

'The end of Euratom?' from La France catholique (25 March 1966)

Caption: On 25 March 1966, the French newspaper La France catholique considers the real reasons for the failure of Euratom's policy and advocates a reorganisation of the research programmes of the European Atomic Energy Community (EAEC).

Source: La France catholique. 25.03.1966. [s.l.]. "Veut-on tuer l'Euratom", auteur:Frisch, Alfred.

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The end of Euratom?

Research is Europe's neglected child

by Alfred Frisch

The decision by Germany and France to strengthen their cooperation in the field of scientific and technical research, following a personal initiative by Chancellor Erhard, is very welcome. After a long period of relative indifference to French overtures, the German government has finally understood that national efforts in this complicated and costly field are increasingly limited.

The first joint project has already been decided upon: the construction in Grenoble of an atomic research reactor under the auspices of an institute directed by a German professor, which will employ over 100 people. But one swallow doesn't make a summer, and an intergovernmental decision does not always lead to genuine coordination of research. In fact, the current European situation is quite dismal in this area. Out of a misplaced sense of economy, Britain has just announced its intention to withdraw from the joint European organisation responsible for developing a powerful launcher for a large European satellite.

To well-informed observers, the situation of Euratom, the European Atomic Energy Community, appears particularly critical. It is no exaggeration to ask outright whether the governments of the Member States still want Euratom to be successful or wish to condemn the Community to a slow death.

Following the collapse of the European army project in August 1954, European cooperation in atomic energy was considered by all parties as the only way out of a serious crisis. Subsequently, the success of the Common Market quickly pushed Euratom into the background, but that is no reason to waste a real opportunity for Europe by failing to make the Community work properly.

Before discussing its difficulties, let us recapitulate Euratom's principles and objectives: coordinating Member States' research programmes; establishing joint research centres that give the whole atomic energy sector a Community impetus; developing cost-effective power reactors to ensure an economical supply of atomic energy in Europe; and enhancing the competitive potential of the European atomic energy industry.

To describe Euratom's current situation and give the measure of the failure of this commendable and indispensable European endeavour, we need only point out that the Community's first objective has not been achieved even in part, and that those who wish to revive it no longer dare demand that national research programmes be coordinated, but merely ask for regular compulsory comparisons that will provide a practical incentive for governments to reflect upon the usefulness of a perfectly reasonable degree of coordination.

The concentration of efforts envisaged when Euratom was established has been replaced by an unbelievable dispersion. Each Member State has tried to grab the largest possible share of the European funding available. As a result, a whole range of joint research centres have been set up in Italy, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands, instead of one or two large centres.

Numerous association contracts have been signed to allow Euratom to put money into a very large number of national projects of all kinds without having any real influence on them and without using its financial leverage to coordinate research. National research centres have clearly preferred Euratom to have only a minority holding.

In principle, any national centre that receives funding should automatically be sent nuclear scientists or technicians employed directly by Euratom, in order to maintain organic links throughout Europe. Unfortunately, on several occasions, the Council of Ministers has refused to allocate Euratom the funds needed to hire such staff, so that most of the association contracts are of little European value.

To get things back on track, the award of association contracts would have to be governed by a strictly European policy, rather than being used to share out Euratom funds in the interests of national research.

Secondly, efforts would have to be concentrated on developing modern cost-effective reactors in one or two well-equipped European research centres, which presupposes the reconversion of several research centres set up in response to barely legitimate national demands.

Unfortunately, things are not moving in this direction. Although Euratom's latest research budget of almost 100 million dollars for the current year is quite impressive, it is insufficient because it is spread far too widely. The national governments refuse to understand that efficient use of the Ispra centre means stepping up expenditure as research progresses. The Council of Ministers has refused to increase funding for Ispra — or to drop a number of secondary projects at Ispra and elsewhere — in order to give project leaders the means to pursue their basic research to the appropriate extent.

Euratom is thus heading further and further down a dead-end street. Its only hope lies in the merger of the executives and a single Commission that will successfully defend European interests vis-à-vis national governments, rather than acting — as the present Commission of the European Atomic Energy Community too often has — as a conscientious manager of national interests.

A few figures will show how serious the situation is. In 1964 the six countries of the Common Market spent about 800 million dollars on nuclear research and development, i.e. approximately the same amount as the United States. Yet the United States can supply power reactors at competitive prices throughout the world, while the European atomic energy industry still has a long way to go before it comes of age.

That 800 million dollars represented 20 % of the total value of all electricity produced in the Common Market in 1964 — an exceptionally high ratio of research to output. This shows that there is regrettable and harmful waste, and makes the rational reorganisation of Euratom more necessary than ever.