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1974

- 1. ^{ECS} MR. BUTLER - to see last paragraph
- 2. PRIME MINISTER

Env Affairs - Acid Rain
H.S.
cc Postgraduate Association
+ HOME AFFAIRS,
Disposal of
Nuclear Waste
July '79.

H Committee

To report:

NIREX

Consideration of Mr. Jenkin's proposals for the use of Special Development Orders was deferred, pending further details of counter-proposals from Sir Walter Marshall. These were reported orally to the Committee - they involve long term storage (as opposed to disposal) of intermediate-level waste, using existing nuclear sites. The Committee will return to this subject within a fortnight.

The Broads

H shared your doubts, both about 90% grant-in-aid, and about a special "grazing grant". They felt decisions should await the full review of the Wildlife and Countryside Act for which you have asked (and which is due to come forward very shortly). Meanwhile the Secretary of State is asking the Broads Authority to renew their temporary management agreements with Broads farmers.

Scotch Whisky

There was not much support for Mr. Jopling's defence of the producers of full strength whisky. The Committee felt that prohibiting the sale of under strength whisky, provided it was so labelled, was a doubtful application for the criminal law, as well as a restriction of consumer choice. If despite this the Scotch Whisky Association succeeded in

persuading a Private Member to introduce legislation, the Government would need to consider its attitude further.

Hampton Court

You will recall the proposal to lease flats in Hampton Court Palace to private companies. The immediate issue before the Committee was whether Chestertons, the estate agents, should be authorised to proceed with a further study

[REDACTED] The Committee felt that the study should go ahead, in consultation with the Palace - but only on the basis that the apartments would be let by the Crown Estates Commissioners, and not by the Secretary of State directly. This was your preferred solution when the issue arose some while ago. At the time, the DOE pleaded legal difficulties - but H believed that these could and should be overcome.

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CLOSED UNDER THE
FREEDOM OF INFORMATION
ACT 2000

David

David Barclay

16 November 1984

UKAEA TESTS IN CORNISH MINE

LINE TO TAKE

THIS WORK FORMS PART OF THE DEPARTMENT OF THE ENVIRONMENT'S SPONSORED RESEARCH INTO POSSIBLE OPTIONS FOR THE ULTIMATE DISPOSAL OF HIGH-LEVEL RADIOACTIVE WASTE. IT IS GOVERNMENT POLICY TO CONVERT HIGH LEVEL WASTE INTO SOLID GLASS BLOCKS AND THEN TO STORE IT FOR AT LEAST 50 YEARS. THE WORK BEING UNDERTAKEN AT THIS MINE IS PURE RESEARCH AND THERE IS NO QUESTION OF THE MINE BEING USED FOR THE DISPOSAL OF RADIOACTIVE WASTE.

House of Commons

Friday 8 March 1985

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

PETITIONS

Pensioners

9.34 am

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): I rise to ask leave to present to the House a petition on behalf of the National Pensioners Convention. It contains over 1 million signatures and has been signed by pensioners throughout the country. All hon. Members will have in their constituencies many thousands of men and women who are retired and pensioners.

The petition reads:

To the Honourable the Commons of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in Parliament assembled; the Humble Petition of the National Pensioners Convention sheweth that they are concerned at;

The present situation of State Retirement Pensions which denies pensioners the right of choice, dignity, independence and security in retirement;

The increasingly heavy burden of fuel costs borne by pensioners which undermines their health and well being;

All hon. Members will have received in recent weeks many letters from pensioners expressing their concern about the payment of fuel costs in view of the severe weather that Britain has recently experienced.

The petition continues:

The erosion of public transport services on which pensioners depend.

Wherefore your petitioners pray that your Honourable House will;

Make an immediate commitment to a pension level of not less than one-half of average earnings for a married couple, and not less than one-third for a single person;

Ensure pensioners' ability to maintain warm and well lit homes with adequate heating allowances covering all fuels without a means test, and with total relief from standing charges;

Extend the statutory free fare scheme recently enacted for London pensioners throughout the United Kingdom.

I am proud to present this petition to the House on behalf of the millions of men and women, now pensioners, who, during their working life, worked for, and in many cases loyally served, this country in times of need.

I, like many other hon. Members, express to the Government the hope that they will take note of and act on the views expressed in the petition.

To lie upon the Table.

Crayford School

9.37 am

Mr. David Evennett (Erith and Crayford): I beg leave to present a petition signed by 224 parents and governors of Crayford school and residents of the surrounding area. Crayford school is within my constituency and most of the petitioners are my constituents:

The humble petition of the Parents and Governors of Crayford School and Residents of the surrounding area sheweth

That the council of the London Borough of Bexley has proposed to cease to maintain Crayford School which is to be put forward to the Secretary of State for Education and Science for his approval.

Wherefore your petitioners pray that your Honourable House will urge the Secretary of State to reject the proposals of the Council of the London Borough of Bexley to close Crayford School and see fit to ensure that the Council of the London Borough of Bexley will continue to maintain the aforesaid school with its existing status for the foreseeable future in its present position in Iron Mill Lane, Crayford in the London Borough of Bexley.

