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Sweden lifts ban on nuclear power

Green light for new generation of reactors in Sweden reflects change in sentiment towards nuclear power, government says

Terry Macalister

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Nuclear power received a significant boost today when the Swedish government announced plans to overturn a near 30-year ban on atomic plants as part of a new drive to increase **energy** security and combat global warming.

Ministers said they would present a bill on 17 March which would allow the construction of nuclear reactors on existing sites and introduce a new carbon tax as part of a programme to cut **carbon emissions** by 40% on 1990 levels by 2020.

The decision is significant because **Sweden** was at the forefront of anti-nuclear sentiment following the Three Mile Island accident in America in 1979 and voted in a referendum a year later to phase out its existing stations.

It also coincides with a statement today from Fortum Corporation that it wanted to build a second new atomic plant near Helsinki in Finland. The company is already building the first new nuclear station in Europe for more than 30 years.

Fredrik Reinfeld, the Swedish prime minister, said he did not feel bound by his nation's previous referendum result because it did not specify how the power from the nuclear stations should be replaced, but the government must still convince parliament before it is turned into law. The proposal was made possible after a compromise by the Center party, a junior coalition member which has long held a sceptical stance toward nuclear power.

"I'm doing this for the sake of my children and grandchildren," said Center party leader, Maud Olofsson. "I can live with the fact that nuclear power will be part of our electricity supply system in the foreseeable future."

This follows a series of public opinion polls indicating a change in sentiment as the country becomes increasingly dependent on energy imports from Norway and **climate change** has become a matter of increasing concern.

Sweden's 10 nuclear reactors at three plants – Oskarshamn, Ringhals and Forsmark – supply roughly half of the country's electricity, while two other reactors at the Barseback site have been closed over the past decade. The country has been at the forefront of efforts to find ways of burying the highly toxic waste produced during the nuclear cycle.

The current generation of nuclear generating plants around the world came into operation between 1972 and 1985 but the industry fell into disrepute with the public following the Three Mile Island accident and the image of nuclear was further tarnished when there was a meltdown at the Chernobyl plant in Ukraine seven years later.

But since then there have been no scares and climate change has risen up the global agenda. Nuclear power emits virtually no carbon although critics claim significant amounts of CO₂ are released if one takes into account the mining of uranium and other aspects of any full-lifecycle programme.

Finland is the first to European country to start to construct a new nuclear plant, and has been followed by France. Britain is preparing for new reactors to be constructed to replace those coming to the end of their useful lives.

Germany - like Sweden - has been seen as a firm opponent of atomic power but

chancellor, Angela Merkel, has made clear that she too thinks a new debate should take place on whether new plants should be constructed.

Environmentalists opposed to nuclear power said the decision in Sweden was one taken by a small majority in parliament and did not represent a significant swing back to favour for atomic power.

"No way can this be seen as a ringing endorsement given the parties concerned only hold 180 of 349 seats. The largest party in Sweden is still against nuclear and the people are not enamoured by it either," said Jean McSorley, a senior nuclear adviser at Greenpeace.

McSorley believed the construction of an new nuclear plants would be hampered by the long lead times and huge expense at a time when the global recession means money is in short supply. "There are very long lead times for new nuclear plants giving plenty of time for faults to emerge," she explained, noting that the Finnish reactor, Olkiluoto 3 currently under construction, has already fallen behind schedule and is over cost.

Nuclear consultant John Large said it was not very surprising that Sweden should want to recommit to nuclear. "If you looked at the wording of the moratorium it was pretty liberally worded. I think [the latest decision] is as much to do with being overly dependent on Norway for power than the fight against climate change."

But Swedish ministers also outlined plans to lift the proportion of renewable energy consumption to 50% of the total. In the transport sector alone, the target was set at 10% and Sweden has become a major importer of sugar-based ethanol from Brazil. Sweden already gets much of its power from hydroelectric and biomass schemes.

The new energy package also included plans to expand wind power and tough new taxes on CO2 and energy.

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