

REVIEWS:

The Sizewell Saga

Sizewell Report
Martin Ince Pluto £3.95

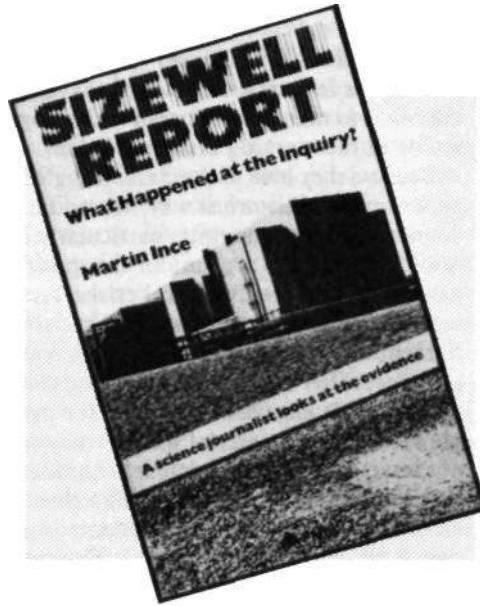
In 1956, the inquiry into the proposed nuclear power station at Bradwell in Essex took three days. On 11 January, the inquiry into the proposed Pressurised Water Reactor at Sizewell in Suffolk enters its third year. What should we make of this way of reaching decisions?

For the Central Electricity Generating Board to have to defend its plans in public in such detail is, at first sight, a model of democracy. The objectors to Sizewell have done well, even though they have a mere fraction of the CEB's resources. Yet the length of the inquiry has made it a closed book to most of us. Independent citizens who have the time and the expertise to wade through the proceedings can probably be counted on one hand. So Martin Ince has done us a service. His lucid book summarises the arguments that dominated the first half of the inquiry. He tackles both the science and the economics of the PWR, though you don't have to be either a scientist or an economist to understand the book.

But why should anyone care about Sizewell? At stake, as Ince shows, is the whole future of Britain's energy policy. Should electricity be generated increasingly by a novel nuclear technology imported from America? Or should it, as at present, come mainly from British coal? These are the questions at the heart of Sizewell.

Put it another way: a history of the coal industry written in the year 2000 will probably give as much weight to Sizewell as to the miners' strike. The inquiry is filling the vacuum left by the Government's refusal to set out, let alone defend, its energy policy.

What emerges from Ince's book, though this isn't his intention, is the impossibility of reaching definitive conclusions. Asking whether Sizewell is economic makes as little sense as asking whether pits are economic. At what rate will the British and world economies grow? What will happen to energy demand and to electricity's share of it? How quickly will the prices of oil and coal rise? What will be the trend of exchange rate movements, particularly between the pound and the dollar? These are a few of the questions that have to be answered *well into the next century* if we are to know whether a PWR programme is



'economic' (and hence whether many pits are 'uneconomic'). Something has to bridge this uncertainty gap if any decisions are to be made. Increasingly, that something is politics.

'Nuclear power no thanks' is now one of the Left's jumble of ideas. But things aren't that straightforward. True, the electricians' union, led by Eric Hammond, bastion of the Right, is virulently pronuclear - but so too is AUEW-TASS, led by Ken Gill, doyen of the Left. True, right-wing governments in the west have a crush on nuclear power - but so too does the Soviet Union.

So in what sense is it politically correct to oppose nuclear power? Not, I think, because of safety. Though there are unresolved problems about disposing nuclear waste, safety is essentially a technical issue. So far, nuclear power has been at least as safe as coal or oil.

But there are two political reasons for

opposing nuclear power. The first is its murky relationship with nuclear weapons. One witness calculated that the Sizewell PWR will yield 1000 warheads' worth of plutonium. The second argument is the employment and economic consequences of nuclear power. The miners' strike and Sizewell are two sides of the same coin. The Government wants nuclear power to diminish the power of the miners. Many coal-fired stations are due to retire in the next 20 years. They will be replaced by PWRs if the Government gets its way.

What is insufficiently appreciated is that the miners can hardly win at Sizewell. The main objectors to the PWR, as Ince makes clear, argued that coal could be cheaper than nuclear power if old coal mines were closed, if coal output was concentrated in a few modern super-pits and if the flood-gates were opened to cheap coal imports. Heard that before?

In theory, the Sizewell inspector could conclude that energy conservation, or converting oil-fired to coal-fired power stations, or renewable energy sources, or coal-based Combined Heat and Power are all preferable to Sizewell. It's a safe bet he won't. The best hope, from an anti-nuclear position, is that he will turn down the PWR, but give the green light for the home-grown Advanced Gas Cooled reactor. This is still nuclear power, but it would set back CEB planning for years.

The more likely outcome is that the inspector will give the PWR the go-ahead, but with a number of tough-sounding safety conditions. The job of the anti-nuclear Left will then be to make so much fuss that the Government has to delay the final decision till after the next election. That is the next campaign if you back the miners.

David Thomas

'The people do not bear sufferings, such as they bore when the army occupied the Transkei, without becoming steeled in their determination to re-group, re-examine their methods of struggle, develop new ones, and retain the spirit that seeks forever for freedom.'

Taken from THE PEASANTS' REVOLT by GOVAN MBEKI, reprinted by **idaf** and available from IDAF PUBLICATIONS, Canon Collins House, 64 Essex Rd, London N1 8LR.

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