I wholeheartedly support the petition because Crayford school is the only secondary school within the local community and its closure would be a severe blow to the local population. The decision has been referred to the Secretary of State and I join my constituents in urging him to reverse the decision of the local education authority.

To lie upon the Table.

Nuclear Waste (Disposal)

9.39 am

Mr. T. H. H. Skeet (Bedfordshire, North): I beg to move,

That this House, while congratulating the electricity supply industry on the production of some 18 per cent. of its power from nuclear sources as compared with 48 per cent. in France, and recognising the need following the miners' dispute to have a diversity of fuels available for the manufacture of electricity in the United Kingdom, acknowledges the need to adopt a satisfactory policy for the disposal of nuclear waste to ensure that people and the environment are protected from any hazards to which they may be exposed; expresses the need to hold a full and comprehensive inquiry into the siting of such repositories and into the several options technology has made available to the industry in such a manner that the public may participate and be fully informed of all relevant facts; and asks the Government to consider the prospect of employing the planning machinery contained in sections 47 to 49 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1971 relating to a planning inquiry commission.

We are lucky that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Macfarlane), is able to be with us until my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Mr. Waldegrave), the Minister responsible, can get here. He has been delayed in Paris, but it is expected that he will be here between 10 and 10.30 am. He will then be able to listen to the many invaluable contributions of my colleagues.

In the United Kingdom the electricity supply industry produces some 18 per cent. of its power from nuclear sources, compared with figures of 48 per cent. for France, 46 per cent. for Belgium, and 18 per cent. for the Federal Republic of Germany. Thus, it is a very substantial industry. The year-long strike by the National Union of Mineworkers has convinced many that without alternative energy sources for electricity, the United Kingdom might have been administered by Scargillism, with all the revolutionary content that that would involve. That could have had a significant bearing on the cost of electricity for all consumers.

Many people fail to appreciate that nuclear electricity, the manufacture of radio isotopes, and X-ray facilities in hospitals produce waste that must be dealt with. The Government's policy on this issue was outlined in the 1982 White Paper, which sought to accommodate the industry's requirements with the integrity of the environment. I have noted that in the 1985 report—the consultation exercise on the draft principles for the protection of the environment—the Government have added a further significant dimension, with which I agree. Page 7 states:

"The Government recognises that waste management policies will not be successful unless there is public support based on a full and accurate assessment of the situation."

Of course, people are perplexed by the bewilderment caused by a force that is both intangible and unseen, even though it is easily measurable. Such apprehension was felt about the growth of the railways, the use of the car and the passage of aircraft. The risks were felt to be intolerable, but gradually the majority began to appreciate that there were long-term advantages, and that it was safer to travel by car than to move along the highway on a horse.

A public inquiry is essential to examine local fears, to examine propositions in depth, to extract the facts, and to site a nuclear repository in an acceptable location. It is well recognised in the House that high level waste is no concern of the Nuclear Industry Radioactive Waste

Executive. It comprises fission products and actinides in liquid form, and will continue to be kept at Sellafield, until at some future date it will be vitrified in borosilicate glass, ready for long-term disposal.

Lower levels of waste have been entrusted to NIREX. Radiation from high level waste is intense, but the quantity is small and is estimated at 4,300 cu m by the year 2000 AD. On the other hand, intermediate and low-level waste tends to be bulky and much less radioactive. The figures for the year 2000 AD are assessed to be 90,000 and 500,000 cu m respectively. The options available for disposal are limited. Discharges into the deep sea in the north-east Atlantic have been temporarily suspended. I hope that the Minister will say something about the prospects of dumping nuclear waste at sea, following the recent moratorium. As that was a useful option, will it be revived?

In 1984, the Government agreed to comply with a requirement from the Paris Commission for the gradual elimination of radioactive discharges into the Irish Sea from Sellafield, and to suspend the dumping of low-level waste into the Atlantic, 600 miles off Land's End, pending the Holliday report, which has now been published, and the report of the ad hoc scientific review arising out of the London dumping convention. That is due in September 1985, together with the Nuclear Energy Agency's site suitability review.

As some 200 to 300 tonnes of low level waste were dumped in that way every year between 1966 and 1982, permanent suspension could negate one of the most useful options available to the United Kingdom. Another option available to the United Kingdom is to fire the waste into space, but that is not recommended, as the cost would be inordinate. The remaining option involves deposits on land, together with openings which have been and will continue to be, created by technology. For example, Ensec Ltd. has proposals for the location of long-lived intermediate level waste in deep boreholes beneath the sea.

But perhaps I may turn my attention to the Elston type of repository or trench. This functions through the inhibiting factors of multiple barriers which prevent the movement in and out of waterflows. The first barrier is the insolubility of the waste and the supporting concrete and bitumen matrix. The second barrier is the impenetrability of the canisters containing waste. At the extreme end of time, I am informed by the Swedes that a 10 mm copper canister could last for about 10 million years. That simply illustrates the capability, but a lot of waste of lesser intensity would completely decay within 300 to 400 years, and need be placed in much less expensive containers.

