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On the agreement between the PS (Socialist Party) and
EELV (Europe-Ecology-the-Greens)

The Soup and Lentils will be Radioactive

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Last week when the agreement between socialists and ecologists was announced, the "financial markets" saluted the news with a 4.6% drop in EDF shares (Electricité de France). A wrong decision: they ought to have saluted it with a considerable rise. Similarly, according to « Sauvons Le Climat » - an outfit that uses climate as a pretext for defending nuclearism "the decision to stop 24 reactors with a hasty deal... amounts to refusing to prolong their life to 40 years." Wrong: on the contrary, it does prolong their operations past 40 years. Here is how and why.

The ageing of a nuclear plant occurs by a gradual degradation which can be slowed by ongoing maintenance but which inevitably ends up with insoluble safety problems, notably fissuring of the reactor vessel.

At first, French nuclear reactors were conceived to last at least 30 years. But, arguing on the basis of "safety margins" already planned for, EDF obtained agreement to prolong this from 30 to 40 years (after a third "ten-year visit"). That's one third more. It's like saying, mutatis mutandis, that "today Frenchwomen have a life-expectancy of 84 years, but we now decree that if she's 84 and passes her check-up she can live risk-free to 112. Latest medical knowledge predicts no fatal accident between 84 and 112." If this discourse leaves you sceptical, you are mistaken, it's experts speaking!

But how do you calculate a reactor's age? That varies with people's tastes and interests. In the USA for example, what counts in legislation is the first pouring of concrete. By this system, and using EDF data, the average age of France's 58 reactors in April 2003 was 24 years 7 months.

But EDF, like most operators, thinks that the two non-replaceable components of a plant are the reactor vessel and the concrete containment structure. Now we know that French concrete is marvellously solid and long-lasting (witness the problems with EPRs at Olkiluoto in Finland and Flamanville in France...), well, it might be better to use some other calculation.

Three other ways are possible. We could count from the first « divergence » (first test of nuclear fission and heating of reactor). Or from the first connection to the network, corresponding to the first electricity production sufficient to require power being evacuated from inside the plant. Thirdly from the MSI (putting into industrial service), which corresponds to a stable and permanent industrial functioning.

EDF in their calculation, followed by the OPECST (parliamentary office for evaluating scientific and technological choices), don't take the divergence date, since the first heating of the core can sometimes be several months before its active service. OPECST hesitates about the first coupling to the network, which would give France's reactors an average age of 18 years 2 months in April 2003, while the MSI gave the figure of 17 years 4 months. Finally, although EDF opted reasonably for the first coupling, OPECST opts without explanation for the latest date, obviously the most rejuvenating one. This is only half surprising, given that one of the office's rapporteurs is the socialist MP Christian Bataille. You can't get more pro-nuclear than him without dropping dead.

France's 58 reactors are the same now as in 2003. Therefore, their average age will be 27 years in 2012, whatever reference is adopted (February for coupling, December for MSI). 40 years will be up in 2025... if none of them is closed before then.

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Averages, however, don't tell us about particular cases. At the end of 2025, according to EDF figures, there will be 22 reactors younger than 40. Half of these (11) will reach 40 and have to close in 2026-7, and half (11) will still have some years of service: Belleville 2 (31 months), Cattenom 3 (55 months) et Cattenom 4 (65), Flamanville 2 (67), Nogent 2 (3 years), Penly 1 (5 years 5 months) et Penly 2 (6 years), with four reactors even exceeding ten years: Golfech 1 (10) et Golfech 2 (13), Civaux 1 (12) et Civaux 2 (14).

Fortunately for EDF, the AREVA corporation, the financial markets and all the nuclear lobby, the politicians Martine Aubry, Cécile Duflot et François Hollande have now offered France's nuclear power industry a new life and a new youth, totally unexpected. A second wind, with the prospect of further delays in the phasing out of this technology.

According to the agreement these politicians have worked out and then had adopted by their bodies (national office or federal council), "we will reduce France's dependency on nuclear-generated electricity from 75 % today to 50 % in 2025, and will set in motion an evolution of the existing assets with a view to reducing its power by a third by progressively closing 24 reactors, starting with Fessenheim immediately..."

Subtraction one: $58 - 24 = 34$. That leaves, after 2025, still 34 reactors operating, instead of the 22 that ought to be still surviving, according to EDF's generous age criterion of 40 years.

Subtraction two: $34 - 22 = 12$. The agreement between the EELV and the PS has thus saved 12 reactors from their « natural death » (mechanical death) - 12 reactors which the PS and EELV, exceeding the wishes of EDF and AREVA, are permitting to live past age 40. Twelve "old crocs" to which will be added 1 little youngster reactor that counts for 2, the EPR at Flamanville - 1650 MégaWatts exchanged for the 2 x 900 MW at Fessenheim, as from the first five-year term (if they win) of « the left and ecology » parties.

The EPR at Flamanville is a « little youngster » that will be aged around 10 in 2025 but will be promised 60 years of active life. Not counting all the little brothers which a defeat of the left (either in 2017 or 2012) will have given him. This is because (don't be misled) only two reactors are certain to be closed by 2017 - those at Fessenheim, the only ones expressly mentioned in the agreement, the two that Ségolène Royal had already promised to close when she campaigned in 2007. They are 34 years old now and will pass 40 before the end of 2017.

