

NUCLEAR SHOCK HORROR EXPOSE

by Walter C Patterson

Reasoned argument has failed. The nuclear energy juggernaut is rolling inexorably across Britain. Those who in past years naively put their faith in rational discussion, Parliament, and the democratic process must now realise that this faith was misplaced. The nuclear establishment has subverted the Civil Service and short-circuited planning procedures to get its own way, and will go on doing so until there are nuclear power stations in every wilderness beauty spot, and plutonium by the ton trundling along every motorway in Britain. The only way left to challenge the onrush of this nuclear juggernaut is to take to the streets, petrol bombs at the ready ...

And so on - if it were set to music, you could probably sing along with it. This high-pitched rhetoric has been reverberating through the environmental movement - and through these august pages - for many months, growing ever shriller. It betrays not only a near-toxic concentration of the political naivety it purports to deplore, but also a gullibility and credulity which must greatly encourage Britain's nuclear establishment. They can use all the encouragement they can get: for, far from rampaging roughshod over the countryside, the nuclear establishment in Britain is in near-total disarray, and must look back on a decade in which its plans have largely come to naught. Before the nuclear opposition goes collectively off the deep end, it would do well to pause and look at what has really been happening on the British nuclear scene - and at what is really happening now.

The last of the first-generation AGR stations, at Heysham, received government consent in October 1969, shortly after Atomic Power Constructors Limited, constructors of Dungeness B, had gone bankrupt. The next four years were spent in trying to sort out the snowballing problems of the first-generation AGRs; in mid-1981 only two of these five stations have actually even started up. In October 1973 it was revealed that the CEBG, with the backing of GEC, wanted to abandon the AGRs and bring in American PWRs; on 18 December 1973 the then CEBG Chairman told the Select Committee on Science and Technology that the plan was to order some 32 1300-megawatt Westinghouse PWRs by 1983. The public controversy which erupted in October 1973 raged until July 1974. It was the first full-blooded national confrontation about civil nuclear policy; and it ended in a complete rout of the CEBG and GEC. The government rejected not only the PWRs, but also the scale of programme proposed; it authorised not 41 gigawatts, but only four, to be based on the British heavy water reactor.

After two years of further confusion, it was clear that the heavy water reactor was not going to work out; and Sir John Hill, then Chairman of the Atomic Energy Authority, which had developed the heavy water reactor, recommended its abandonment. The government agreed, writing off costs of £145 million. The ensuing chaos very nearly did in the two British power station boiler manufacturers. To prevent their collapse, the Labour Government in the late 1970s instructed the electricity suppliers to order three new power stations, which were not needed: the coal-fired Drax B, and nuclear stations at Heysham B and Torness. Both the latter had to be AGRs because nothing else would have been ready soon enough to forestall the collapse of the boiler makers. Since that time the electricity suppliers have repeatedly reduced their forecasts of future electricity requirements. As a result electronuclear promoters have for more than a year stopped citing future growth in electricity use as a justification for ordering new nuclear stations. They now limit themselves to claiming that such stations will be needed to replace existing stations as they are retired.

In February 1981, the first report from the new Select Committee on Energy - known to be strong nuclear supporters - concluded that the Heysham B and Torness AGRs ought not to have been ordered; the Committee came to within a hair's-breadth of recommending their cancellation. Their report was fiercely critical of the Conservative Government's civil nuclear policy. In response to the Select Committee's criticism, both the CEBG and the Department of Energy rushed into print to deny that there was any such thing as a nuclear programme; and indeed the Government's statement of 18 December 1979 makes no such commitment. The statement was carefully crafted to boost the morale of the nuclear industry without actually tying the Government down to anything specific. In the face of dwindling forecasts and official criticism from the Select Committee and more recently by the Monopolies Commission, the Government and the electricity suppliers were quick to disavow any long-term nuclear commitments, leaving the morale of the nuclear industry shakier than ever.

In mid-May 1981 Denis Rooney, chairman of the National Nuclear Corporation, had the rug pulled out from under him, by his fellow board members, as the long-running nuclear management brawl erupted yet again. Finding a replacement for Rooney presents the government with a further nuclear quandary. Even the first PWR, planned for Sizewell B, may now run into difficulties. The CEBG has no desire to order yet another superfluous power station just to keep the boiler-makers off the dole; and if the Sizewell B order is not placed before the run-up to the 1984 General Election, the Government will find itself in an embarrassing position, given its merciless onslaught on public expenditure everywhere else in the economy.

And what of Windscale, that notorious "failure" of the nuclear opposition? The record shows that in 1974 BNFL were actually proposing to build two new nuclear reprocessing plants, and had no thought that either would be subject to any significant delay as a result of public pressure. At the Windscale Inquiry, Friends of the Earth argued that a delay of ten years from 1977 would be appropriate, posing fewer problems and gaining obvious advantages. It is now mid-1981, and BNFL has yet to begin construction of the THORP plant. According to the Monopolies Commission, the CEGB is having second thoughts about its commitment to THORP; dry storage of AGR fuel, as advocated by FOE, may yet be adopted. At this rate the FOE recommendations may yet carry the day, Parker or no Parker. Meanwhile, BNFL's decision to cast off the increasingly stigmatic name "Windscale" in favour of the anonymous "Sellafield" scarcely bespeaks pride and confidence in the facility. Let us also spare a thought for the fast breeder reactor. Ten years ago, the AEA was pressing urgently for immediate commencement of a full-scale demonstration plant. Ten years later such a plant is, if anything, even farther in the future than it was at the beginning of the 1970s.

There may once, long ago, have been a British nuclear juggernaut. But in the past decade it has become mired to the axles; and any suggestion to the contrary is simply lurid nonsense, and no basis on which to plan any strategy of opposition. In fact, if you really want to upset nuclear people, don't waste your breath accusing them of crimes against society. Just reflect aloud on the shambles of their industry, and tell them you're sorry for them.

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