

THORPE: BRITAIN'S NUCLEAR FOLLY



WEDNESDAY, December 15, 1993, will be remembered in the House of Commons as the day when the Government announced its joint statement on Northern Ireland. A packed House, a charged atmosphere and a statement for future peace. When all the fuss over Ireland had subsidised and the Chamber had emptied, the Secretary of State for the Environment John Gummer arose, mumbled that a few copies of the following decision were available elsewhere and then proceeded to make vacuous comments on an equally important statement, concerning future peace. And so the decision to commission the thermal oxide reprocessing plant (Thorp) at Sellafield was announced.

In October I wrote that the opening of the reprocessing plant at Sellafield made no sense at all. The consultation process produced 15 clear arguments against Thorp and only five in favour. Of the 42,500 responses 63% were against and only 37% in favour. These were the Government's own statistics which they chose to blatantly ignore.

Mine was not an isolated voice opposing a grand, new energy scheme bringing prosperity and wealth to the country. I was an individual reflecting the worries and concerns of local constituents and the general public who were overwhelmingly opposed to the exposure of future generations to the complexities and dangers of nuclear power.

In total there have been objections from 10 nations, 104 local authorities and almost 90,000 individuals. These concerns are not unreasonable or irresponsible scare tactics, but genuine worries over safety and security. The Government has not acted to ensure that the interests of the public, which subsidises nuclear power, take precedence over the nuclear companies' commercial ambitions.

Indeed, these commercial ambitions have been permitted to take precedence over issues of global security and nuclear non-proliferation. This disturbing aspect of the decision has even been pointed out by the Clinton administration in America, who voiced disapproval of the exporting of tons of plutonium from Thorp to Japan at a time when North Korea is believed to be developing a nuclear weapons capability. This is only one area in which the UK can be accused of having broken its commitments under the worldwide Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty.

A sane and safe world means ending our reliance on nuclear power and weapons and investing in alternatives. By decommissioning we could reduce the possibility of another Chernobyl disaster. However, our Government is only concerned with the short term, believing that since the plant has been built it must be used, irrespective of its implications and the future decommissioning costs that will inevitably be incurred.

The Government did not release any arguments to override the risks involved with the plant. The issue of employment in Cumbria is hardly enough in itself to justify the operation of an unviable plant. After all, non-inviability was the argument used to justify the pit closures, when regional unemployment was apparently unimportant.

If a positive commitment were made to alternative energy sources, jobs could be safeguarded. The irony is, that on the day of the announcement on Thorp, Dounrcaay — the site of Britain's only fast breeder reactor and the only place in Britain that will need Thorp's plutonium — was chosen as the home for the first wave power device capable of mass manufacture. The real irony, beyond the timing, is that much of the development work for OSPREY, (Ocean Swell Powered Renewable Energy), has been done by nuclear scientists. It is further evidence of this Government's shortsightedness. Increasingly, people in Britain are questioning the sanity of the nuclear programme, yet the Government carry on regardless.

The whole process of public consultation and deliberation was, in fact, a sham. The Government has been committed to Thorp whatever the facts and despite the opposition. "Consultation" was only about going through the motions to avoid being taken to court for a failure to give the public a say. What we had was a "say" but not a "hearing." FIGURES produced by BNFL to justify their claims of a £500m profit margin over the next ten years have never been published. To add to the accounting mystery a review of the figures by accountants Touche Ross, commissioned by BNFL itself, has been kept confidential, although selective published elements have raised doubts over the figures. Details of the contracts with overseas customers have also been kept secret, further hampering any reasonable economic assessment of the plant. Independent economists, however, argue that Thorp may never be profitable because of escalating reprocessing costs and decommissioning.

At a time when such effort is being invested in peace in Ireland, the Middle East and elsewhere, Britain is pursuing a cavalier disregard to the threat that Thorp poses to global security and environmental stability. In addition to the US disapproval, the governments of Holland, Iceland and Denmark have all objected to Thorp. Many other countries, however, are quietly pleased with the decision. As customers of Thorp they will be able to off-load their nuclear waste on our shores and so not need to deal with the waste at home. Despite these setbacks, the environment movement has continued to challenge the decision. The opposition has now moved to the courts, where legal challenges will be made to the proposal to open the plant.

Once it begins its first test run, the plant will give us a radioactive nuclear legacy that will be here for the next 1000 years. It is not only passing on the cost to generations yet to be born, but to take on a risk that some of them may never be. Fools rush in...