German nuclear power

Local difficulties

Hamburg

West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt will need to do some political juggling in the next few weeks if he is to maintain the credibility of plans to expand West Germany's nuclear energy programme to lessen dependence on oil imports. The dilemma stems from a decision last week by local members of his own Social Democrat Party (SPD) in Hamburg that the city should not contribute 50 per cent of the costs of a new nuclear power station planned for Brokdorf, 40 miles away.

Despite support for the power station from several local and national trades union, the Hamburg SPD accepted the arguments of the city's mayor, Herr Hans Ulrich Klose, that it was more important to base future energy policy on energy conservation than to support significantly increased production of electricity by nuclear means.

The Brokdorf plant, which would be built and operated by the Hamburg Electrical Utility, has become something of a symbol for the German anti-nuclear movement. Two years ago it was the scene of the first of a series of violent demonstrations against nuclear power which culminated in the decision to withdraw plans for a major storage and reprocessing facility at Gorleben.

Chancellor Schmidt, in putting considerable political weight behind the Brokdorf proposal, seems to have been gambling on an apparent decline in popular anti-nuclear sentiment over the past two years. The link between growing economic problems and OPEC oil prices is increasing pressures to proceed with the construction of nine new nuclear power stations.

Mayor Klose's arguments against Brokdorf were expressed more in local than national terms. He pointed out, for example, that although the country as a whole at present relies on nuclear energy for only 10 per cent of its energy needs, the completion of the Brokdorf plant would increase Hamburg's dependence from 30 to 70 per cent.

"How can we encourage energy saving when we blindly push ahead with nuclear power that may well prove to be superfluous to our needs?" Herr Klose asked a meeting of the local SPD, in a debate which ended with a vote against the plans.

The decision is not yet final, since it will have to be taken formally by the Hamburg Senate, which meets this week to vote on the city's participation in Brokdorf. However, it is unlikely that the view of the ruling SPD will not prevail.

The Brokdorf situation has already become a major political embarrassment to Chancellor Schmidt, who has made a commitment to other European leaders that his

nation will make a major effort to reduce its dependence on foreign oil.

The SPD's position is that, pending the resolution of the waste disposal issues, the construction of nuclear power plants already under way should continue, as long as an adequate form of temporary disposal has been agreed.

In Hamburg, a plan for dealing with waste has been produced that seems to meet the conditions laid down by local port authorities. But the local SPD's decision — which runs directly contrary to Herr Schmidt's plans — has already been described by Hamburg's Interior Minister as a possible precedent for other nuclear stations.

The political problems raised by Hamburg's actions have further exacerbated tensions at a national level, where Herr Schmidt needs a viable energy policy to maintain the SPD's coalition with the Free Democratic party, but is finding his position on nuclear energy out of line with that of a large proportion of his own party.

For example, in Hamburg's neighbouring state Schleswig Holstein, the national SPD feels it has a chance of defeating the ruling Christian Democrats in the next elections. However, as in Hamburg, the local SPD is also opposed to the Brokdorf plans.

Not surprisingly, the national SPD has been somewhat embarrassed by Herr Klose's firm anti-nuclear stance. Some local SPD members who do not support the mayor's position had been hoping that he would be replaced by Herr Hans Apel, currently Defence Minister in Bonn, who supports Chancellor Schmidt's position. However, other political pressures make it unlikely that Herr Schmidt would agree to such a weakening of his own cabinet.

David Dickson

EEC nuclear research

Reactor guarded

Brussels

The go-ahead on the European Community's light water reactor (LWR) experiment, the Super-Sara project, is expected to be given at a meeting in Brussels this week. The ten member states' permanent representatives to the Community (Coreper) will be deliberating on a report by the Council of Ministers' Working Group on Atomic Questions before deciding whether or not to release the main bulk of the funds for the three-year programme (1981–83).

