

(from Financial Times Energy Economist, July 1989)

Raising the green, green flag of nuclear power

The Household Cavalry of Britain's nuclear establishment this month staged its own version of a traditional British pageant, the Trooping of the Colour. The colour trooped was green.

The occasion was a conference entitled "Nuclear Forum '89: Nuclear Power and the Changing Environment", 4-5 July at the Institution of Electrical Engineers in London, under the auspices of the British Nuclear Forum. Like the royal version of the pageant, the nuclear version was, to be sure, purely ceremonial. The accoutrements were superficially impressive; but their efficacy on today's battlefields remained deeply improbable. Nevertheless the conference participants drew fresh heart from the combative posturing on view.

Rumour beforehand had indicated that the conference would be the opening shot of a major campaign to restore the waning fortunes of nuclear power. In the event, however, the conference was attended almost exclusively by delegates from the nuclear industry itself, mainly British. It proved to be an exercise whose primary objective was to boost the morale of a once-proud regiment, whose recent experiences in the field has left its members suffering from shell-shock.

The conference opened with a rallying cry from the Commander-in-Chief, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. Her devotion to the nuclear cause has been unwavering, even in the face of devastating economic casualties. On the morning of 4 July, however, she was engaged on other fronts, and had to deliver her uplifting message through the medium of a slide-show. It was, as usual, uncompromising: "... Nuclear energy is one of the newest and safest ways of maintaining our economic development and quality of life without increasing the levels of greenhouse gases and the risk of global warming which is one of the greatest challenges that mankind faces today..."

The green theme was taken up immediately in the opening address by Hans Blix, Secretary-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and echoed throughout the subsequent proceedings. The IAEA was created in 1956, as a response to mounting concern about the spread of nuclear technology with weapons implications; and Blix himself first came to global popular attention when he flew over the smoking ruin of Chernobyl 4 in May 1986. Nevertheless his speech to the Nuclear Forum was unabashed flag-waving for nuclear power. He dismissed with an inaccurate aside the problems it poses for his own agency: "Let me remind you that all nuclear weapons states had their weapons first and power reactors second" - demonstrably untrue in the case of France, and deeply suspect in the case of present-day problem states like Pakistan.

Blix rattled through the litany of now-familiar arguments about the putative limitations on energy efficiency and "renewables", and the environmental impact of fossil fuels, adducing that nuclear power was the true "green alternative". He discounted the significance of nuclear waste and decommissioning problems and costs, and insisted that the safety of nuclear power had to be seen against the hazards of other energy technologies and the damage they caused. He added a strange parenthesis: commenting on the 1980 nuclear power referendum in his home country of Sweden, he

observed that "a victory for the opponents of nuclear power would have been an unmitigated disaster for Sweden". Blix of all people must have been aware that Swedish voters stipulated a permanent shutdown of all of Sweden's nuclear plants by 2010. As another field general, the Roman Pyrrhus, once remarked, "Another victory like that and we are done for".

William Lee of Duke Power in the US continued the global theme. Lee had just returned from the inaugural meeting in Moscow of the World Association for Nuclear Operators (WANO), of which he had been elected president. He acclaimed WANO as a breakthrough, a worldwide voluntary partnership drawn together to share experience and establish standards of excellence in the operation of nuclear plants. He was evangelical about its importance: "The pain of Chernobyl has caused the world's nuclear operators to set aside differences and distrust of one another and to work on a plan of action... The significance of what WANO can achieve will not be lost on the world, or on our governments... Nuclear operators... can set an example of global cooperation with enormous implications for agriculture, medicine and environmental protection." As he reiterated the profound implications of overcoming distrust and bridging political differences, however, one recurring usage inevitably jarred. Again and again, when mentioning countries with non-Communist governments, Lee referred to the "free world", an American Cold War epithet that will not make "global cooperation" with Eastern Europe any easier. In his capacity as president of WANO he would do better to expunge the expression from his vocabulary.

Remy Carle, the deputy general manager of Electricite de France, appeared in his international capacity as president of Foratom, the European nuclear trade association. But his usual ebullience was curiously muted. Far from exhorting the multitude to expand nuclear power ever wider, he warned instead that "We must vigorously combat the temptation to give up on nuclear energy" - downbeat indeed, from one of the technology's unquenchable optimists. "Producers of electricity may gain in terms of their immediate popularity were they to abandon nuclear power. But if they were to give in to this temptation, they would be sorely lacking in their responsibilities towards themselves, towards the developing world, and towards future generations. They must continue their efforts to convince both their governments... and public opinion."

Dr Jack Cunningham, whose brief as environmental spokesperson for Britain's opposition Labour party sits uneasily with his constituency role as Member of Parliament for the British Nuclear Fuels site at Sellafield, took a narrower view. He confined himself to party-political point-scoring, chiding the assembly gently - "nuclear power has advantages, but it has no divine right to exist". He also laid claim to "huge investments in infrastructure" required around Sellafield. Sir Alistair Frame, chairman of the major uranium-producers Rio Tinto-Zinc, likewise took the opportunity to defend his corporate patch, asserting that "today's spot prices for uranium have been driven down far too far for your industry's health". Like Lee before him he quoted John Donne; Lee began the quotation - "No man is an island...", and Frame concluded it, slightly awry - "Ask not for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." The troops filed out to lunch on a note distinctly gloomier than the organizers intended.

