

USA

● The Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, the Congressional body which has reigned supreme over nuclear policy in the United States for nearly three decades, last week suffered a severe, possible fatal public battering. Already weakened by the loss of several key members through retirements and election defeats, and facing concerted attack from senators and congressmen seeking its abolition, the joint committee last week became the target of some well-aimed barbs hurled by Common Cause, an influential lobbying group.

In a lengthy review of the joint committee's activities, Common Cause says it has uncovered numerous examples of "procedural abuse", pro-nuclear bias, and failure to examine important issues. The harsh indictment may turn out to be an important factor in persuading Congress that the time is ripe to carve up the joint committee's responsibilities and divide them among other congressional committees, a move which is already being planned and which would have important implications for nuclear policy.

The joint committee derives much of its immense power from its unique status as the only Congressional committee which handles legislation in both the House and the Senate. Every bill related to nuclear power, no matter where it originates, must be referred to the joint committee, a fact which gives its 18 members a monopoly over nuclear legislation.

Formed shortly after the second world war to oversee the United States's nuclear weapons programme, the joint committee rapidly became one of the most powerful committees in Congress. For more than two decades its authority went largely unchallenged and legislation it approved was virtually guaranteed easy passage through the House and Senate. But, as nuclear power has turned into a controversial issue, the joint committee has attracted increasing fire from nuclear critics. It has been persistently accused of pro-nuclear bias, and in the past couple of years a few other Congressional committees have even begun to invade its turf by holding hearings on nuclear matters. (The joint committee is still the only committee with authority to consider nuclear legislation, however.)

Criticisms of the committee have recently given way to more strident calls for its complete abolition, and the Common Cause blast is no exception. The organisation's report pre-

sents evidence that the joint committee has given short shrift to the concerns of nuclear critics, failed to explore important nuclear issues which raise doubts about nuclear power, refused to take the lead in examining major policy questions—such as nuclear proliferation—and often used its unique Congressional position to rush legislation through both the House and Senate before



relevant studies have been completed.

Common Cause also notes that the committee has persistently voted for increases in nuclear spending, adding more than \$850 million to the budget of the Energy Research and Development Administration (ERDA) in the past three years alone. Those actions, Common Cause claims, can be explained in part by the fact that the committee is "dominated by representatives who have a vested interest in encouraging increased nuclear spending". In the last session of Congress, for example, 12 of the committee's members represented six states which together carried off more than half the funds distributed by ERDA.

The chief recommendation from Common Cause is that the joint committee should be scrapped and its responsibilities transferred to House and Senate committees which have broad authority over all energy research and development matters. The report is likely to give considerable impetus to moves already afoot which would accomplish precisely that objective.

Next month, when Democrats in the House of Representatives meet to consider their political agenda, Representative Jonathan Bingham will propose that the joint committee be scrapped and its responsibilities be assigned to other committees, probably the Science and Technology Committee or the Interior Committee. And a committee reorganisation plan

proposed recently for the Senate would transfer the joint committee's responsibilities for nuclear research and development to an expanded Interior committee, and its authority over nuclear regulation to a new Public Works and Environment committee. The reorganisation plan is expected to be debated by the Senate in January, as one of its first items of business.

● If the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy is scrapped by the new Congress, the nuclear industry in the United States would lose one of its most important political allies just as a number of matters deemed crucial to the industry's long-term interests are coming to a head. Among those issues is whether the United States should press ahead with the liquid metal fast breeder reactor programme, at present the highest priority and most lavishly funded energy research and development effort supported by the federal government.

In that regard, a report published last week by the General Accounting Office (GAO), an investigative agency of the Congress, is unlikely to help the LMFBR's political acceptability. The report estimates that it would cost some \$150,000 million to build the 128 breeder reactors which ERDA is now planning, compared with \$95 million to build coal plants of an equivalent capacity and \$128 million for light water reactors. That level of capital expenditure would be difficult for the electricity industry to raise without federal assistance.

● There has recently been a spirited debate in many countries about how to dispose of commercial nuclear wastes and keep them isolated from the environment for thousands of years. The disposal of nuclear wastes from military programmes in the United States is, however, an even bigger problem. Last week, the Energy Research and Development Administration announced that it hopes to start drilling next year in some 13 states to find suitable sites for commercial repositories. Though no sites have yet been short-listed, ERDA officials said that they hope to have the first repository in operation by 1985, and some six in operation in the 1990s. The total cost of the programme, which will handle some 330,000 cubic feet of material by the year 2000, is reckoned to be \$2,000 million. Under questioning, however, ERDA officials said that the total amount of waste generated by military programmes by 2000 will be about 11 million cubic feet, and the cost of getting rid of it could be as much as \$20,000 million.

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