

# Too chic to meter?

Tom Burke explores France's relationship with nuclear power

'Why can't we be more like the French?' is not a cry often heard from British politicians. But such is the capacity of nuclear power to confuse otherwise rational people, that this plea has been heard a lot of late as the energy debate in Britain took off.

Ministers have looked across the Channel with bemused envy and wondered, perish the thought, if the French public might not be more sensible than our own.

This sentiment reflects a number of misapprehensions. The first is an upshot of the short memory of most politicians. When the French nuclear programme began in the mid-Seventies, it was accompanied by large-scale protests of a rather French kind.

Not for France the quiet calm – soon to be abolished here – of a public inquiry. The early days of the French nuclear programme were accompanied by widespread and occasionally violent demonstrations – leading to the death of a protester on at least one occasion.

The tide of those demonstrations ebbed as the ten-year burst of nuclear construction ended in the mid-Eighties. Since then the relatively slow build rate of additional reactors has diminished the focus for public concern, but opposition to nuclear power in France remains strong.

This became clear during the extraordinary formal dialogue involving politicians, business, NGOs, trades unions and academics that took place during 2007. In his speech last October welcoming the outcome of this process, President Sarkozy promised that France was not going to replace its existing nuclear fleet in its entirety. In future no more than 60 per cent of France's electricity will be produced from nuclear, well down on the current 85 per cent.

Incidentally, the French *Grenelle* process, named after the town where the first meeting took place, seems a far better model for achieving real political consensus on technically difficult strategic issues than the proposed Independent Planning Commission in this country. Only the politically naïve would believe that this is likely to be independent enough to become anything other than a rubber stamp for pre-ordained government policies.

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A second misapprehension is that resolving this issue has anything to do with public opinion. The government has made much of the apparent shift in British opinion to a view more favourable to nuclear power. Considering that there has been no serious debate on the issue here for more than 20 years, this is hardly surprising. Whether this apparent shift will hold if a concrete proposal emerges to focus opposition remains to be seen.

Again, differences between France and Britain on nuclear issues can be exagger-

ated. In both countries the decisive conversations take place within tiny, hermetic elites neither open to, nor influenced by, wider engagement. In both, public opinion is something to be quietened by fear, carefully selected facts, authoritative assertion or, if the opportunity occurs, straightforward bribery – a page we have stolen from the French playbook with the recent offer to bribe local authorities that welcomed radioactive waste dumps.

Public opinion played no role in the demise of nuclear power in Britain. Nor did the ruling elite abandon their faith. It was brought about entirely by Margaret Thatcher's decision to privatise the electricity industry.

Investors took one look at CEGB books and unanimously said 'Nuclear power? No thanks'. The economics of nuclear were so bad that it had to remain in public ownership for the privatisation to go ahead. They have not improved since.

Nuclear power in France is still in the hands of a state-run industry with inevitably opaque economics. Britain, quite rightly, is a champion of the greater liberalisation of electricity markets within Europe. It would be a delicious irony if success in that endeavour helped to undermine its mistaken faith in a nuclear industry well past its sell-by date. ■

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Pollution over Paris last year: in future no more than 60 per cent of France's electricity will be produced from nuclear, down on the current 85 per cent