Gorleben: winning the battle, losing the war?

Helmut Hirsch, coordinator of scientific opposition to West Germany's nuclear reprocessing plans, gives his view of the decision last week not to proceed—for the time being

THOSE of us closely involved in the debate over whether or not to build a nuclear waste disposal centre at Gorleben have, it now seems, been barking up the wrong tree. The Federal Government stated two years ago that one of the conditions for further nuclear expansion in West Germany was what it called the "technical safety and feasibility" of nuclear processing and reprocessing. It was on this basis that the Reactor Safety Commission and the Commission for Radiological Protection expressed their opinion that the Gorleben centre was feasible. It was also on this basis that 20 international scientists, working in the Gorleben International Review, produced a 2,200 page report arguing that it was not. The matter was discussed at the controversial hearings in Hanover which ended on 3 April.

Now, it seems, we were all wrong. Because on 16 May Minister-President Albrecht of Lower Saxony revealed to the astonished German public that he was not worried about Gorleben's "technical safety and feasibility". His chief concern, he said, was its political feasibility. He turned the project down because of political, not technical, opposition.

Albrecht was well aware of the massive opposition to the centre; during the hearings, more than 100,000 people demonstrated in Hanover. He made quite clear in his speech on 16 May that he considered the roots of this opposition were wholly irrational but he decided he would not ram nuclear power down the throats of the ill-informed populace. Or at least he would not do so as long as he was the only one responsible.

Albrecht (who belongs to the CDU) is clearly very irritated about the position adopted by Lower Saxony's Social Democrats. Their leader, Ravens, came out with the conclusion that the Gorleben centre was technically not feasible. Ravens even met Chancellor Schmidt, an outspoken supporter of the Gorleben plan, but Schmidt did not pull Ravens into line. Thus, Albrecht, when announcing his decision, made it clear that he would not take it upon himself to push ahead with reprocessing plans which originated in the Federal Government's (and hence the SPD's) energy strategy but which were opposed by the SPD

in Lower Saxony, who could then profit from their opposition by gaining anti-nuclear voters.

Albrecht also announced the next step: *intermediate* storage of spent fuel elements, probably for up to 40 years, while research into final disposal is to be intensified, covering both post-reprocessing wastes and unreprocessed spent fuel elements. However, it is the Gorleben salt dome—and only the Gorleben salt dome—that is to be explored for its suitability for final disposal. If the results are positive, disposal of radioactive wastes will take place there; if not, other sites will then be considered. Clearly the people of Gorleben will have to postpone their victory celebrations.

Local people fear—perhaps with good reason—that this means Gorleben is still the first and only choice for solving West Germany's nuclear waste problems, particularly if pressure mounts for an official decision on a suitable site so that the country's nuclear capacity can expand as fast as possible. They are less than confident that the exploratory drillings at

Minister-President Ernst Albrecht: turned down Gorleben plan for political reasons

Gorleben will be analysed in an unbiased manner, and fear that the salt dome will be proved suitable simply because the nuclear lobby needs it badly.

This concern is shared by Dr Friedrich Mauthe, geologist at Hanover University and one of the participants of the hearings. He says, "So far, nobody has even bothered to define clear criteria stating which drilling results are necessary for a positive judgement. I wouldn't feel too happy if the criteria are tailored after the drillings have been completed".

The procedure envisaged by Albrecht goes right against the conclusions of the Gorleben International Review, whose report emphasised that a broad investigation at several sites would be necessary before any site was singled out. The review expressed doubts about the Gorleben salt dome as well as the suitability of salt as a medium in general. The GIR proposed

detailed and timely investigations of other geologic formations. But at the hearings, Albrecht flatly refused to discuss the Gorleben salt dome.

Albrecht has avoided the question of where to site the intermediate storage facilities. This is another worry for the people of the Landkreis Lüchow-Dannenberg, to which Gorleben belongs. They might yet have to put up with storage ponds. The siting of these at Gorleben would further suggest that the nuclear industry still wants to proceed with the original proposal, with some modifications, and use step-by-step tactics to avoid major conflicts. Considering the determination with which the Federal Government has pushed reprocessing up to now, these suspicions may not be completely unfounded.

Given the uncertainty and political manoeuvring, who can blame the people of Lüchow-Dannenberg if they take things into their own hands? On 10 May, 600 local inhabitants walked into a closed meeting of local politicians discussing the Gorleben issue at Hitzacker, frustrated with the attitude of their representatives, many of whom still have not made up their minds. One farmer shouted: "We do not want the plant, and we do not like it better if it comes step by step!"

Activists collected more than 20,000 signatures in just over two weeks—in a district with 48,000 inhabitants, including children—and are still working to complete their list. The official farmers' union has come out with a clear "no" against nuclear facilities. The resistance is strengthened by the fact that test drilling has been going on at the site more or less continuously for the past two months. The latest news was that drillings had revealed a layer of peat 50–70 m below the surface. This is not unusual over a salt dome, but it indicates that the ground is not suitable for large concrete buildings.

The people of Lüchow-Dannenberg were not surprised by Albrecht's decision. Marianne Fritzen, one of the leaders of the local opposition says: "Albrecht is very cautious, but it is clear to me that he is still in favour of the reprocessing plant." However, many opponents of the project feel that at least a battle has been won. Time has been gained which can be used for a national debate on the issue which really ought to have been paramount: the desirability of reprocessing, and of further use of nuclear energy in general, which has been tacitly assumed by German politicians right from the start. □