

# Renouncing Nuclear Power

Jay Watkinson

## The German response to Fukushima

Faced with the ongoing nuclear crisis in Japan and increasing pressure coming from the opposition side of politics, the current 'black-yellow' coalition of the Christian Democratic Party (CDU), its sister party the Christian Social Union (CSU) and the Free Democratic Party (FDP), led by Chancellor Angela Merkel, recently reversed its previous support for nuclear power and decided to temporarily close down seven nuclear power plants and reassess the extension of the operating lives of all nuclear plants in the country. Seeing as though the current government only last year overturned the 'Nuclear Exit Law' that the previous Social Democratic-Green government had negotiated with the power industry by extending the operating times of nuclear plants by an average of twelve years, this policy reversal is nothing short of stunning and could turn out to be a defining event in the anti-nuclear movement in Germany, as well as Merkel's chancellorship. As Europe's largest economy and a would-be leader in international affairs, the reaction of both the German population and their government to the Fukushima incident is being watched carefully around the world, but in order to understand recent events better, we need to examine the forces at work in this long-running national debate.

### Why is the anti-nuclear movement so strong in Germany?

The burden of history hangs heavily over every country, but perhaps none so more than Germany. Unified as a single nation-state for the first time in 1871, the country has since lived through defeat in the First World War and the subsequent end of its imperial monarchy; a failed experiment with liberal democracy and the rise of National Socialism, catastrophic defeat in the Second World War; and the partition of the country during the Cold War, where it was the main front in the stand-off between NATO and the Warsaw Pact and dominated on the respective sides by the opposing superpowers within those blocs. The effects of these twentieth-century episodes have left indelible marks on Germany's political landscape, and have given impetus to numerous

social movements that have reacted to conditions or events within the context of, and fully aware of, this history.

The anti-nuclear movement emerged out of the broader peace movement that became strong during the turbulence of the late 1960s and 1970s, a generation after the end of the Second World War. Growing up surrounded by the physical and psychological scars of war as a reminder of what can happen if strategic policy decisions are not made in the interest of protecting peace, the (predominantly) young members of the anti-nuclear movement reacted to the stationing of nuclear weapons and the construction of nuclear power plants on German territory as if they were working to avoid a 'nuclear Auschwitz', as was articulated by leading member of the student protest movement and future Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer.

The connection between nuclear power and nuclear weapons was a strong element of the early anti-nuclear movement—a natural association given the dynamics of the Cold War. Since the Chernobyl disaster of 1986, which sparked an even fiercer anti-nuclear backlash in Germany than the Fukushima crisis has, the anti-nuclear movement has relied less on the connection to nuclear weapons to advance its arguments and instead uses the fear of nuclear accidents (from both power plants and waste storage sites) and the salient language of environmental protection to gain support from the mainstream. This has been a remarkably successful tactic: recent Infratest poll results indicate that 80 per cent of Germans oppose the extension of the operating lives of the nuclear plants and that just over 50 per cent want all of the country's nuclear plants shut down as soon as possible. However, although the anti-nuclear movement has evolved along with the historical events of the last four decades, its roots are without doubt to be found in the post-war generation's reaction to the horrors of National Socialism and their determination to avoid future catastrophes on German territory.

The anti-nuclear movement also benefits enormously from the political opportunity structures that exist for such social movements in Germany. Not only does the movement appeal



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to the aforementioned values that are held by a large section of the German population, nuclear issues are so well researched and debated that they also have an ability to disseminate information through the media that few other social movements can boast (the images of nuclear reactors exploding at the Fukushima plant are very effective campaign advertisements). Yet as much as this publicity forms the basis for mass mobilisation, truly successful social movements also need access to political decision-making as is determined by the institutional rules of the state, for example electoral laws. The anti-nuclear movement is fortunate to have the world's most successful Green political party, *Bündnis 90 / Die Grünen*, as its standard-bearer in the corridors of political power in Germany.