The third barrier would depend upon the absorption capacity of the clay surrounding the canisters, its ability to thwart the movement of water. However, there are three further far-field barriers which apply more particularly to deeper sites. I should emphasise that these barriers are designed to prevent the movement of radionuclides into the wider environment and into the public water supply. Since public safety is the prime consideration, it is not surprising that the memorandum on the principles for the protection of the environment spells out the safeguards. Apart from the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee, which gives the Secretary of State independent advice, and which is broadly represented and may, indeed, include new men, at a later stage, there are several other procedural safeguards. They can be grouped under three headings. First, there are authorisations under

the Radioactive Substances Act 1960, to ensure the maintenance of radiological standards, in particular in relation to the radiological impact of disposal. Secondly, there is licensing under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974. The Nuclear Installations Act 1965 established that the facility must be designed, constructed and operated to the required safety standards. Thirdly, planning permission, under the Town and Country Planning Act 1971, as subsequently amended, should ensure that the site is suitable for the use proposed, taking social and other considerations into account.

A comparatively recent innovation in the British system — thanks to the United States and France — is the environmental assessment referred to in chapter 5 of the principles. It is designed to improve the quality of decisions made. Extensive consultations are required, and at least 16 references have to be undertaken with the local authorities.

The European directive will make mandatory the assessment of the environmental effects of certain large projects. Meanwhile, until acceptance by the Council of Ministers under oil and gas operations, the environmental assessment has been accepted as good practice, though without legal force. In the nuclear industry, it has become established as an administrative requirement pursuant to chapter 5 of the principles.

The timetable will necessarily be long, because of the incorporation of special procedures and the desire at once to inform the public of the facts and to seek their participation. I have endeavoured to piece together a projected timetable which may be of interest to the House.

Notification of other sites could take place in May or June 1985. Presentation of a special development order to the House of Commons to make possible the geological testing of all three sites nominated, subject to a negative resolution and one and a half hours debate, could take place in July 1985. Allowing about a year for geological drilling and collation of the information, we arrive at July 1986. A series of consultations, and the drafting of the environmental assessment — in part running in parallel with the processes already mentioned — might take about a year, to July 1987. Presentation of an application for planning permission to develop one or all three sites, coupled with an environmental assessment, might take us to 1987-88.

Dr. Flowers made the following observation during Mr. P. Critchley's evidence to the Sizewell inquiry:

"I think we must see that it would be three to four years at least from now before we have a document ready to support a planning application for the construction of a shallow repository."

A comprehensive public inquiry under the Town and Country Planning Act might take little less than a year, taking us to 1988-89. There would then be the inspector's report, consideration by the Government, debate in Parliament and the Secretary of State's decision, which might be expected in 1990.

If authorisation was granted, it would have to be obtained, licences granted and the facilities commissioned and constructed. That might take two years, or until 1992 at the earliest.

In France, the French national radioactive waste agency, ANDRA, has been invited to find a new site to follow La Hague. The French allow two years to complete

procedures for obtaining building authorisations and a further two years for construction. Commissioning would thus take place in the early 1990s.

The planning exercise will inevitably be a long one. In my judgment the most appropriate procedure would be a planning inquiry commission under sections 47 to 50 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1971. Section 48(2) states:

"Any of the matters mentioned . . . may be referred to any such commission . . . if it appears expedient . . . that the question whether the proposed development should be permitted to be carried out should be the subject of a special inquiry on either of the following grounds—(a) there are considerations of national or regional importance . . ."

there is no doubt that in this case matters of regional importance are involved—

"(b) the technical or scientific aspects of the proposed development are of so unfamiliar a character as to jeopardise a proper determination of that question . . ."

It is important that one should recognise that the planning inquiry procedure has been on the statute book since 1971. It has not been used, yet it is not unserviceable. Wherever the repository is to be sited, let the public have the full facts in a comprehensive examination of the issues involved. Section 48 is tailor-made for the job.

Against that background, the battle currently being waged by the newspapers in Bedford is in my view premature. It is bound to bore even the most persistent sympathisers. More extreme stories have to be discovered in rapid succession to maintain local interest, and the facts that there are have become immersed in emotion and alarm. I have consistently adopted the policy of waiting for the facts before reaching judgment rather than prejudging the case without the evidence. A number of people seem to have fallen for that fallacy. I trust that my attitude will be fully understood and will not continue to be misrepresented by sections of the local press.

My constituents are concerned about proximity — about the distance of the site at Elstow from a population of 135,000. Will the Minister address his mind to that point? In answer to a question from the Billingham Band, Mr. A. Faussat, deputy manager of ANDRA, stated that population density was not a criterion in site selection and that one of the proposed new sites was 3 km from a population centre of 80,000. It should also be noted that the radio isotope manufacturer, Amersham International, is situated within housing settlements at Amersham and, indeed, in Cardiff, the new AGR power stations being constructed at Heysham and Hartlepool are relatively near to centres of population. Further, there is no evidence of fatalities from ionising radiation from nuclear power stations in the United Kingdom. That exemplary record appears to compare favourably with the difficulties experienced with coal-fired stations.

