



## • NUCLEAR TROUBLES

Nuclear power in the UK is in visible decline. To a considerable degree it has achieved this position by its own efforts. The decline began over 10 years ago, when it was manifestly unable to come to terms with the collapse of the programme of Advanced Gas Cooled Reactors (AGRs) begun in 1965.

This was the second phase of nuclear construction, and was to be followed by the fast breeder reactor programme, based at Dounreay in Scotland of which some 20 stations should by now have been under construction. That programme too has been a disaster. Operationally the nuclear industry is made up of an ageing and failing first programme of Magnox reactors, feeding into an ailing and ageing reprocessing plant at Sellafield - now the subject of a withering report by the select committee on the environment.

But these troubles on their own would not necessarily spell the industry's demise. What it is now having to contend with however is public hostility. 'The first, overriding, all-pervading impression which presented itself to us at every stage of the inquiry' according to Sir Hugh Rossi, chair of the select committee inquiry into radioactive waste, 'was the enormous and seemingly unbridgeable gap which exists between the perception of the problem by the professionals (ie, the nuclear industry) and the anxieties expressed by representatives of the general public'. Strong words from a Tory chair of a Tory-controlled committee about an industry, criticism of which was off limits for the first 25 years of its development.

In the wake of that report, the chances of the waste disposal body winning approval to bury low level waste, in shallow trenches covered by soil, at one of the four sites now under discussion must be doubtful. The select committee castigates the industry for its complacency: Sellafield, it says, is the most polluting plant to be found anywhere and the Irish Sea the most polluted sea. The report very largely vindicates the National Union of Seamen whose forthright action has stopped the dumping of intermediate level waste at sea.

In total the select committee's report is a blow not simply against those directly responsible for waste mismanagement, but against the future of nuclear power. The CEGB and the construction companies are now awaiting the report of Sir Frank Layfield on the two-year Sizewell Inquiry with a considerable amount of apprehension. If, as is possible, their fears turn out to be justified,

in the present climate there will be almost no possibility of even Mrs Thatcher pulling the chestnuts out of the fire for the nuclear industry. Which will leave Lord Marshall and the PWR lobby feeling the chill of isolation.

The nuclear lobby as a whole will take shelter in supporting the construction of yet more of the disastrous AGRs largely on the grounds that they are British built. In that they will hope to have support of the Labour party leadership. But they may be disappointed. In any event, as the industry ducks and weaves to stay afloat, the prospects of the £20 billion PWR programme announced in 1979 are shattered for good.

Perhaps the most important recommendation in the environment's committee's report is that which casts serious doubt on the construction of the new reprocessing plant at Sellafield. Although £350m has been spent they suggest that it might be better to write this off rather than to go ahead and spend £1400m to complete the plant. This is



a courageous recommendation by the committee and if acted upon, it spells serious trouble for the proposal to build a new reprocessing plant at Dounreay when it goes to public inquiry in April.

Public hostility to nuclear power is of course not the same thing as political opposition. Because nuclear power has been a politically protected area, the political parties and the trade unions have been sucked into a consensus of support. That is now beginning to break up, as it becomes obvious on the most pragmatic level, that there are no votes

in nuclear power. It has been reported that Dr John Cunningham was given assurances that the resolution of the 1985 Labour party conference to close down the nuclear industry will not find its way into the manifesto. That may be so, but it is an open question, and what is now almost certain not to go in the manifesto, is the commitment to support nuclear power.

The hard core of support for nuclear power remains within the TUC's fuel and power industries committee, still controlled by the electricians, the electrical power workers, the professional civil servants, with support from the engineers. The issue of jobs will not make it easy to break that hold on this area of policy. The Scottish Labour party conference recently defeated the AUEW-led defence of nuclear power, but they are under pressure to exempt Dounreay. Dounreay is a reactor that does not work, it carries a greater potential for serious accident, and it is so expensive that even if it did not work, it would not produce electricity at competitive prices.

Moreover like the other nuclear plants in Scotland, it can only work at the expense of the coal industry. Why not then spend another £2 billion over the next 10 years on developing the Scottish economy, rather than put coal miners out of work?

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