In March last year, the Nine, on the insistence of the French, allocated an initial grant of 3.31 European Units of Account (EUA), or £1.7 million, for the exploratory stage of the project. During the previous six months, the member states had been deeply divided as to whether the research was really necessary or justified at the price. Initial estimates put the cost of the programme at 43.92 million EUA but inflation

and salary increases have now increased this to 54.03 million EUA.

The project makes use of the Community's Ettore experimental reactor at Ispra in Italy, which, having served its original purpose, would otherwise become redundant. Italy is unwilling to take over financial responsibility for Ettore and through the Super-Sara project, drawn up in 1979 in the wake of the Three Mile Island accident, the Commission is willing to take this on. It aims to simulate as far as possible the complete gamut of accidents which might occur in light water reactors. More extensive than similar projects in West Germany (the Rebeka reactor), France (Phébus) and the United States (PBF and MRBT), the simulated accidents include loss of coolants from small and large cracks, the exposure and fusion of the core, the effect of the containment breaking up, the monitoring of events in and outside the core and the possibilities of recooling the core.

The real task of the Commission since the project was agreed in principle last March has been to define the areas where the Community could benefit. The report which formed the basis of the Commission's communication to the Group on Atomic Questions was drawn up by a task force composed of experts from the member states, and the decision taken at the Coreper meeting will reflect the extent to which the task force has been successful.

The United Kingdom's original position — that the project is a good idea but in practice would be too expensive — changed after the March meeting to one of acceptance provided that the project went ahead as soon as possible. At that time, other member states, Germany and the Netherlands in particular, proposed carrying out the research in two stages and withholding much of the money until Super-Sara had proved its value. But postponing the project for two years, argues the Commission, would cost an extra 32 million EUA. Moreover, a follow-up programme planned for 1983–86 might produce particularly valuable results. France and many other countries are more worried that the project's costs will rise more steeply than predicted, with the high temperatures at which the experiments take place. France also feels that its own experimental reactor, Phébus, although smaller, will produce similar results just as quickly. On the other hand, the United Kingdom may now be prepared to come to the programme's defence in view of the recent decision to build the first British pressurized water reactor in the face of strong public opposition, and because of the United Kingdom's lack of safety expertise with light water reactors.

The Commission has been at pains to emphasize that it will ensure "a particularly rigorous control" of the costs and timetable. Another possible line of attack for the programme's detractors is the lack

of qualified staff. An estimated 70 temporary staff will be needed in addition to the 2,600 permanent staff. However, the Commission emphasizes that other nuclear safety programmes will not be robbed of their present staff.

The biggest arguments in Coreper are likely to revolve around the timing of the project. Work on the loop has already begun at Ispra and to keep Essor unoccupied now will only lose money. But while the Commission is urging that the project should start in earnest immediately, the nuclear safety programmes' consultative committee wants the project's first phase to be extended for 6–12 months so that more feasibility studies can be carried out. However, financial support from third parties may tip the balance in favour of an early start. Three United States organizations — the Department of Energy, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Electric Power Research Institute — are all considering participation, as are Japan and Sweden.

Jasper Becker

Data protection laws

UK lags behind

The United Kingdom seems on the point of becoming a "data desert" following its decision not to sign the Council of Europe's convention on data protection and privacy. On 28 January, seven European states signed the convention, which requires them to enact legislation defining the rights of individuals over the formation and use of files concerning them. All these states except one (Turkey) already have such laws. When ratified by the parliaments of five signatories, the convention will pass into force.

Britain must establish a domestic policy first, said ministers questioned in Parliament last week. But the issue has been under debate in Britain for ten years, and it is two years since the Lindop committee on data protection produced its report and recommendations. Mr William Whitelaw, Secretary of State for the Home Office, last October promised a policy statement "shortly". But there is now little sign that a statement will be forthcoming in the present session of Parliament.

It is a matter of human rights, but also of commercial interest. Companies argue that contracts involving protected data from outside countries will be lost to the United Kingdom, as Britain will be seen as a potential information leak. And this information can concern companies as well as individuals: the Council of Europe convention is defined in terms of "legal persons", which may include registered businesses.