I should like to read a short extract from the book by Alan Cottrell, FRS entitled, "How Safe is Nuclear Energy?" On page 90 he states:

"if we really want to worry about releases of radioactivity from the earth, we should concern ourselves much more with emissions of radon-creating uranium from coal-fired power stations and from large earth-moving operations, for these present radioactive hazards to future generations which, although extremely minute, are nevertheless larger than those from deep underground nuclear waste deposits."

Nevertheless, this matter is referred to on page 21 of the report on the consultation exercise on the draft principles, prepared as recently as 1985., where it is stated

[Mr. T. H. H. Skeet]

that the size and distribution of local populations is a relevant planning consideration, and that the risk of a fatal cancer to any member of the public should be less than one in a million per year. That alone is a remarkable safeguard.

I see that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment is now in his place. I welcome him back to the House of Commons after his return from Paris. I should like to ask him whether I am right in assuming that, apart from natural radiation, the radiation at the perimeter fence of a repository or tumulus would be virtually nil, and therefore nil in Bedford?

The principles also seek to establish a satisfactory framework for the construction and operation of disposal facilities such that future generations will not be exposed to risks unacceptable to the present generation.

The proximity factor is common to a number of letters that I have received from constituents. It is a serious point to which the Government will have to address themselves, wherever the developer locates repository. Can the Minister tell me whether proximity is a radiological consideration as well as a planning one, or a factor confined to principles arising under the Town and Country Planning Acts?

Some of my constituents are advising that low and intermediate level wastes should be stored at nuclear facilities and power stations rather than at a green site nuclear repository, which might be attended with some difficulties. They cite the case of the projected Sizewell B where provision is being made to store waste in modules at the station. However, there is a clear statement in the fifth report of the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee, which advises the Government:

"We are firmly of the opinion that these wastes should be disposed of as soon as practicable. We consider that each generation should deal as far as possible with its own waste arisings and has a duty to minimise the responsibility it passes on to future generations. Provided wastes are safely contained placing them underground in a way that removes any need for future handling has clear radiological advantages."

There appears to have been a little urgency in the voice of Dr. Ron Flowers, director of fuel processing for the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority when he emphasised that the packaging techniques for nuclear wastes such as I have described would last 500 years—well beyond the point of total decay of the content. He also stressed that the wastes could be stored safely in existing nuclear installations at no significant extra cost to the electricity industry while the political obstacles to new and permanent repositories were being overcome.

I am mindful that the comparative assessment study of disposal and retrievable storage options being undertaken by the Department of the Environment, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee to determine the best practical environmental options, as suggested in the fifth and tenth reports of the Royal Commission on environmental pollution, has yet to report. I should nevertheless appreciate some guidance from my hon. Friend the Minister. I should like to stress the obvious merit of early publication.

Although studies have been undertaken with a view to reducing substantially the volume of low-level waste by conventional incineration and recycling and treatment of the gases produced. Also for intermediate level waste—what has been the outcome of investigations in tunnelling

from the shore out to sea for the establishment of underwater repositories? What has been the outcome of investigations into the acquisition of a salt cavern in the United Kingdom for the final placement of longer-life intermediate wastes and vitrified higher level materials? It might also be relevant to inquire whether it has been found feasible to incinerate fission products and actinides in nuclear reactors, and to invite the industry to participate in the destruction of its own waste.

The timetable for choosing a site would be long due to the painstaking procedures that must be followed. I nevertheless recommend the course in planning that I have advocated. As nothing has yet been decided, there will be every opportunity to object at the most suitable time. That time is certainly not now, before any application has been lodged by the developer and before consultations have got under way. As the local press has prejudged the issue, it seems that there is little point in their minds in holding a public inquiry to ascertain the facts. Members of Parliament should stand back, examine the problem in all of its dimensions, assess it on the facts and decide in the community's interest.

The press and the county council have adopted a county approach. On that basis, in which county could a repository be located, even if such a repository is recognised as the best environmental option? Could it be located anywhere in the United Kingdom if the matter is approached on a county basis, with everyone objecting in succession? My reply to those who want the waste to be stored at nuclear installations is the question, "Is Amersham to keep all its waste? Will the same apply to Hartlepool and Heysham?"

Public safety is paramount, and the Government would be failing in their duty if they omitted to establish that concept in theory and practice. A site should be chosen only on the basis of the risk or the probability of fatal cancer to any member of the public from a repository being no greater than one in 1 million per year. For the sake of succeeding generations, movement of radioactivity should not be permitted to show a significant increase above that naturally occurring in the general vicinity. Perhaps I might illustrate that point by quoting what Dr. Lewis Roberts of Harwell said in November 1984 at a British nuclear forum: "no one individual, at any time in the future, should suffer more radiation from the operation of a repository than he would get by moving from a low-radioactivity part of the country, like London, to an area with higher natural radioactivity, like Aberdeen or Cornwall. Moving from one to another was not usually thought of as a risk."

