

## **Dismantling the Nuclear Safety Institute is a big mistake, by Cédric Villani**

For the mathematician, who has worked with all the civil nuclear authorities, the integration of the Institute for Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety into the Nuclear Safety Authority will not bring about greater efficiency and is evidence of a harmful verticality in decision-making.

by Cédric Villani, Mathematician, former President of the Parliamentary Science Office

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"I myself was among the ranks of the stunned. And yet, for five years, alternately president and first vice-president of the Parliamentary Office for the Evaluation of Scientific and Technological Choices (OPECST), I coordinated and led, in good understanding with Senator Gérard Longuet, dozens of parliamentary hearings and field visits involving all the civil nuclear institutions. The refusal of the French Nuclear Safety Authority (ASN) to derogate from the 'failure exclusion' standard for the Flamanville welds, the announcement of stress corrosion phenomena, and many other technical episodes in nuclear safety in recent years were made public for the first time during these hearings. It was also under my responsibility that the last two parliamentary reports on the development of civil nuclear power and its waste management were published, with the senators Stéphane Piednoir and Bruno Sido, and the deputies Thomas Gassilloud and Emilie Cariou as rapporteurs.

During these years of hearings, many avenues for the development of nuclear control were discussed. For example, the extension of the ASN's competences to research or security, as practiced by other nations - the question became even more acute after a disastrous hearing of the General Secretariat for Defence and National Security (SGDSN) before the OPECST. But the integration of IRSN into ASN has never been discussed, either in public or in private.

It is at best a highly risky gamble, at worst a serious mistake, to believe that this integration will bring greater efficiency - or could, according to the official communication, "make the ASN's technical examination and decision-making processes more fluid in order to respond to the growing volume of activities related to the revival of the nuclear industry".

1) The IRSN has played its role in a fair, efficient and transparent manner during its twenty years of existence. A prominent example was the complex debate on the storage of bituminous waste. But in fact, IRSN has been involved in all the recent important decisions of the ASN and has succeeded in building the confidence of all the scientific, political and public parties, in a French context marked by a historical mistrust and damaged by the management of the Chernobyl disaster.

2) Any merger of organisations - be they companies, universities, communities or committees - automatically leads to resistance, frustration and conflict, which almost always leads to years of inefficiency and sometimes to lasting struggles. Who has not witnessed this? To launch the IRSN blindly into this institutional uncertainty, on the eve of an announced revival of the sector, is to put oneself in a very fragile situation at the worst possible moment.

3) There have been good reasons for distinguishing the function of expertise, which is free and non-binding, from the function of control and decision-making, which is imposed on the players in the sector. But for those who admire the integrated expertise-decision model, let's remember that in the United States, where it is in force, we have exactly the same trial of slowness and immobility as in our country - see the recent articles in Forbes, The Hill or MIT Technology Review.

4) It is ironic that the government is so critical of the slowness of the control process. It is my direct experience that by far the slowest, most fickle and inefficient player in the nuclear system is the government. During my term of office and up to my very last letter as President of OPECST (written in no uncertain terms, co-signed by Senator Gérard Longuet, addressed to Prime Minister Jean Castex), the list is long of the occasions when the government has evaded debate or refused to apply the law... not caring, despite warnings, about the state of the competence channels, nor about the updating of the nuclear waste management plan, nor about the legitimate questions of the Parliament or of the citizens. Consider that the Astrid programme, voted in Parliament, was closed by press release, without anyone in the executive branch being able to give us any explanations on the subject. The government did not deign to answer any of our questions on the three-year plan for the management of nuclear materials and waste for 2019-2021 - for the record, in 2022 this plan still did not exist, which obliged the rapporteurs to work on a poorly prepared draft obtained through a circuitous route. At the time, many of us at OPECST wondered: is there a pilot in the plane?

Finally, the dispersion of the IRSN to the four winds - shared at a minimum between the CEA, ASN and DSDN -, organised on a corner of the table in the secrecy of a small committee, bears witness to a model of verticality of decision making, the equivalent of which we would vainly seek in modern democracies. A decision with such far-reaching consequences, without the slightest preparation through debate, mission, hearing or field visit! A decision taken with responsibility? Quite the opposite.