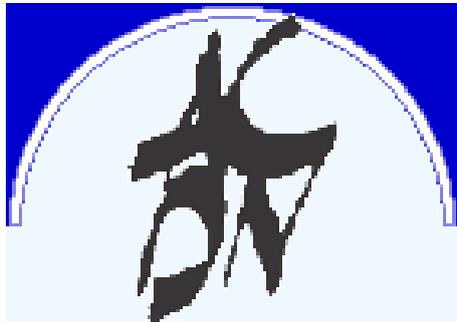


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Hinkley Point: damnable lobby, damnable decision!

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Hinkley Point C, twenty months later (June 2016): "Urgent decision"

We've been fearing that this would happen, and it has : Brussels has approved and will subsidise the project for EPR nuclear power-generation in the UK, to be built by Electricité de France (EDF) at Hinkley Point (SE England).

First of all, looking at the trivial considerations of money, one notes that the projected cost, 31 billion Euros for two EPRs, is ten times the 3 billion initially announced for the one EPR in Finland (at Olkiluoto). That means over 15 billion each...No less. Doubtless this results from « experience gained » at Olkiluoto, where the cost has already tripled without the facility being completed yet.

The overruns at Olkiluoto are essentially being paid for by French taxpayers, via the AREVA corporation (since the French State, with its CEA, holds an 86 % share) and the insurance company COFACE (Compagnie française d'assurance pour le commerce extérieur) which is tasked with guaranteeing « risky » export contracts - both military and civilian - on behalf of the State. Oddly, for a project in Finland far from the geopolitical zones judged « risky » in the early 2000s, this contract received a COFACE guarantee. Does that tell us that all EPR projects are judged risky ? Yet actually the events confirmed this perception of risk.

The Olkiluoto contract was signed in late 2003 by an Areva-led consortium to provide an EPR ready-to-go (finished !) for the Finnish electric group Teollisuuden Voima Oy (TVO). Construction began in September 2005. The reactor was scheduled to begin in mid-2009. Yet now in 2014 the construction is not yet complete, and it is not even certain that the plant can start working before the end of 2016, if ever. Seven years of delay : a mere trifle !

The explanation for this delay is truly extraordinary (Jacques Chirac might call it *abracadabrantisque*). Judge for yourselves. In 2006, Finland's agency for radiation security (STUK = Säteilyturvakeskus) listed 700 dysfunctions and anomalies in the security and safety of the worksite ... The STUK spoke of « inadequate preparation » on the part of AREVA and laxity in « the quality of work, ... the organisation and monitoring of activities onsite. » In addition, STUK said that for the construction of the steel liner that protects the reactor core, plans kept changing in a improper way, and that as a consequence some of the machining was done to obsolete plans. Moreover, some repairs were done without respect for planned procedures. The STUK said it was very hard to inspect the site because of these improper changes, and concluded that « Such a situation ought not to be possible in a correctly-functioning quality system ». (Source : Wikipédia)

The EPR currently under construction at Flamanville (France) under the aegis of EDF is experiencing similar malpractices, disappointments, delays and financial overruns - and these too are being charged to French taxpayers and EDF customers, present and future. If the UK project at Hinkley Point led by EDF encounters the same problems, what will the final bill amount to, how much will it really cost French and British taxpayers ? It is true that once the reactor is operating « if there prove to be higher profits than currently foreseen, the gains will be shared with British taxpayers. If the profits rise by 1% that will mean a saving of about 1.5 billion euros for the UK authorities. » But it is also true that this is a relatively unlikely scenario, and that the most probable outcome will see the British State using its taxpayers' money to subsidise EDF, as compensation for the losses the operator would otherwise bear.

Secondly, one notes that Hinkley Point is planned to operate for 60 years. That is the duration of pain and threat that the nuclear lobby inflicts wherever it tries to plant an EPR plant. At present, this means France, Finland, the UK, India, China... and by extension on all the countries and regions unlucky enough to share the same atmosphere. Remember the 1986 case of Chernobyl (Ukraine) and Corsica, among others.

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In France, to the 60 years planned for the first EPR, called "Flamanville 3", we must add the 40 years already ratified for the Westinghouse reactors currently in service. Over a century of nuclear electricity, of nuclear contamination, of nuclear waste that we don't know what to do with... of the risk or more precisely the probability of major nuclear accidents : that is the prospect offered to France and Europe by our nuke-loving governments, our nucleo-cratic financiers and engineers. And now by the European Commission, and it's not even a surprise.

Austria, a virtuous state opposed to nuclear weapons and nuclear power (Vienna hosts in December the 3rd governmental conference on the « humanitarian » effects of nuclear weapons), a state that even wrote an anti-nuclear clause into its constitution, is perfectly right to be angry at the Brussels decision to authorise British government aid to the nuclear operator. And is perfectly right to fear that « this autorisation boosts the prospects of nuclear power in Europe to the detriment of renewable energies. »

Thirdly, one notes that the neo-liberal sacred cow of « free and unfettered » competition, that has prevailed in Europe since the Lisbon treaty, has a very variable geometry. To justify this huge infringement of the principle of banning state subsidies, the Commission argues that « the operator would have found it impossible to obtain the necessary funds in the markets alone, because of the exceptional size and nature of the project. » Why impossible? Because nuclear technology is too risky and unprofitable, even from the strict viewpoint of capitalist profit. The British company *Centrica*, which had taken a 20% share in the project, withdrew last year invoking problems of cost and delay. And Peter Atherton, an analyst for *Liberum Capital*, who had already judged the agreed subsidies for Hinkley Point as « economically mad », maintains that he has not changed his view since the Brussels decision.

To sum up, the construction of EPRs in the UK is going the way of the construction of future Trident nuclear subs : it's banknotes thrown into the ocean. Even if not everybody loses, obviously. How fortunate that Nation States are there to support the great nuclear enterprise (as EDF is hoping now as it asks for help from two Chinese companies supported by the Beijing government).

Oh Atom, when you hold us in your power...

One flicker of hope - Austria has decided to appeal to the European Court of Justice against this decision for the Commission in Brussels.

Jean-Marie Matagne

(TO BE CONTINUED)