Already, according to International Computers Ltd, a number of small deals with Sweden — the first in Europe to enact data laws — have been affected. Austria is also beginning to pay close attention to the

nature of the data that cross its borders. So far there has been no serious commercial effect; but the European laws are only just beginning to operate.

In the United Kingdom, bodies from IBM to the National Council for Civil Liberties (NCCL) support the spirit of the Lindop report — that there should be legislation within five (now three) years. Opposition stems from government departments whose data handling might be most affected by legislation: the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Security. The Department of Industry backs the data industry's view that legislation is necessary, although the appointment last year of a junior minister for information industries (Mr Adam Butler) specifically excluded data protection from his portfolio.

Lindop recommended the establishment of an agency which would initially coordinate views and propose legislation to Parliament (thus by-passing departments and ministers). Later the body would register and license protected files and uses of files.

Such an authority is regarded by NCCL as a necessary democratic safeguard. But commercial interests, while recognizing the need for independence, are fearful of a centralized bureaucracy. IBM, involved in most countries, favours the decentralized German system. There, firms and government agencies holding sensitive files must appoint an ombudsman who then bears legal responsibility for ensuring that files are properly constituted and used. Costs are thereby distributed to the file owners, rather than being a matter for central government.

The system also avoids the danger — so IBM thinking goes — of a "Balkanization" of data transfers, which might occur when national protection agencies attempted to agree on this or that data flow between their countries. Another way out, however, would be the wide adoption of a convention such as that drawn up by the Council of Europe.

Broadly, the Council of Europe convention — which is open to states outside the European region — commits ratifying states to enact legislation requiring that personal data be lawfully obtained, accurate and relevant, and that its use be restricted to approved purposes. Any information recorded on race, politics, religion, health, sexual behaviour and criminality is subject to extra safeguards — although the convention may be over-ridden in extreme cases involving state security, public fraud and crime.

The signatories so far are Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Sweden and Turkey. Within Europe, Norway also has data protection legislation but has not yet signed the convention. Outside Europe, the United States and Canada have legislation. It is being considered at one level or another in most developed states. **Robert Walgate**

European astronomy

Winning ways

Hard on the heels of the race for the Space Telescope Institute, won by Johns Hopkins University last month, comes a similar competition in Europe. Four astrophysical institutes are competing for the European Coordinating Facility that will analyse and store space telescope data for European astronomers. The winner is expected to be announced by the European Space Agency (ESA) in June.

The competitors are the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh, the European Southern Observatory, Munich, the Observatoire de Paris and the Italian Institute for Astrophysics, Frascati. They have submitted bids to have their own hardware used to store the data and develop programs for analysing them.

European astronomers will be allocated at least 15 per cent of the space telescope's observing time. Observers, who will only be a fraction of those wishing to use the telescope, will typically spend one or two weeks at Johns Hopkins and then return to Europe with their data for further analysis. Astronomers working at institutes with hardware compatible with that of the coordinating facility will be able to use its programs either by accessing them directly through computer links or by applying for tapes through the post.

Observers will have exclusive rights to their data for one year after which they will be available to the whole astrophysical community. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration and ESA have recently agreed that all space telescope data should be stored at the European facility as well as the Space Telescope Institute.

The European facility will most probably use a VAX 11/780 computer manufactured by the DS Digital Corporation. In an effort to increase the compatibility of hardware, several astrophysical institutes in Europe have decided to adopt this computer over the past year. Of the four competitors for the facility, the Royal Observatory, Edinburgh, with links to five other nodes in Britain, has the most highly developed system based on the VAX 11/780, making it perhaps the most likely winner. But the other competitors could catch up. There are plans to link Frascati's computer to other nodes in Italy and several computers compatible with VAX 11/780 are already linked in France.

Most of the cost of the coordinating facility will be met by the chosen institute. Although all candidates have suitable hardware, some could be required to expand their facilities more than others, involving them in considerable expense. ESA will provide only modest support: about £50,000 towards start up costs and thereafter £25,000 a year for incidental expenses plus seven staff salaries.

Judy Redfearn