The Atomic Energy Authority is conducting a study on the behaviour of radionuclides in geological formations beyond the repository. When will it report? The findings will be material to the Elstow issue. Materials technology is also vital as it will doubtless improve the containment capability of canisters and the performance of cement as a matrix and as an external containment material.

Does my hon. Friend the Minister doubt the ability of containers to hold their charge until decay renders it innocuous, and of cement to perform reliably during the term required? He might be interested in a paper by Atkinson and Hearne of Harwell of October 1984 which says:

"Sulphate attack and $\text{Ca}(\text{OH})_2$ leaching have been identified as the most likely processes causing degradation in repository environments. Corrosion of reinforcement and alkali-aggregate reaction are likely to be somewhat less deleterious whereas carbonation,

action of micro-organisms, crystallisation, environmental cycling and radiation effects are likely to be negligible. The engineering lifetime of a 1 m thick reinforced concrete slab has been estimated from the data available. The lifetime could be as short as 380 years for a concrete based on Ordinary Portland Cement, but is likely to be in the range of 500—1000 years for Sulphate Resisting Portland Cement and may be as long as 3000 years for SRPC in the deep repository."

Problems will arise for the industry 30 years after the building of the Magnox stations. They will have to be replaced by new plant, and old reactors will have to be decommissioned. Well ahead of that date, thinking will have to be done and feasible plans will have to be reached for disposing of abandoned resources. That is more of a problem for the Department of Energy than for the Department of the Environment, though the latter will have its say.

When alarm, stimulated by fear of the unknown, builds up, it is essential to have a public inquiry to dispel many of the monstrous chimeras. While the Government have an open mind, nuclear waste must be discussed freely in a public forum. I welcome the opportunity for that in the 1980s. The public will be richer for the information derived from a clash of opinions, and for the shattering of many illusions. We have traditional methods for settling these great issues. While these matters are being considered, the Government cannot expect local authorities to defend their positions and yet be penalised for the expenditure involved. The Department may consider that later when it comes to make some accommodation.

Finally, we have an environmentally sensitive Government. I have noted their actions on siting airports, responding to accidents at Sellafield, pursuing broad studies into realistic alternatives and tackling the pesticide nettle. I detect changes in their inner counsels about Elstow. However, it does not require the clamour of masses to promote change. The Select Committee on the Environment, which is considering this matter and hopes to report by October 1985, may presage the course ahead.

10.10 am

Mr. Ian Wrigglesworth (Stockton, South): I congratulate the hon. Member for Bedfordshire, North (Mr. Skeet) on choosing this topic for debate today. I am sure that it is most timely and that the House will have listened with interest to the detailed and responsible way in which he introduced his motion. He displayed his technical knowledge and understanding of these matters to the benefit of the House and of those outside who take a close interest in them.

I shall deal less with the technical than the political and human aspects of the problem. Hon. Members will know that on Teesside the last few months of our lives have been dominated by a proposal by NIREX to place nuclear waste in the anhydride mine at Billingham. That caused an outcry in Billingham and from the surrounding area. I congratulate the Minister on the fact that the Government responded by withdrawing the proposal.

I shall address my remarks to the House on the basis of that experience. I appeal to the Government and the industry to realise that the nuclear industry will be successful and the technology to develop it will be allowed only with public consent and support. It is absolutely vital

that we have, not secrecy and misunderstandings, but the fullest possible public discussion and exposure of the details of the case. I welcome the hon. Gentleman's remarks about following planning procedures that will allow that to happen. Indeed, the Government are to a considerable extent allowing that to happen. However, some aspects of Government policy have made the position much worse.

I shall deal first with energy policy. The lack of clarity about the Government's energy policy is giving rise to fear and uncertainty. We do not even have a vague certainty whether the Government intend to pursue a vigorous policy of nuclear power generation. We can only search Ministers' answers to parliamentary questions, their occasional speeches and other statements from Government sources to ascertain how much reliance the Government will place on gas, oil, coal, nuclear power generation, other non-renewable sources of energy and renewable sources of energy, which at present constitute only a small part of our energy needs.

My first criticism of the Government is that they unnecessarily allow people to have greater fears than may be necessary, because of the lack of a clear energy strategy. That is remarkable, because we are an energy rich nation and have the good fortune to sit on enormous supplies of coal, to have oil under the North sea and possibly even more oil elsewhere, and to have gas. We are the most energy rich nation in Europe. In those circumstances, it is remarkable that the Government have not made their strategy clear.

In the light of our rich energy resources, it is natural for people to ask why we need to rely on the nuclear option to the extent that we do. My colleagues and I believe that we need to retain the nuclear option. I visited Japan recently and looked at the work on nuclear power generation there. Japan is a major competitor to much of our industry, and in future it will have a substantial thriving nuclear power industry. Other countries, such as France, also have that option.

