Lasting damage would shortly ensue", they claim. □