*Die Grünen*, which later merged with the East German civil rights movement *Bündnis 90* to create today's party, was formed out of the extra-parliamentary opposition milieu in the late 1970s as a vehicle for bringing the fight against the established powers in West Germany, including the fight against nuclear power, inside the system. The party was originally conceived as a platform for expressing the views of the protest movement without participating in government, but Germany's electoral laws, which stipulate that parties that receive at least 5 per cent of the national vote are represented proportionally in the federal parliament, have enabled *Die Grünen's* participation in all but one Bundestag since 1983. Although divided by factional fights in the 1980s, *Die Grünen* have since orientated themselves as a progressive, ecologically orientated alternative to the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and have successfully gained power through coalitions in eleven of Germany's sixteen states as well as at federal level.

As part of their coalition deal with the Social Democrats after the 1998 federal election, *Die Grünen* negotiated for the phased shutting down of old nuclear plants and a shift away from nuclear power by 2020, shaping nuclear energy policy from the highest level with a Green Minister for Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, Jürgen Trittin. Since losing government at the federal level in 2005, which saw the (until recently) pro-nuclear Christian Democrats and Free Democrats take power, the Greens have continued their anti-nuclear campaigning from the parliamentary opposition and at protests across the country. The party recently won the right to head their first ever state government in Baden-Württemberg, the bastion of German high-tech and automotive industries and previous heartland of the Christian Democrats—and if current opinion polls are any guide, the prospect of a Green chancellor is not entirely out of the question.

**Recent developments: genuine change in thinking or response to electoral pressure?**

There is much scepticism in Germany as to whether the governing coalition has had a genuine change of heart regarding nuclear power generation, and the general consensus seems to be that the decision to review the extension of the nuclear plants' operating lives was a tactic to try and shore up declining support in the electorate for the Christian Democrats and Free Democrats at both the federal and state level. Commentators have noted that the science behind nuclear power hasn't changed since the Fukushima crisis, which suggests that Merkel, a physical chemist by profession, is reacting to political pressure rather than genuine belief that nuclear power is an unsafe power source for Germany. Nonetheless, this shows that organised social movements can influence government policy directly, which is unquestionably a sign of a functioning democracy.

The stated reason for the decision to shut down the seven ageing plants was to allow for a full safety review to be conducted in the wake of Fukushima, but there is no doubt that the pressure being piled on governments by *Wutbürger* ('enraged citizen') movements have played a fundamental role in the astounding policy reversal. The phenomenon of the *Wutbürger* movements is causing major shifts in the German political landscape and is widely seen as being a challenge to previous models of governance. How governments and political parties respond to the heightened expectations of organised and educated groups of 'enraged citizens' while balancing economic and other political interests will be a defining feature of German politics in the immediate future, with the nuclear issue being the most prominent case to watch.

**The (predominantly) young members of the anti-nuclear movement reacted to the stationing of nuclear weapons and the construction of nuclear power plants on German territory as if they were working to avoid a 'nuclear Auschwitz'**

Nuclear power generation is an incredibly lucrative industry in Germany, generating billions of euros for the major energy companies every year. The influence of the energy generators in setting energy policy is accordingly huge, which leaves the already fractious black-yellow coalition in a real dilemma. Neither the CDU/CSU nor the FDP have any ideological problem with nuclear power generation, and it would seem that the decision to stop supporting the nuclear industry was a doomed attempt to avert losses in the recent state elections. The coalition parties have now trapped themselves with this issue for the time being, because to reverse their reversal would be disastrous for their already battered images in the public mind and would spell trouble for their re-election chances in 2013. Some commentators have interpreted Merkel's new anti-nuclear stance to mean she has abandoned hope of forming another coalition with the FDP and may be considering a coalition deal with the Greens after the next election.

