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Disposal of
Nuclear Waste

10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

25 July 1984

NUCLEAR ISSUES: SELLAFIELD AND
RADIOACTIVE WASTE DISPOSAL

The Prime Minister chaired a meeting on 24 July to discuss the Sellafield nuclear fuel reprocessing plant, and radioactive waste disposal. Those present at the meeting, in addition to your Secretary of State, were the Lord President, the Secretaries of State for Defence, Energy, Employment and Scotland, the Minister of Agriculture, the Chief Secretary, the Minister of Health, the Minister of State for Industry and Information Technology (Mr Baker), Mr Ray Whitney (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), Mr William Waldegrave (Department of the Environment), Mr David Mitchell (Department of Transport), Mr Wyn Roberts (Welsh Office), Sir Robert Armstrong, Dr Nicholson and Mr. Brearley (Cabinet Office). The papers before the meeting were your Secretary of State's minute of 20 July and the paper by officials which was attached to it; the letter of the same date from the Secretary of State for Energy; your Secretary of State's minute of 23 July on radioactive waste disposal facilities; and the Secretary of State for Energy's minute of 17 July on the Black Report.

Introducing a discussion on the options for reducing radioactive discharges from Sellafield, your Secretary of State said that current levels of discharges were higher than those from any other reprocessing plant in the world, basically because Sellafield was an old installation. Sir Douglas Black, in his recent report on the incidence of cancer in West Cumbria, had recommended a critical review of the need for discharges to be at their present level, and backbench opinion in Parliament was rallying in support of a substantial reduction. Significant progress would be made as a result of changes now in train and due to be completed by 1986. Further reductions could not be justified on strict cost benefit criteria, but comparisons would inevitably be made with the much cleaner French plant at Cap de la Hague, and the political feasibility of expanding

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nuclear power generation could depend on restoring public confidence in Sellafield.

In discussion, differing views were expressed on the level of additional expenditure which could be justified in order to reduce further the level of discharges. On the one hand, it was argued that there was no scientific case for any further reduction, since discharges were already comfortably within the agreed international standards, which were themselves very low. There were many alternative uses for the money which would make a higher contribution to the nation's health. On the other hand, it was argued that international standards were virtually certain to reduce further as understanding of the effects of radioactivity and its paths of return to the human body increased; that questions of public confidence were just as important as the scientific facts; and that the levels of expenditure proposed in all but the most extreme option in your Secretary of State's paper compared favourably with the cost of constructing a single nuclear power station. It was noted that any expenditure would not score as public expenditure, but would feed through to electricity prices.

Concern was expressed about the ability of BNFL management to cope with further changes in addition to the massive programme of civil and chemical engineering on which they were already embarked. The recent spate of inquiries had had a damaging effect on morale, and it was important not to force the pace to the point where new safety hazards could be created. The continued cooperation of the local population was also vital.

In terms of presentation, it would be important to avoid any "dramatic gestures". Press reaction to the Black Report had been generally favourable, and this suggested that a low key announcement, after an interval, might be the best course. Your Secretary of State was in any event committed to announcing revised levels of authorisation for discharges from Sellafield in the autumn.

Summing up this part of the discussion, the Prime Minister said that the meeting endorsed option 1 in your Secretary of State's paper, which would reduce alpha levels to 17 curies a year and beta/gamma levels to 8000 curies a year, by 1992. The Secretary of State for Energy should, however, explore with the BNFL management the possibility of bringing forward this timescale without prejudicing other developments at the plant and without creating new safety hazards. No announcement should be made before the Recess, but further consideration should be given to the possibility of a low key statement in the autumn, perhaps in the form of a response to recommendation 9 of the Black Report.

Introducing a brief discussion of radioactive waste disposal and storage, your Secretary of State said that the planning procedures originally envisaged now seemed untenable. Instead he proposed that exploratory operations at not less than three sites for each type of waste should be covered by a Special Development Order, which would be subject to negative resolution of both Houses. The main planning enquiries would follow once exploration had been completed.

In discussion it was argued that such a major change in the Government's approach to these matters required further and deeper consideration. There was a danger that by multiplying the number of sites the Government would simply multiply the opposition to any land disposal of waste: an alternative approach would be to store waste only at existing nuclear sites.

Summing up, the Prime Minister said that the meeting was not ready to reach conclusions on the proposals set out in your Secretary of State's minute of 23 July. Further work should be done in Departments at official level over the summer, following which your Secretary of State should circulate a further paper to colleagues. The statement of Government policy on radioactive waste management which the Sizewell Inspector had requested should be cleared in correspondence.

Consideration of the Secretary of State for Energy's proposal for a national study of leukaemia rates (his minute to the Prime Minister of 17 July) was deferred.

I am sending copies of this letter to the Private Secretaries to those who attended the meeting, and to Graham Sandiford (Northern Ireland Office).

DAVID BARCLAY

John Ballard, Esq.,
Department of the Environment.