

France's love affair with nuclear power

Be aware that this is a far left newspaper with 'Greenpeace-type' reporters.

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As the debate on nuclear power reaches critical mass in Britain with the publication of the government's energy review, Tony Blair may well be casting envious glances at France, writes Mark Tran.

The prime minister is already coming under heavy fire from environmentalists and some of his own Labour MPs for wanting to build new nuclear plants to replace the existing 13 as these come to the end of their working life.

But in contrast to the British, the French seem quite blasé about nuclear power. The French have led a peaceful coexistence with nuclear power for years.

In the 1950s, the imperious General de Gaulle decided that nuclear power was the way to assure energy independence. The oil crisis of the 1970s, when oil prices quadrupled only strengthened the French elite's belief in nuclear energy.

Today, France has 59 nuclear reactors producing a whopping 80% of its electricity needs.

Nuclear power is also a nice little earner for the French. France is the world's largest net exporter of electricity, which makes up the country's fourth biggest export. Those electricity exports – including to the UK – bring in about 3 billion euro a year.

Apart from the economic benefits – electricity prices are also cheap – various other reasons have been put forward for the French public's relaxed attitude to nuclear power. They range from a pride in big infrastructure projects such as the TGV high speed train to the desire for energy independence to an aggressive PR campaign by the government.

A recent opinion poll showed that 52% were in favour of nuclear power; just 36% against. But this does not mean that the French have no misgivings whatsoever. Riots broke out in the 1980s in those rural regions where French engineers began digging exploratory holes to bury nuclear waste.

It seemed that while they were all in favour of power stations, the French were not so keen to have the waste in their backyards. Nuclear waste has turned out to be a big headache and could dim the French love affair with nuclear energy.

It took a 15-year review to decide what to do with nuclear waste, including some 220,000 tonnes of depleted uranium. Finally, in June the French parliament approved a proposal to bury the country's stock of high-level nuclear waste.

That was the easy part, though. The problem has been essentially shelved as France will not choose a site until 2015 for the burial of nuclear waste in rock formations below the earth's surface, with storage beginning in 2025. France literally could be storing up problems for the future.

Moreover the nuclear consensus is no longer so clear-cut. Only one French expert has abandoned the nuclear ship. Dr Bernard Laponche worked on the French government's

nuclear programme. Now out of that job, he thinks it was a big mistake. "Nuclear power," he told the BBC recently, "is the most dangerous way to boil water that mankind has ever invented."