A press conference followed; but the questions made no allusions to the grandiose global visions of the morning. Instead they concentrated on the parochial but absorbing infighting about privatizing electricity in Britain, illustrating vividly the chasm between nuclear rhetoric and practical realities. The *Independent* newspaper had headlined a front-page story declaring that nuclear power was proving such an embarrassing encumbrance that some cabinet ministers wanted it to be dropped

from the privatization package. Lord Marshall, chairman of Britain's Central Electricity Generating Board and the most vocal promoter of nuclear power in Britain, found himself caught in a crossfire about nuclear liabilities, responsibilities and financial bail-outs. He was, however, unable to offer any specifics, dates or details as to how the snowballing controversies might be resolved within the government's hectic timetable.

This proved not to faze him in the slightest, as he rose after lunch to give a rumbustious knockabout address. Noting the rush of attention to the environmental issues raised by other energy technologies, he offered a message "from all of us in the nuclear business: welcome to the goldfish bowl". He declared that nuclear power was "a most benign industry probably the most benign, certainly the most benign source of energy", and that "public perception must inevitably change", listing all the usual reasons. He also declared that the industry must "get its house in order"; "we don't do everything perfectly - only the French do everything perfectly", one of a series of heavily ironic asides punctuating his commentary. He insisted that nuclear waste was a non-problem because the amount was "trivial compared to the natural world... there were no nuclear inspectors around when God made the universe". He also declared flatly that "weapons proliferation has NOTHING to do with nuclear power".

His peroration was fervent. "Let us, please God, complete the privatization process; let us build pressurized-water reactors to time and cost, and there will be a renaissance of nuclear power. We in the nuclear industry must get it right next time." The final heartfelt phrase was perhaps more revealing than Marshall intended: "next time"?

The afternoon was devoted to "Effects on the environment and public acceptance". Roger Berry, director of health and safety for BNFL, called the industry's record on radiological safety "an unrecognized success story". Lennart Fogelstrom, president of ABB Atom in Sweden, announced his conviction that the Swedish referendum result would be overturned, and that Sweden would reinstate nuclear power. Professor Klaus Trott of St Bartholomew's Hospital, speaking on the health effects of radiation, asserted - or appeared to assert, since at least one listener found his discourse verging on the unintelligible - that radiation risks could not be compared with any other risks since they were of different kinds, on the face of it a recipe for abandoning the subject entirely. Brian Ponsford of Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Pollution perforce took a more pragmatic view. James Wilkinson, science correspondent of BBC television, commiserated with the nuclear people about the distorted and inaccurate coverage given to nuclear issues. Harold Bolter of BNFL offered a rueful and reflective assessment of "relationships with the public", concluding that the industry should not exhibit such a craving for "positive support", but be satisfied with "passive tolerance" on the part of society.

The after-dinner speaker at the banquet was Energy Secretary Cecil Parkinson, arising to flourish yet again the by now slightly dog-eared green flag for nuclear power. After delivering an earnestly pedestrian speech, platitudinous even by his own unexacting standards, Parkinson appended a postscript. "When I heard what you'd been listening to today, I rewrote my speech and put in a lot of jokes - which I'm sure you'd have enjoyed. However" - pointing to the second microphone in front of him - "that is the BBC. If you'd have preferred the jokes, drop a note to the chairman of the BBC." The audience, to its credit, cringed; and an unworthy thought could not be suppressed: with friends like this, nuclear power doesn't need enemies.

The second day of the conference saw a continuation of a trend already perceptible the preceding afternoon: dwindling numbers in the hall, a consequence perhaps of the competing attraction of Wimbledon tennis or of the London rail-strike. The drop-outs missed a much more entertaining day. The morning was devoted to privatization; Donald Miller of the South of Scotland Electricity Board and John Baker, chief executive designate of National Power, left no one in any doubt about the support they were demanding from the British government in exchange for furthering its nuclear aims, however green. Ed Wallis, chief executive designate of PowerGen, the non-nuclear 30 per cent of the CEGB and thus unburdened by any nuclear hangover, gave the best presentation of the entire conference, setting out his stall with exhilarating brio. Although he endorsed some form of nuclear power as a future option, his nuclear industry colleagues, having to cope with its intractable past and uncomfortable present, could not have been blamed for a pang of envy.

Investment analysts from the City of London and the US offered their views, underlining the demands already itemized by Miller and Baker for assorted indemnities of indefinite duration if British nuclear power was to find any takers among private finance. Escaping from the rigours of such hard-nosed scepticism, the closing session of the conference considered "the way forward", which proved to be - yet again - on wings of rhetoric, not to say fancy. The single most striking attribute of the conference was its lack of particulars - unlike, for example, a major energy conference a month earlier. That conference, in San Francisco, was devoted to the "clean-coal" technology called fluidised bed combustion (FBC). For three days some 400 delegates from 18 countries were immersed in particulars: particular power plants, particular problems and solutions, particulars of economic and environmental performance, names, numbers and other details: the language of orders, specifications, delivery dates, warranties, environmental guarantees, everything that signifies a technology carving a place for itself in the market.

At the "Nuclear Forum", by contrast, with few exceptions, the discussions were couched in the language of vast averages, sweeping forecasts, and free-floating, panoramic broad-brush argument almost unanchored in present-day economics and politics. Listening to most of the speakers, a dispassionate observer had to wonder "If nuclear power is this good, why isn't everybody queuing up to buy it?"

It was, however, essentially a ceremonial occasion, only tangentially related to the harsh realities of the energy wars. Whether it was an appropriate exercise in the circumstances remains in doubt. As an observer once remarked about another flamboyant but ill-judged manoeuvre, the Charge of the Light Brigade: "C'est magnifique - mais ce n'est pas la guerre".

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