The source of energy to our industry is inevitably a major part of the equation that determines our competitiveness. For many of our industries, the cost of energy is a substantial part of their overheads burden and profoundly influences how competitive they can be. As we remain a great industrial nation, albeit not as great as we used to be, we need to ensure that our industries have a potential source of nuclear energy available in future, which could provide a cheap source of energy. Our competitors could completely undermine some of our industries if the whole of the energy equation were to come together in 50 or 30 years' time to make our position grossly uncompetitive. We therefore need to retain the option, for that and other reasons.

On the other hand, there is no justification for following the road which the Prime Minister and other Government Ministers wish to take, which is to adopt a substantial nuclear strategy, to rely on nuclear energy power generation and to minimise our reliance on our other sources of energy. We should not adopt that policy.

If the Government made clear what they see as the future of our nuclear power industry, we could have a much clearer debate on the disposal of waste arising from it and the many other industries which the hon. Gentleman mentioned which give rise to nuclear waste. I urge the Government to make clear their strategy on nuclear power generation within an overall energy policy. I repeat that

[Mr. Ian Wrigglesworth]

if the Government want to continue along the road of nuclear power generation, they will have to produce a much greater degree of public support for their policy than they have up to now. The method of disposal of nuclear waste is a major factor in people's minds.

It is understandable that people living in rural areas are very concerned that their areas might be chosen as sites for the disposal of nuclear waste. On the basis of our experience at Billingham, I cannot think of anything more calculated to give rise to public anxiety and concern than a proposal to put nuclear waste underneath people's houses. Such decisions create a degree of opposition to the whole nuclear industry that has to be seen to be believed. In the case of Billingham, it was a remarkably stupid decision. Clearly, density of population must be one of the factors—although not an overwhelming factor—in the choice of sites for the disposal of nuclear waste. It was not surprising that there was an outcry at Billingham.

I believe that opposition to proposals for the disposal of nuclear waste can be overcome only if people can be reassured and can feel that matters are not being kept secret. Recent events have not helped to reassure them in that respect. The dreadful saga of Sellafield in 1983 and afterwards created grave doubts in people's minds about the willingness of the nuclear industry to come clean and display to the public the difficulties and dangers that can arise in the handling of nuclear substances. Secrecy is counter-productive. The authorities may think that by keeping quiet it is possible to calm public fears, but that has not proved to be the case. As a result of the investigation and activities of Greenpeace, many factors have emerged. Rather than having secrecy, it is far better to have a full public announcement giving details of the risks and dangers that may be involved. Such information should be given as soon as it becomes available.

I appeal to the nuclear industry not to be secretive or to cover up details of the disposal of nuclear waste. If accidents happen in the industry, it is vital to publish the full facts, so that when claims are made as to the safety of sites—in Bedfordshire or wherever it may be—the public can feel confident that what is being claimed is accurate and that they can trust what is being said. I hope that the industry and the Government will ensure that there is the most open debate and discussion on all such matters.

The people of Teesside and Billingham fought a tremendous campaign to prevent the disposal of nuclear waste under Billingham. The leaders of Billingham's campaign against nuclear dumping deserve to be congratulated on the effectiveness of their actions. It was a great encouragement to people, such as myself, who do not believe in groups breaking the law to achieve their ends. The Billingham campaign was carried out within the law, using all the available democratic means, including those in this place. As a result, the Minister was persuaded to reverse the decision. I hope that the people of Bedfordshire will take some heart from our success in Billingham.

Mr. Skeet: I have followed closely the hon. Gentleman's remarks about Billingham. I remind him that ICI owns the anhydride mine and that ICI has its own problems on Teesside. It has a cyanide plant there. It has

enough troubles on the chemical front. Does the hon. Gentleman think that, on that basis, ICI perhaps decided that it would not add to its problems?

Mr. Wrigglesworth: That may be part of the reason why ICI took its decision to oppose the use of its mine, but there were probably bigger reasons than that, such as the ones to which I have been referring. As I have been arguing, it is not simply a technical problem. We are dealing with people's fears. People's individual interests and the community's interests are involved. As politicians, we must take account of those interests. The technical problems with which the hon. Member for Bedfordshire, North dealt in his speech can be ascertained, weighed up and controlled much more easily than can people's opinions and fears. I do not think that the nuclear industry, the Government or previous Governments have been sufficiently sensitive to the need to calm people's fears and to take people along with them in their arguments. A great deal more time and resources—I particularly stress resources—need to be devoted to ensuring that people understand exactly what is being proposed and what are the threats.