Of the 22 other candidates for closure, we know only that they are "more vulnerable, by being sited in seismic or flood zones, by their age and by the costs needed to ensure maximum safety". We are not told which they are or when they will be sold. Perhaps in 2024 or 2025? This proves only one thing: if even today the EELV negotiators have no precise list or calendar for closing reactors, that's because the delay of 25 years proclaimed as "possible but uncompressible" par Cécile Duflot on 21 March 2011 did not rest on any serious study, or anything at all, except a memory of old debates among the Greens. This doctrine was imposed as an unchallengeable edict within the EELV. And it should be challenged, at least as much as the PS-EELV agreement: Why 25 years? Why not 5, 10 or 15? Why not 10, which is two presidential mandates?

We're even a long way from a phase-out in 25 years. The shonky deal which the EELV ecologists have accepted enthusiastically (but not all, not Eva Joly!) is this: exchange two clapped out reactors, which had to be hosed down to limit their overheating during the last torrid summer, for a flagship EPR and for a promise to prolong the other reactors past 40 years. The negotiators and leaders seem to have made this promise without even noticing. Or worse - by hiding it from their supporters and federal councillors.

I nearly forgot one element of the deal : the 15 to 30 -35 parliamentary positions which the socialists shamelessly promised to the ecolos, knowing they might not win otherwise, but that they could easily govern without them once in power and assured of a parliamentary majority - thanks to the majorit majority vote which the pink tide of ambient

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anti-sarkozism seems at present to be promising them.

You spoke of: « nuclear phasing-out » ? No way ! EDF and AREVA could have never dreamt up a better deal. While AREVA was holding François Hollande's hand to make him delete a paragraph mentioning MOX which would be a red rage to the ecolos, AREVA was distracting everyone's attention from the key point: you change the personnel a bit, but not the policies. What we need most is atoms, power and filthy lucre!

As for phasing out nuclear weapons, this agreement seems at first sight to offer better prospects. There are phrases saying: "France will declare her availability for negotiations for nuclear disarmament that is universal, gradual, negotiated and monitoring." If that turns into reality it would be a real novelty, at a time when Nicolas Sarkozy is still going on about how "nuclear deterrence is the Nation's life-insurance." But really isn't Hollande saying that too? What his team of negotiators grant with one hand they take away with the other by requiring the clause that about that disarmament happening "without denying the legitimacy of an independent national deterrence as long as other arsenals exist".

Firstly, how can a defense policy based on the threat to annihilate entire populations, i.e. commit a crime against humanity, be considered legitimate?

Secondly, how can anyone still believe or tell voters that deterrence would be effective, that nuclear weapons would protect us from anything? Against terrorism, they are useless. Useless also against an aggressor state with nuclear weapons, because of massive reprisals. President Giscard d'Estaing had understood this and resolved never to use them first, not even if the Soviet Army occupied French territory. In fact they have no defensive uses and can at most serve as revenge-weapons against nuclear aggression - which would result in generalized massacre here and in the enemy's homeland. Their only conceivable use would be to attack a weaker country that doesn't have nuclear weapons - and that is neither glorious nor on the agenda (except in the fantasies which Jacques Chirac and Nicolas Sarkozy sometimes expressed in their speeches).

Finally, by recognising the "legitimacy" of these civilian-massacre weapons, one is deciding never to renounce them unilaterally.

Undoubtedly we must start with multilateral negotiations to eliminate the nuclear arsenals: that is already written into Article VI of the NPT, and that's what we certainly want. We don't just want a planet without French nuclear weapons (1.5 % of the total...), we want one without ANY nuclear weapons. If a referendum is needed, this the question for it: "Do you agree with France should participate with the other states concerned in the complete elimination of nuclear weapons, under mutual international monitoring that is strict and effective?" Such a question can be put at any time in the negotiations: beforehand, to legitimize and stimulate the process; during, to give weight to French diplomacy; and afterwards, to approve the result, if the negotiations have produced a draft treaty or convention for the complete elimination of nuclear weapons. The current constitution foresees precisely this case.

But if multilateral negotiations fail, as is possible, the time might come for France to renounce unilaterally these criminal weapons, to announce their dismantling, and to rejoin the ranks of the 184 states that don't have them. One five-second sentence, spoken by the right person at the right moment, could be enough. But that would require the Head of State to want to speak it (what if it was François Hollande?) and to not be prevented beforehand. Then and only then we would need a second referendum, on the subject of unilateral disarmament. And the same remark applies: the political movement calling for it must have not previously justified the retention of France's nuclear weapons! One wonders how EELV agreed to sign such a document. And I won't examine its attitude to NATO (we should quit but we're staying) which is unforced capitulation.

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A piece of advice to conclude: if you're pro-nuclear, don't hesitate to invest in EDF and AREVA. Then vote for Hollande. But if you are not, if you remember 27 December 1999 and the crisis at Fukushima-sur-Gironde, then ask for a visa to migrate to New Zealand. They have a few earthquakes there, but they have no nuclear weapons or nuclear plants to prolong any disaster for eternity. So they can live calmly. If the New Zealanders feel like a bust-up, they field their All Blacks - maybe not a "strike force" but quite sufficient for national pride and pretty good to watch too.

Short of emigrating, you still have one faint hope: that a woman of integrity who's intelligent and resolute, indeed incorruptible, might come and upset the political skittle-game, and might convince enough people to send all the careerist politicians packing. No, I don't mean Marine le Pen. I mean Eva Joly. A slim hope, I grant, but still a hope.

Saintes, 22 November 2011

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