

German nuclear power

Local difficulties

Hamburg

West German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt will need to do some political juggling in the next few weeks if he is to maintain the credibility of plans to expand West Germany's nuclear energy programme to lessen dependence on oil imports. The dilemma stems from a decision last week by local members of his own Social Democrat Party (SPD) in Hamburg that the city should not contribute 50 per cent of the costs of a new nuclear power station planned for Brokdorf, 40 miles away.

Despite support for the power station from several local and national trades union, the Hamburg SPD accepted the arguments of the city's mayor, Herr Hans Ulrich Klose, that it was more important to base future energy policy on energy conservation than to support significantly increased production of electricity by nuclear means.

The Brokdorf plant, which would be built and operated by the Hamburg Electrical Utility, has become something of a symbol for the German anti-nuclear movement. Two years ago it was the scene of the first of a series of violent demonstrations against nuclear power which culminated in the decision to withdraw plans for a major storage and reprocessing facility at Gorleben.

Chancellor Schmidt, in putting considerable political weight behind the Brokdorf proposal, seems to have been gambling on an apparent decline in popular anti-nuclear sentiment over the past two years. The link between growing economic problems and OPEC oil prices is increasing pressures to proceed with the construction of nine new nuclear power stations.

Mayor Klose's arguments against Brokdorf were expressed more in local than national terms. He pointed out, for example, that although the country as a whole at present relies on nuclear energy for only 10 per cent of its energy needs, the completion of the Brokdorf plant would increase Hamburg's dependence from 30 to 70 per cent.

"How can we encourage energy saving when we blindly push ahead with nuclear power that may well prove to be superfluous to our needs?" Herr Klose asked a meeting of the local SPD, in a debate which ended with a vote against the plans.

The decision is not yet final, since it will have to be taken formally by the Hamburg Senate, which meets this week to vote on the city's participation in Brokdorf. However, it is unlikely that the view of the ruling SPD will not prevail.

The Brokdorf situation has already become a major political embarrassment to Chancellor Schmidt, who has made a commitment to other European leaders that his

nation will make a major effort to reduce its dependence on foreign oil.

The SPD's position is that, pending the resolution of the waste disposal issues, the construction of nuclear power plants already under way should continue, as long as an adequate form of temporary disposal has been agreed.

In Hamburg, a plan for dealing with waste has been produced that seems to meet the conditions laid down by local port authorities. But the local SPD's decision — which runs directly contrary to Herr Schmidt's plans — has already been described by Hamburg's Interior Minister as a possible precedent for other nuclear stations.

The political problems raised by Hamburg's actions have further exacerbated tensions at a national level, where Herr Schmidt needs a viable energy policy to maintain the SPD's coalition with the Free Democratic party, but is finding his position on nuclear energy out of line with that of a large proportion of his own party.

For example, in Hamburg's neighbouring state Schleswig Holstein, the national SPD feels it has a chance of defeating the ruling Christian Democrats in the next elections. However, as in Hamburg, the local SPD is also opposed to the Brokdorf plans.

Not surprisingly, the national SPD has been somewhat embarrassed by Herr Klose's firm anti-nuclear stance. Some local SPD members who do not support the mayor's position had been hoping that he would be replaced by Herr Hans Apel, currently Defence Minister in Bonn, who supports Chancellor Schmidt's position. However, other political pressures make it unlikely that Herr Schmidt would agree to such a weakening of his own cabinet.

David Dickson

EEC nuclear research

Reactor guarded

Brussels

The go-ahead on the European Community's light water reactor (LWR) experiment, the Super-Sara project, is expected to be given at a meeting in Brussels this week. The ten member states' permanent representatives to the Community (Coreper) will be deliberating on a report by the Council of Ministers' Working Group on Atomic Questions before deciding whether or not to release the main bulk of the funds for the three-year programme (1981-83).

In March last year, the Nine, on the insistence of the French, allocated an initial grant of 3.31 European Units of Account (EUA), or £1.7 million, for the exploratory stage of the project. During the previous six months, the member states had been deeply divided as to whether the research was really necessary or justified at the price. Initial estimates put the cost of the programme at 43.92 million EUA but inflation

and salary increases have now increased this to 54.03 million EUA.

The project makes use of the Community's Essor experimental reactor at Ispra in Italy, which, having served its original purpose, would otherwise become redundant. Italy is unwilling to take over financial responsibility for Essor and through the Super-Sara project, drawn up in 1979 in the wake of the Three Mile Island accident, the Commission is willing to take this on. It aims to simulate as far as possible the complete gamut of accidents which might occur in light water reactors. More extensive than similar projects in West Germany (the Rebeka reactor), France (Phébus) and the United States (PBF and MRBT), the simulated accidents include loss of coolants from small and large cracks, the exposure and fusion of the core, the effect of the containment breaking up, the monitoring of events in and outside the core and the possibilities of recooling the core.

The real task of the Commission since the project was agreed in principle last March has been to define the areas where the Community could benefit. The report which formed the basis of the Commission's communication to the Group on Atomic Questions was drawn up by a task force composed of experts from the member states, and the decision taken at the Coreper meeting will reflect the extent to which the task force has been successful.

The United Kingdom's original position — that the project is a good idea but in practice would be too expensive — changed after the March meeting to one of acceptance provided that the project went ahead as soon as possible. At that time, other member states, Germany and the Netherlands in particular, proposed carrying out the research in two stages and withholding much of the money until Super-Sara had proved its value. But postponing the project for two years, argues the Commission, would cost an extra 32 million EUA. Moreover, a follow-up programme planned for 1983-86 might produce particularly valuable results. France and many other countries are more worried that the project's costs will rise more steeply than predicted, with the high temperatures at which the experiments take place. France also feels that its own experimental reactor, Phébus, although smaller, will produce similar results just as quickly. On the other hand, the United Kingdom may now be prepared to come to the programme's defence in view of the recent decision to build the first British pressurized water reactor in the face of strong public opposition, and because of the United Kingdom's lack of safety expertise with light water reactors.

The Commission has been at pains to emphasize that it will ensure "a particularly rigorous control" of the costs and timetable. Another possible line of attack for the programme's detractors is the lack