When we talk about nuclear waste or nuclear power generation, many people think that we are talking about a bomb; they do not think that what is involved is the disposal of nuclear waste. I do not doubt that many people in Billingham thought that there was a proposal to put a bomb underneath their houses. That sort of fear and misunderstanding has to be overcome. We must realise that people's minds are confused and mixed up. They do not understand the technical details in the way that they are understood by those who have studied them. Therefore, although it is important that the technical aspects should be investigated in great depth, adequate consideration must also be given to people's fears. In Billingham, those fears began to affect house sales, because of the general uncertainty involved. It was felt that the value of their houses would drop, that people would not want to move into the town, and that industries would not want to move there.

I believe that the fears about nuclear waste are almost certainly exaggerated. On Teesside we have the largest concentration of hazardous material in Britain. We have petrochemical plants north and south of the River Tees. We have heavy engineering and other plants. We have the largest proportion of hazardous and waste materials to be found in any part of Britain. All sorts of hazardous materials regularly travel by road and rail through our community. Perhaps NIREX thought that as we are so used to the hazardous materials we would not mind another one, but this was the straw that broke the camel's back.

In the past, I have fought for schemes such as the Hazchem scheme for the labelling of hazardous wastes when they are transported. People should worry more about other hazardous substances being transported over our roads, not least liquid gas, which has caused some devastating accidents in other parts of the world, such as at Seveso. If we want all the things that we have, such as plastics and other materials, we must learn how to deal with the waste. However, let us not over-exaggerate the nuclear threat and forget the other hazardous substances or think that they are not as dangerous.

My main point this morning is to make a plea that every possible effort and resource is put into taking the public along with this argument, reassuring people and giving

them full information so that their understandable fears are overcome. The Government have done a reasonable job on this, but I urge them to do more and continue with the consultations, and particularly I urge them to encourage the industry to be open and unsecretive.

The industry should involve the public as much as it can in discussions of these matters, otherwise it will be crippled in the way that it has been in the United States, and fear will become so great that public opinion will stop the industry from making any progress. If that happens, an important opportunity for Britain might be lost.

10.32 am

Mr. Nicholas Lyell (Mid-Bedfordshire): I am glad to follow the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Mr. Wrigglesworth); and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North (Mr. Skeet) on giving the House its first opportunity to debate the widespread issues that surround this difficult question.

The House will know that I speak as the Member of Parliament for Mid-Bedfordshire, which is the constituency within which Elstow is sited. Elstow is the place where NIREX, at least until the recent announcement of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy, has been concentrating its efforts to dump low and short-life intermediate level nuclear waste.

This debate gives me the opportunity to do a number of things. First, as Member of Parliament for that area, I can, in some detail, say why I strongly oppose the proposals of NIREX. I do so from the standpoint of someone who strongly supports the programme of nuclear energy policy. We need nuclear energy as part of our overall energy provision. We need it to keep our children and grandchildren warm, both now, as 18 per cent. of our electricity comes from nuclear energy, and increasingly into the coming century and the centuries ahead.

The Government have to overcome the problem of nuclear waste. I quote my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine), who said that this is a management problem, and in some senses more a management than a technical problem. He recognises that there are still technical questions to be answered, but he is right that it is a management problem. I am sure that he intended to comprehend the fact that this is also a political problem.

If we do not recognise that these problems are political, we shall go down the wrong road time and again. I can draw an analogy with airports, about which I have some experience. The notion that we can slough off a problem of this nature to public inquiries and thereby think that it will go away is wrong. We have to hold public inquiries, and there will have to be a major public inquiry before any final decision as to how or where nuclear waste of this nature is dumped, dealt with or stored. However, to think that this decision can be passed to a judge, an inspector or a multiplicity of inspectors under a planning inquiry commission and get away from the political problem is fundamentally to misunderstand the nature of the beast.

I believe that until recently, and to some extent even now, we have been going about it the wrong way. NIREX has certainly been going about it the wrong way from the outset. The notion that we can simply take one place for low and intermediate levels of nuclear waste—Elstow—and another place for longer-lived nuclear waste—

Billingham—and then use money and energy to persuade the local population that it will be all right is gravely mistaken.

Nothing illustrates that point better than the Billingham campaign. I hope that I shall not be thought to be over cynical when I say that the Billingham campaign succeeded for two reasons, not for one. There is no doubt that the enormous weight of local opposition was a major and serious cause. However, I ask myself, as the Member of Parliament representing Elstow, whether the campaign would have come to so swift and, for them, happy a conclusion if the anhydrite mine had not been owned by ICI, and if ICI, having at the outset shown complicity, had not then changed its mind.

I know something about compulsory purchase procedures. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends not to shrink from the notion of compulsory purchase if the right site requires it. But, as a lawyer, I believe that to seek the compulsory purchase not only of the right to use part of a mine but of all the access ways and requirements that would have been involved would be a legal maze from which we would never have emerged. I believe that one of the real reasons why we so quickly got rid of the Billingham idea was that, as soon as ICI showed its implacable opposition, the idea became an impossibility.

Mr. Wrigglesworth: One of the reasons why ICI changed its mind was that Billingham is almost an ICI town. ICI's employees, expressing their strength of feeling about the proposals, led ICI to take that decision. Therefore, it was a political decision.

