

URANIUM

Solidarity and optimism

The Uranium Institute held its second annual meeting in London last week. Chris Sherwell reports

IT HAD BEEN a busy year since members of the Uranium Institute last gathered in the splendid London facilities of the Institute of Electrical Engineers. The uranium cartel controversy had blown up. Anti-nuclear forces had made headway. And a new US nuclear policy had emerged. But if most of the more than 200 delegates who attended last week's meeting came somewhat chastened by the events of the previous twelve months, after two days closeted together they seemed to leave in slightly more buoyant mood.

A renewed feeling of solidarity was perhaps an inevitable outcome, but the sense of optimism that emerged from the usual business of exchanging ideas and informally discussing recent developments was a bonus. That optimism was expressed by Terry Price, the Uranium Institute's secretary general, when in summing up the formal symposium on uranium supply and demand he offered his 'scenario' for the immediate future.

Once it was appreciated that numbers mattered and there was agreement on the facts, he said, the realisation

that there are no easy answers would see the reinstatement of nuclear power to respectability. The current debate would be damped down, a large programme of thermal reactor building would go ahead and the industry's long lead-times would see a determination to push ahead on both fast breeders and reprocessing. The lasting legacies of the present period of uncertainty would be "wholly beneficial", not least the political legacy of a heightened awareness of the need to deal with proliferation.

Earlier the symposium had ranged over the most general and most specific problems relating to uranium and nuclear power. An opening paper examined projected energy requirements to the year 2000, and found that even in a 'world of internal contradictions' (rather than a 'belle époque') there was a large role for nuclear power. Later presentations discussed exploration techniques and factors affecting mining costs. Between these extremes came the most controversial issues—those of supply and demand and of proliferation—and here the real uncertainties arose.

On supply, for example, one paper on the US position contended that unless "drastic action" was taken, "there is not sufficient uranium forthcoming to

sustain a nuclear industry based upon light water reactors". That contrasts with the optimistic assessments of the Ford Foundation report which is apparently the basis of US policy. Another paper on the same subject reveals some of the findings of a US National Academy of Sciences panel; these also indicate serious supply shortages in and beyond the mid-1980s.

Supply questions easily spilled over into proliferation matters. Anthony Grey of Pancontinental Mining suggested that the US emphasis on international safeguards meant that Australia, by using its influence as a major uranium supplier, could lessen rather than increase the risk of nuclear war. Kyoji Mizumachi of the Tokyo Electric Power Company was more critical of the effects of the US anti-proliferation stance: this "drastic" change of policy had been a "great shock" to Japan. And Terry Price himself took the opportunity to criticise an erudite defence from Harvard lawyer Abram Chayes, suggesting that other countries would not alter their energy strategies without being convinced by their own advisers—and they, said Price, would be giving cautious advice. One speaker's conclusion sounded most appropriate: at the moment no quantitative conclusions about the impact of proliferation policy on the uranium market can be drawn. □

COMECON

Energy supply problem?

The 31st session of the Council of Mutual Economic Assistance (Comecon), held in Warsaw last week, reflected a growing concern of the eight member countries with raw materials and energy. Vera Rich reports

TO DATE, developments in the fields of raw materials and energy have largely been based on the 'unlimited' supplies of the Soviet Union. According to official doctrine, delays in the supply of these resources have been essentially a matter of logistics; so when the smaller Comecon members want immediate access to these resources, they have to contribute to the cost of development.

Now, however, although the speeches in Warsaw still stress the dependence of members countries on Soviet supplies, there is a tacit recognition that the Soviet Union cannot at present meet the total demands of the bloc. While acknowledging the "decisive

importance" of Soviet supplies, the Hungarian Premier, György Lazar, for example, stressed the need "to fully utilise the resources of the member countries"; he noted that Hungary was stepping up the pace of research into fresh domestic resources of fuel and raw materials. And Manea Manescu of Romania announced a massive cutback in the use of hydrocarbons for power purposes, so that they may be devoted primarily to the petrochemical industry.

The simple answer to the energy problem seems to be nuclear power. Vaclav Hula, the Czechoslovak representative to the Comecon Committee for Cooperation in Planning, put forward plans for the development of atomic power plants which would more than double the nuclear capacity of the Comecon bloc in each successive five-year plan. The final communique says the "session particularly stressed the importance of the programme for the maximum development of nuclear engineering of the Comecon countries

in providing a comprehensive solution of issues related to the development of the atomic power industry, and a solution to the entire problem of fuel and energy".

The communique recommended that an agreement on multilateral international specialisation and cooperation in the production and delivery of atomic power station equipment for 1981-1990 should be concluded next year. No formal reference was made to the potential hazards of a major nuclear programme, and the only reference to the environment was in a list for suggested inter-state conferences that would lead to "constructive business cooperation" with the capitalist countries. The Carter nuclear policy was not, apparently, even mentioned.

A major conversion to atomic power has long been a principle of Comecon energy policy, which is not hampered by ecology-minded minority pressure groups. The new resolution, therefore, is not so much a change in policy, as a recognition that it is time to proceed from theory to practice. □