### The future of nuclear power in Germany

The current situation leaves the future of the German nuclear power industry, which supplies around one quarter of the country's electricity requirements, at a crucial juncture; yet many questions remain unanswered. Given the passion that this issue generates, and the electoral results that it is helping to deliver around the country, it is perhaps unsurprising that Merkel is stalling on this issue, not wanting to make a firm commitment either to or against maintaining the extended nuclear plant life spans. Rational debate over nuclear energy policy is increasingly clouded by the passions aroused by the Fukushima incident and political manoeuvring from the centre-right political parties, and it is hard to predict whether the current federal government is just biding its time to see if the issue settles down or whether there is to be a genuine cross-party agreement on an accelerated phasing out of nuclear power in Germany.


Whatever happens, Germany will not be able to extricate itself from the nuclear issue in the future. Even if all of its seventeen nuclear reactors were turned off tomorrow, Germany would not be any safer from the threat of fallout from a nuclear meltdown, as many of the countries surrounding it have a strong reliance on nuclear power—France generates over 75 per cent of its electricity from fifty-eight nuclear power plants—while others are planning to build new nuclear power stations. The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Sweden and Hungary all currently use nuclear power for electricity generation and Poland is in the process of building a nuclear energy program. (It is interesting to note that the generation of electricity from nuclear power plants is illegal in Austria.) With the exception of Belgium and the Netherlands, which only has one nuclear plant, and Switzerland, which has recently decided not to build any new nuclear reactors, there is no real prospect of the major nuclear energy producing countries phasing out nuclear power in the foreseeable future.

While there are of course strong anti-nuclear movements in many European countries, the global trend seems to be going in the opposite direction. There are now over 440 nuclear reactors operational in thirty-one countries, which together generate around 14 per cent of the world's electricity needs, and there are plans for this number to more than double over the next fifteen to twenty years, with China, India, Russia and the United States all planning large expansions of their already considerable nuclear programs. Any move away from nuclear power in Germany would undoubtedly have a significant impact around the world, but in the face of the challenges posed by climate change and peak oil, which make nuclear energy an increasingly attractive option for cheap, low-carbon base-load electricity, it seems unlikely that the future of nuclear power in other countries, particularly in the developing world, is likely to be so dramatically threatened.

## How governments respond to the heightened expectations of organised groups of *Wutbürger* ('enraged citizen') movements while balancing economic and other political interests will be a defining feature of German politics in the immediate future.

For Germany to completely renounce nuclear energy, a massive investment in coal, gas and renewable energy sources will be required—meaning higher electricity prices or higher taxes, which will affect many of Germany's energy-intensive industries—as well as a reduction in overall energy consumption through energy efficiency programs. The potential costs to the German economy, the 'engine room' of Europe, in terms of driving manufacturers overseas are significant, meaning that this is a high-stakes game that politicians are playing.

The coalition government is due to release a plan for Germany's new 'energy concept' in June after it reviews the reports from both the recently-appointed safety and ethics commissions, and it is widely expected that a date around 2022 will be announced for the final nuclear plants to be shut down. There is debate as to whether this date is realistic, but if this early nuclear exit becomes law (again), Germany will be the scene of one of the most ambitious energy transformation projects ever seen. If successful, this would serve as an example to the world of what can be done when both political and popular will is directed towards achieving a certain goal. The amount of political and economic capital that is to be invested in research and development as well as subsidies for wind and solar energy projects is truly remarkable, and Germany looks set to maintain and even enhance its position as a leading proponent of renewable energy technology.

The reality of implementing such a dramatic shift in energy policy will however likely be even more fraught than the debate over whether nuclear power is right for Germany, and the powerful vested interests in the pro-nuclear lobby are likely to resist these changes with all of their substantial resources and influence. Whether Germany will follow down a nuclear *Sonderweg* and abandon nuclear power early under pressure from the electorate or whether there are more twists to come in this long-running saga is still unclear, but it is certain that this issue is driving the core of the Merkel government to dangerously high temperatures. 

\* The Merkel government has since announced its decision to phase out nuclear power plants in Germany by 2022.

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Birds and Bird Song in Poem and Painting

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