Minister of State for Research and Technology, Jean-Pierre Chevenement, said recently that nuclear power was necessary to France, but that "democracy" was worth a delay of a few months.

So August has seen increasing tension over energy issues — only heightened by the arrival in Cherbourg of a British freighter from Japan, carrying Japanese nuclear waste for reprocessing at Cap de la Hague in Normandy. There was a demonstration against which the police used tear gas. And on the other side, the broadly Communist-led union, the CGT, protested to the Prime Minister against the pause that had been imposed by the government at certain less-advanced reactor construction sites, such as Cattenom on the Moselle near Luxembourg, while at other sites workers and local contractors blocked roads to protest against the pause.

So it seems that energy politics in a France that at least pays lip service to democracy is going to be just as difficult as it has proved in other western countries, and it remains to be seen whether the government can handle the situation in any other than the effectually dirigiste manner adopted by the previous administration.

Much must wait for the debate and its aftermath, but for the moment the government has been shaken into taking one new step — the setting up of a permanent scientific commission to enquire into the operation of the Cap de la Hague reprocessing plant, which has suffered a number of leaks and accidents and has never functioned efficiently.

Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy appeared to have been forced into this position by a broadly-based group which opposes the extension of Cap de la Hague to treat foreign waste. Shortly after the landing of the Japanese cargo, the group was led to believe by a member of Mauroy's cabinet that the extension of the plant and the treatment of foreign waste were inevitable. They came away saying they were deceived and disheartened and that the government's position was "very clear and very grave". Almost immediately Mauroy gave them a personal audience, announced the setting up of the commission and indicated that no foreign fuel would be reprocessed until after the debate.

Where this leaves energy policy in France is, however, unclear. The socialist party appears to be split on the issue. Chevenement is the most outspoken pro-nuclear spokesman. Other ministers are more equivocal, notably Minister of Finance Jacques Delors, who says he does not want France to become the waste-dump of Europe. The debate may only further muddy these waters, for elements of the socialist party — represented by national secretary Paul Quilés — believe that it should not lead to decisions. Rather, Quilés says, it should help to define a democratic framework within which the final decision can be taken.

Robert Walgate

Indian technology

Home and away

Bangalore and Lucknow

Although India has a well defined national policy on science, there is still no such luxury for technology. An attempt by the Janata government that ruled India between 1977 and 1979 to formulate a technology policy failed because the draft was never approved by the cabinet. Now the present government led by Mrs Gandhi finds the draft Janata policy "lacking in emphasis on self-reliance", and efforts are now being made to give India a "comprehensive self-reliant" policy on technology. A "special group" has been set up by the Science Advisory Committee of the cabinet to come up with a new draft.

Professor M.G.K. Menon, Secretary of the Science and Technology Department, says the new policy will "reflect the government's stress on self-reliance". Some of the main objectives that will ultimately form part of the policy statement have already been spelt out by the working group on science and technology for India's sixth five-year plan. One new feature is likely to be the idea of maintaining a register of all foreign collaborations. The aim is to ensure that prime contractors for technology policy are Indian and that there is a firm commitment to involve Indian research and development activities whenever foreign technological know-how is being imported.

Professor Menon observed that "the need for formulation and adaptation of a new national policy has been felt for quite some time", and said that state-level science and technology departments would be set up to make sure that the policies formulated at the centre were properly implemented. **Radhakrishna Rao**

● India is to set up an agency specifically to regulate the transfer of technology to other developing countries. India already has 207 joint ventures with Third World countries under way abroad — 115 already in operation and 92 in various stages of planning and construction.

India's involvement in these projects is mainly through the export of capital equipment and technology, although there is also some transfer of cash. Most of the effort goes towards light engineering and textiles, but there are also projects in oil fractionation, the paper industry and chemicals and pharmaceuticals.

The proposed new agency is expected to coordinate the efforts of public sector undertakings, such as Engineering Projects (India), Bharat Heavy Electricals and Electronics Trade and Development Corporation. It is to be part of the Department of Science and Technology but will have links with the External Affairs Ministry to help promote cooperation between India and Third World countries.

Zaka Imam

US synthetic fuels

Going for broke

Washington

Disregarding several of his top-level economic advisers, President Reagan has approved federal loan guarantees totalling $3,500 million to support investments by private companies in three plants being built to produce synthetic fuel (synfuel) from coal and oil shale.

The three loan guarantees are the first to have been offered under legislation passed last year by Congress providing up to $20,000 million a year to support synfuel projects. They had been strongly opposed by Administration economists such as Mr David Stockman, director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), on the grounds that the loans represented an unwarranted subsidy for commercial companies.

The synfuels programme was set up by the Carter Administration to accelerate efforts to produce both liquid fuels and natural gas from domestic resources of coal, oil shale, tar sands and heavy oil. The centrepiece of these efforts is to be a Synthetic Fuels Corporation, formally established by last year's legislation, but still to come into effective operation.

In July the Reagan Administration outlined a new energy policy, which seemed to reinforce its proposed withdrawal from issuing large federal subsidies to energy projects, particularly those in the development stage.

The Administration declared that the Department of Energy "will continue to support and fund long-term, high-risk research and development projects which industry would not be in a position to finance", but added that the development pace for the US synthetic fields industry "will be determined by private investors".

Among projects promised loans in the final days of the Carter Administration and which it was argued would collapse without government support, is a coal gasification project sponsored by a consortium headed by American Natural Resources Company which aims to be the first commerical-scale synthetic gas facility in the United States.

Earlier this year the plant, which will be built in Beulah, North Dakota, appeared doomed both by the Reagan Administration's lack of enthusiasm, and by a court decision refusing the government permission to raise natural gas prices to cover the plant's construction costs. Riding a wave of congressional support, however, this plant has now been promised loan guarantees of $2,000 million. The two other subsidies approved by Mr Reagan are $1,100 million for an oil shale project jointly financed by the Tosco Corporation and the Exxon Corporation in Colorado, and $400 million for another shale project in the same state sponsored by the Union Oil Company. **David Dickson**

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