

## Report from Rome by Marco Fanini

### Turnaround on nuclear?

*A timid and much-flawed sortie by Italy's major political party has at least reopened the debate.*

**O**n Feb. 24, in a Milan hotel, the Christian Democrats (DC) carried out a timid and silent reversal, returning to discuss the need for nuclear plants, two and a half years after the referendum that brought Italy's minimal nuclear power construction program to an abrupt end.

Before a crowded hall of 400, technicians, managers, and many noted politicians took turns on the podium, among them the president of ENEL, the state electrical power agency; Bruno Musso, the managing director of Ansaldo, the major Italian producer of nuclear reactors; Carlo Eugenio Rossi, the president of Fiat Research; and several members of the Italian Senate and Chamber of Deputies.

Outside the hotel, activists from the Schiller Institute, the leading pro-technology political movement in the nation, won strong assent with signs praising nuclear energy.

The first broadside was fired by Sen. Giovanni Granelli, who declared himself favorable to a return to nuclear, asking ironically whether the Christian Democrats were going to wait until Bettino Craxi, the former Socialist prime minister, changed his mind even on nuclear energy before admitting that they had made a mistake in permitting the shutdown of nuclear. (The DC has allowed the much smaller Socialist Party to lead the way on many issues.)

Even more incisive was the intervention of the elderly but combative Senator Luigi Noè, vice president of ENEA, the state-run alternative energy agency. He showed some slides of the latest statistics on world nuclear

energy use: France produces 75% of its electrical energy with nuclear plants; Germany, 36%; Japan, 30%; Switzerland, 47%, Britain, 20%; the United States, 18%. And Italy? But 0%, naturally!

Original and creative as we Italians are, we have cleverly believed—we alone—that we can live very well without nuclear power. But the report of Viezzoli, president of ENEL, destroyed every illusion: In the last year, our consumption of electrical energy has grown by 5% over 1988.

Given that electrical energy imports from abroad cannot increase (for both technical and non-technical reasons), we must produce more energy at home, and given that we cannot rely on more oil or methane, we must turn to nuclear. Viezzoli did draw this conclusion, but left it to others to draw their own.

Professor Cumo, a noted nuclear scientist from the University of Rome, proposed recourse to "intrinsically safe" reactors. Today the safety systems of a nuclear power plant can be of two types, active or passive: active when human intervention is necessary to activate pumps and similar devices, passive when spring-activated security valves or membranes break automatically as a given pressure level is reached.

Finally, there are safety systems under study based on physical principles, which are called "intrinsically safe." Cumo has proposed small reactors, of about 300 MW, produced entirely in Italy, with modular solutions which allow quality control to take place directly in the factory, thus eliminating the huge yards, and assuring

maximum security.

Cumo's position, and hence that of the Christian Democracy, like so many who tail behind the Greens, is wrong even from the standpoint of energy policy: Italy ought to decisively adopt the French model, and the Christian Democrats know this, but when it comes to having the courage to say so, "you can't do it by yourself," as the fictional village priest Don Abbondio would say.

However, better Cumo's mini-reactors than nothing; if nothing else, this serves to revive the debate on nuclear power. Vincenzo Scotti, chairman of the Christian Democratic deputies in Parliament, concluded the Milan meeting saying that the Christian Democracy has prepared a motion to permit the ENEL to participate with the U.S. in the development of "intrinsically safe" reactors.

For the record, Scotti has also stated that the plants in Caorso and Trino should meanwhile be closed, which is another big mistake, above all politically, since the anti-nuclear referendum did not apply at all to the closure of existing power plants.

In any case, discussions have reopened. The Christian Democrats' sorties coincided, significantly, with statements in Parliament and in the press by the minister of industry, Italian Republican Party member Adolfo Battaglia. Battaglia has said, "Continuing to burn fossil fuels will bring about a dreadful worsening of the greenhouse effect. To what can we have recourse, then, if not to nuclear? Naturally, to a different nuclear energy than that which we have abandoned: new types of models, plants with passive security, without problems of population evacuation and with guaranteed waste disposal. Look, if we produce this new type of nuclear power, it is possible that the old resistances will be greatly reduced."