



Managing radioactive waste

The need for a long-term political vision

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The long-term management of radioactive waste from French nuclear power plants is a political issue that has been the subject of debate over many years. Since the end of the 1980s, Parliament has passed three acts enabling a national strategy to be established.

The French Parliament addressed the problem of waste management at the end of the 1980s. The government had authorized an exploratory program to search for a geological area suitable for deep disposal of waste. However, the population of the regions concerned (Ain, Aisne, Maine-et-Loire, Deux-Sèvres) reacted very strongly to the initiative because it felt its voice hadn't been heard.

The Prime Minister at the time, Michel Rocard, put an end to the program and left it to Parliament to carry out in-depth consultations to find a solution. In 1990, Christian Bataille, Member of Parliament, was given the task of submitting a report on the strategy for radioactive waste management on behalf of the Parliamentary Office for the Assessment of Scientific and Technological Choices (Office Parlementaire d'Evaluation des Choix Scientifiques et Technologiques, OPECST).

The report presented a set of measures offering a new approach to this issue, which at the time was at an impasse. These measures subsequently formed the basis of a first French law on waste management, passed on 30 December 1991, which, among other things, established guidelines for scientific research into radioactive waste^(a).

Since the early 1990s, the issue of radioactive waste management has been addressed with remarkable political continuity, both by successive governments and by successive majorities in Parliament, with the support of the opposition.

For example, the 1991 act was unanimously passed in the National Assembly under a left-wing government. Fifteen years later, the first law on radioactive waste was passed unanimously by a right-wing government: the act of 28 June 2006 on the sustainable management of radioactive materials and waste^(b). This law also adheres to the timetable drawn up in 1991, which called for an evaluation of the results of research on radioactive waste after 15 years, prior to a further parliamentary vote.

Ten years later, in accordance with the requirements of the 2006 act, the act of 25 July 2016 specifies the procedures for creating a reversible deep geological disposal facility at Bure-Saudron (Meuse/Haute-Marne)^(c). It follows the filing of a number of similar bills in the French National Assembly and Senate by members of parliament with different political leanings (Gérard Longuet, Christian Namy, Jean-Yves Le Déaut, Christian Bataille). It was also passed, by a very large majority, in both houses of Parliament, with the exception of a few opponents of the nuclear industry.

Candidates in the 2017 presidential election proposed to halt the project for an industrial-scale geological disposal facility and storing the waste until a final solution is reached. However, storage could increase safety and security risks and delay the search for an agreed solution. Whether one is for or against nuclear power, nuclear waste exists and to do

nothing today would be to leave it to future generations to solve the problem^(d).

As far as the energy sector is concerned, any policy adopted in the short-term via an electoral mandate must take into account the long-term implications, the unit of time in this field being of the order of half a century^(e). For example, the future deep geological storage facility is planned to be built around 2035, almost 50 years after Parliament first considered the issue, and will operate for at least 100 years. The continuation of this industrial and scientific endeavor will require political decision-makers to reconcile short and long-term interests. ■

a. Act No. 91-1381 of 30 December 1991 on research into radioactive waste management, known as the Bataille Law.

b. Act No. 2006-739 of 28 June 2006 on the sustainable management of radioactive materials and waste.

c. Act No. 2016-1015 of 25 July 2016 specifying the terms and conditions for the creation of a deep geological repository for the reversible storage of high-level and intermediate-level long-lived radioactive waste.

d. On the question of waste, see several articles, in particular that of B. Romagnan (p. 14), and the interview with C. Stéphan and P. Barbey (p. 19).

e. On the question of policy measures over a number of decades, particularly in relation to global warming, see the article by S. Bouneau (p. 46), and that of N. Maïzi and F. Briens (p. 49).