Britain Chooses U.S.-Designed Reactor

London

Britain's largest electric utility, the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB), has been given the green light to build its first U.S.-style pressurized water nuclear reactor (PWR), following the longest public inquiry in the nation's history.

A report published in London on 26 January by the head of the inquiry, Sir Frank Layfield, endorsed the CEGB's arguments that a PWR should be built at Sizewell, on the Suffolk coast 70 miles northeast of London. As a result, the government is expected to authorize the construction of the power station within the next few months.

Sir Frank, who listened to arguments from individuals and groups both supporting and opposing the CEGB's plans for over 2 years, and subsequently spent 18 months drawing up his 3000-page report, said that he did not accept all of the CEGB's calculations. For example, he expressed reservations about those which, it was claimed, demonstrated clear economic advantages of nuclear power over electricity generated by coal.

In general, however, he said that the CEGB had proved the case that the planned nuclear power plant at Sizewell was justified on economic grounds, and was likely to meet acceptable levels of safety—an issue that has been particularly controversial, given the public debate in Britain on the consequences of the nuclear accident with the PWR at Three Mile Island.

Sir Frank said that, based on the figures he had been provided, he calculated that one or two workers at the power station were eventually likely to die as the result of contracting radiation-induced cancers. He also admitted that the power station would have "great and lasting environmental disadvantages."

However he added that, in his judgment, "the expected national economic benefits are sufficient to justify the risks that would be incurred" by the construction of the reactor—known as Sizewell B—which will be the second unit on the Sizewell site.

The CEGB's proposal to build a PWR, based on designs developed by Westinghouse, had been strongly resisted by many members of the British nuclear research community. They have continued to support the British-designed advanced gas reactor (AGR), of which 5 are currently in operation, and a further 2 are under construction.

Sir Frank's report has considerable praise for the AGR. However, it says that, in the long run, the PWRs will "probably" be cheaper to operate than the AGRs—a comment that reflects the relatively lower performance of the AGRs, and was one of the main reasons given by the CEGB for choosing the American design.

The report's conclusions have already been strongly attacked by many of the antinuclear groups, which led a sustained campaign against the CEGB's plans. A spokesman for the British section of Friends of the Earth, for example, said that the organization was "very disappointed" with Sir Frank's conclusions, pointing out that these appear to have been based entirely on evidence provided prior to the nuclear accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in the Soviet Union last April.

In contrast, the report has been welcomed both by the CEGB and by the British government. The energy secretary, Peter Walker, said last week that there would be full debate in the British House of Commons before any definite decision is made to proceed with construction. However, given the clean bill of health that the PWR has now received on technical, economic, and safety grounds, there is little doubt in Britain that such a decision will be forthcoming within the relatively near future. The power station is expected to be in operation by 1995, and is estimated to cost $2.3 billion. ■

DAVID DICKSON

New Look for House Committee

Robert A. Roe (D–NJ), the new chairman of the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology has moved quickly to put his stamp on the committee. He has told members he intends to establish a special task force on technology policy—which would put the committee firmly in the midst of the congressional debate over international competitiveness—and has pushed through a change in subcommittee jurisdictions, collapsing two energy panels into one and creating a subcommittee concerned with international cooperation in science. These changes were approved by the committee's members on 28 January.

Roe himself has claimed the chairmanship of the subcommittee on investigations and oversight, a post that gives him plenty of latitude to range over most of the issues within the committee's overall jurisdiction.

The two energy panels are now consolidated into a single subcommittee on energy research and development under the chairmanship of Marilyn Lloyd (D–TN), who headed one of the panels in the last Congress. The change reflects the shrinking federal role in energy programs.

The new international subcommittee, formally called the subcommittee on international scientific cooperation, will be chaired by Ralph Hall (D–TX). It will deal with such prickly issues as European-U.S. warring over participation in the space station and international cooperation in the Superconducting Super Collider.

Doug Walgren (D–PA) retains the chairmanship of the subcommittee on science, research, and technology, which will continue to oversee the National Science Foundation and the National Bureau of Standards. James Scheuer (D–NY) will remain as head of the subcommittee on natural resources, agriculture research, and environment, which will now be the locus in the committee for biotechnology policy. And Bill Nelson (D–FL) will continue to chair the subcommittee on space science and applications.

One change is that George Brown (D–CA), a longtime member of the committee, has decided to relinquish the chairmanship of the subcommittee on transportation, aviation, and materials in order to claim chairmanship of a subcommittee of the Agriculture Committee. Dave McCurdy (D–OK) will fill his old spot.

Together with its new look, the committee has a new name. Late last year, the House approved the addition of the word "space" to the committee's title to reflect its responsibilities for space policy.

To judge by its first hearing of the session, on the Reagan Administration's science budget, the committee is also adopting a more aggressive stance. A succession of members took turns to lambast the Administration, citing the lack of an overall space policy, the military's growing share of the R&D budget, the paucity of funds for science education, the lack of attention to energy programs, and the confusion over biotechnology regulation. On several occasions, members seemed unsatisfied with the bland responses of the witness, William Graham, President Reagan's science adviser, and demanded written answers. Graham, for one, was made aware that the committee has changed. ■ **COLIN NORMAN**