



Saving children with nuclear power

Belgium is preparing itself for a national debate on keeping open its nuclear power stations. The industry spent €2 million on a media campaign, which seems to have had some effect.

| by Remco de Jong

"You are in favour of nuclear energy because you want to save your children from global warming!"

This was one of the slogans used earlier this year by the Belgian Nuclear Forum in an attempt to reopen the debate on the planned closure of the Belgian nuclear power stations. The forum, which represents the major players in the nuclear sector, is spending 2 million on a large pro-nuclear media campaign.

The Belgian government decided in 2003 that all nuclear reactors in Belgium are

to be closed down from 2015 on. This was the result of a coalition agreement with some green parties. The law regulating the closure, however, contains one passage that provides an opt-out. If it transpires that there are insufficient alternative supply options, the so-called "nuclear stop" can be challenged.

The Nuclear Forum's media campaign angered nuclear energy opponents and resulted in complaints with the Minister of Energy and the supervisory body for correct

and ethical advertising. For instance, campaigners put the proposition "you want nuclear energy because you want an uninterrupted supply of electricity" versus "you are against nuclear energy because you only want green energy". This suggested that nuclear power provides more security for consumers, green politicians complained.

The campaign's main objective is to ensure a balanced debate on the future of the nuclear power stations in Belgium, says the Forum's spokesman Koen Beyaert.



Billboards of the Belgian Nuclear Forum campaign with a Greenpeace anti-nuclear campaign. Photo by: Greenpeace Belgium

'We want a debate based on arguments. Approximately 55% of Belgium's electricity is generated by nuclear power stations. People must realise what the impact of a shut-down will be.' One commercial shows a small thimble to illustrate how much nuclear waste is produced per head of the population. It was broadcast a thousand times on various Belgian television stations. 'The second part of the campaign will follow this autumn,' says Beyaert. He expects the political debate to flare up then, too.

Manipulation |

Belgian cabinet members have commissioned numerous studies in the past few years to check whether Belgium can do without nuclear energy. The latest report, drawn up by the Energy 2030 committee, concludes that it is unrealistic to close down the nuclear power stations. 'It is prohibitively expensive for Belgium to reduce CO2 emissions by 20% in 2020 without nuclear power. CO2-free electricity production and the purchase of emission rights are just too expensive,' says William D'haeseleer, chairman of the Committee. D'haeseleer is professor at the University of Leuven and is considered an authority on energy. He is controversial as he has carried out research for industry. 'In other countries, it is appreciated when academics work with the industry', he counters, 'as this keeps them in touch with the shop

floor. I challenge those critics to refute our work and our figures.'

The 2030 Committee calculated that pushing CO2 emissions back by 15% without nuclear power and without buying emission credits abroad, would result in a price increase of 170% by 2030. If a reduction of 30% were decided on, the increase would be 420%. If nuclear power

'The nuclear energy lobby is led by the Elysee'

stations were to remain open and CSS techniques for the capture and storage of CO2 were to be available, price increases would be much more limited. Belgium only has limited possibilities to save on energy consumption and use renewable energy sources, D'haeseleer notes. The committee calculated that if all planned green energy projects go ahead, this will cost 50 billion over the next twenty years. On top of that, large investments would be required for grid connections. The connection of a large offshore wind park costs an estimated 700 million. To adapt the electricity grid for the connection of small-scale producers, with solar panels for instance, would cost 20 billion. Buying emission credits abroad would cost 15 to 20 billion through 2030.

Jan Vande Putte, nuclear energy specialist for Greenpeace, can only see one reason why Electrabel and parent company Suez wish to prolong the use of the Belgian power stations. 'Electrabel has depreciated the power stations at an accelerated rate and passed the costs on to the consumers. It is now making enormous profits. Maintaining windfall

profits is its only motivation.' According to Vande Putte, it is undesirable or even impossible to expand nuclear power stations, not just because of the waste problem but also for financial reasons.

Jacques de Ruycck, professor at the Free University in Brussels, who specialises in renewable energy, supports the conclusions of the Energy 2030 committee. 'Green parties and other opponents of nuclear energy believe that the closure of nuclear power stations will provide leverage to set up renewable energy. That is incorrect. Research shows that those power stations will be replaced by gas-fired power stations that also emit CO2. Furthermore, renewable



energy and economy measures will only generate minor CO2 gains. The greens just don't want to believe that.'

De Ruyck, who sees climate change as mankind's enemy number one, says it is impossible to replace nuclear energy in Belgium by renewable sources. 'There is not enough sun, we have no hydro possibilities, our coast is very short and there is a lot of opposition to wind turbines on land. If you want to replace 4,000 MW generated by nuclear power stations with wind turbines at sea, you will need to install 12,000 MW at various off shore sites as the wind does not always blow. You will also need a super grid to transport that electricity.' Biomass is not a solution either. 'If we were to use all biomass available in Belgium we could generate 10% of our electricity.'

Elysee |

'We don't necessarily have to generate renewable energy in Belgium', Vande

Putte counters. 'The North Sea provides enormous potential. We need to tackle this problem on a European scale.' He foresees a tremendous power struggle between the Belgian state and the French government. 'The nuclear energy lobby is led by the Elysee, the palace of French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Suez owns the Belgian nuclear power stations. Which other EU country would let something like that happen? Paris decides on the electricity for the Belgian market.'

Lut Vande Velde, spokeswoman for Electrabel, does not want to comment on the political debate. 'We are generally confident, however, that nuclear energy will continue to be a part of the production capacity in the European market. We must be realistic and conclude that we need nuclear energy for our energy supply.' Technically speaking, there are no restrictions to keep the Belgian power stations open, she says. 'We need a decision no later than the

end of this year in order to make timely investments.'

At the beginning of April, Belgian Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy said that the nuclear energy debate will be one of the focus points that his government will decide on this year. Government parties are divided. Parti Socialiste is hesitant, facing competition from the green Ecolo party, which is far ahead in the opinion polls. The liberal parties tend to be in favour of a prolonged use. So do Van Rompuy's Christian-Democrats.

Meanwhile, opinion polls show that 46% of the Belgian population is in favour of keeping the nuclear power plants open and only 15% believe the closure plan must be followed strictly. According to a poll of the agency Brandhome, the campaign of the Nuclear Forum reached 72% of Belgian households. Of these, over 80% say they have not changed their opinion. 12% say they have begun to think more positively about nuclear power. ■



The village of Doel near Antwerpen. Photo by: Peter Hiltz/Hollandse Hoogte