

## THE NUCLEAR DEBATE IN AUSTRIA

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Austria has plans to build 2 or 3 nuclear power plants prior to 1985. The construction of the first began in 1971 at Zwentendorf, located on the Danube about 40 km upstream and upwind from Vienna. It is a G.E.-type boiling water reactor with about 700 MW(e) built by the German KWU. Initial opposition to the plant was limited to a small number of citizens, physicians, and scientists. Nuclear power plant construction and operation licensing under the Austrian radiation-protection law (Strahlenschutzgesetz) takes place behind closed doors with no opportunity for public to participate or to challenge such licenses in the courts. There are well-known law professors who argue that the radiation protection law is, therefore, in violation of the Austrian constitution.

In 1974, plans to build a second nuclear power plant were announced. The proposed site is near Linz in Upper-Austria also on the Danube, close to a heavily industrialized area. Strong Bürgerinitiativen (Citizen Action Groups) soon began their activities. They collected some 80,000 signatures against the St. Pantaleon Plant, and revealed for the first time official plans for a huge industrialization program which would destroy important watersheds and recreational areas in a large region of the Danube.

Growing public concern, the diminishing growth rate of electrical consumption, and the impending elections (October 1975) led to postponement of the construction of St. Pantaleon plant in the Spring of 1975. At that time, Chancellor Dr. Kreisky indicated that the important national decision -- "whether Austria should go nuclear" -- should be made with the participation of an informed citizenry. He directed the Ministry of Commerce and Industry,

which is responsible for energy development, to prepare a public information campaign. The Ministry of Health and Environmental Protection was not to be involved.

The two phase campaign started in October 1976. The first phase was to consist of ten public "discussions of facts" on various aspects of atomic power, each conducted in a different Austrian city. Participants in their discussions were "neutral experts" from Austria and elsewhere in Europe, including Germany, Switzerland and Sweden.

The last "discussion of facts" was to be held (on biological and medical risks associated with nuclear power) on March 24, 1977 in Vienna.

The discussion was cancelled just two days before by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry which claimed that it wanted to avoid expected disturbance by "political extremists". On March 24th, previously-scheduled demonstrations against nuclear power took place in many Austrian cities and towns. The largest one in Vienna, involving at least 3000 people of various political and non-political affiliations, was orderly and completely without any violence. This indicates that the rumors about "political extremists" were not justified and that the efforts to split the antinuclear movement did not succeed.

The second phase of the public information campaign which consists of "discussions of opinions" will start in May. It is supposed to provide various interest groups with the chance to express their views on nuclear energy on the basis of the "facts" developed in the first phase of the campaign. The opponents of nuclear power, organized in a national coalition of over 50 groups, asked that the "discussions of opinion" be public and that politicians be permitted to attend and speak. The Ministry refused and the opponents have decided not to participate.

Kreisky's promise of a national public decision on nuclear power in Austria appears increasingly to be a charade.

First, the big opposition party in the Parliament, which was supposed to receive the reports produced in the discussion of fact and opinion and then make a decision on Austria's nuclear future, are now arguing that the Government must first make its own decision and then present <sup>that</sup> to the Parliament for consideration.

Second, the Government is moving ahead with plans to begin the first loading of nuclear fuel into the Zwentendorf reactor in just a few weeks.

Kreisky has also said that the Zwentendorf plant will not be permitted to operate until the problems of disposal of the spent nuclear fuel are solved. There has been substantial opposition to a proposed disposal site in Lower Austria. It is not clear at this time whether Kreisky's promise will be kept.

The debate over nuclear energy in Austria is becoming more intense and Public awareness is growing. In recent weeks, the major newspapers have begun to run for the first time series of articles on nuclear power. The opponents of nuclear power will focus their activities in the next months on the Zwentendorf plant. They hope to persuade the Government not to allow the loading or start up of the reactor, but rather to convert the plant to conventional powers. Austria still has a chance for a non-nuclear future today.

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