Mr. Lyell: I accept what the hon. Gentleman says. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol, West (Mr. Waldegrave) will accept both points. There was real and profound local opposition.

However, at Elstow we have a different position. One of the prime reasons why Elstow was chosen as a potential site—indeed the preferred site—was that the site is owned by the CEGB, which is one of the partners in NIREX. That makes life a great deal easier for it. That is not the only reason. Elstow has good communications, and NIREX argues that it has a suitable geological basis in the Oxford clay. However, the fact that the CEGB owns the site was a powerful incentive for NIREX to choose Elstow, and this represents a big difference between Billingham and Elstow.

I know that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment will not underestimate the profundity of the local opposition in Bedfordshire. We did not have advance notice of the decision, as they did in Billingham, and perhaps the feeling has been a little slower in building up. I shall describe the level of that opposition, because I have no doubt that rational, sensible people, as we are in Bedfordshire, are profoundly worried. The breadth of the opposition that I am receiving and the nature of the people from whom I am receiving it—I am confident that it is coming from over 90 per cent. of the population—shows the deep nature of the political problem that must be tackled.

While I speak for one county and am, therefore, conscious of the "not in my back yard" syndrome, I am sure that there would be similar opposition were it in Hertford, Hereford or Hampshire. I choose the names carefully, so that it will not be thought that they will necessarily be the next sites to be chosen!

[Mr. Lyell]

I also take the opportunity to comment on the handling of the matter from a parliamentary point of view, because I believe it is undesirable that the Department of the Environment should not only have to field the questions on how the matter should be judged, but should also have to argue the case for the prosecution.

Questions on the technicalities and options should go to the Department of Energy; and questions on how the issue is weighed up and decided should go to the Department of the Environment, which the Secretary of State has been at pains to say is standing back from the technical issues so as to be seen to be taking an impartial view.

I am sure that the Secretary of State will seek to take an impartial view, but in public presentation it is appalling if the same Department is forced to be prosecution, judge and jury in its own case. I hope that serious thought at the highest level will be given to changing that way of dealing with the issue in a parliamentary way, so making it easier to have an open and clear discussion of this important issue.

Although an earlier Parliament tried to set up a suitable procedure, the planning inquiry commission procedure is probably not the right type of procedure in these matters.

I shall now explain why, as the representative of the Elstow area, I strongly oppose the present ill-thought out proposal.

First, the Elstow site is far too close to major centres of population, the most major centre being the town of Bedford, part of which I represent, though much the larger part is represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North. The proposed site is only three miles from the town of Bedford and is close to the villages of Elstow, Wilstead and Houghton Conquest. The degree of anxiety in those villages can hardly be overstated.

Secondly, the technology is unproven. Many assertions are made about the one in a million or one in 10 million risk, the life of concrete, copper, and so on, but all are unproven. Other responsible countries with major nuclear industries—in particular, Sweden and West Germany—have rejected the idea of shallow land burial, mainly because of what is described as the problem of capping the site.

Such sites are, by definition, waterlogged. They are below the water table. The published literature, from the Government and all concerned, recognises that in the fullness of time—and nobody can put an accurate time scale on it—water will seep into, totally surround and finally fill the site. The Oxford clays which Elstow enjoys are strongly alkaline, and that can have a corrosive effect on canisters and cement.

The life of a concrete trench is finite. My hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North put forward some of the technical arguments. We have often heard about the long life of concrete. I do not want to be cynical or to raise unnecessary fears, but one need only think of high alumina cement, of the effects of the use of concrete in Ronan Point and of the way in which concrete has broken down in many towns and cities, including great engineering projects, to appreciate that we do not yet know enough about concrete to give a confident estimate of its life.

When the University of London gave instructions before the war for the Senate House to be built—that

great building in Bloomsbury—it told the architects that it wanted a building which could be sure to last for 500 years. It was built in dovetailed granite blocks.

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): The hon. and learned Gentleman is knowledgeable on the subject about which he is speaking. I am extremely concerned because we currently store nuclear waste in shallow burial in the county of Cumbria. If his assertion is correct, the whole of that part of west Cumberland must be at risk. I hope that the Minister will give reassurance on the point, remembering that we do not want to upset the apple cart and disturb public confidence too much.

Mr. Lyell: The hon. Gentleman will know that what is stored in open trenches in west Cumbria is low level nuclear waste. The trenches are not even lined. I understand that plastic bags are virtually just dumped in shallow open trenches. I have not seen the process and I do not want to misrepresent the position, but I gather from my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North, who has seen the operation, that that is the case. I have been talking about intermediate life nuclear wastes, which are not dumped in that way but which are to be put in lined concrete trenches.

When speaking of unproven technology, it is important to consider with care the likely life of concrete. I am not saying that it will not last, but that, as yet, we cannot be confident that it will. That is one reason why other responsible countries—and 50 per cent. of Sweden's electricity comes from nuclear power—have chosen to go down different roads.

There is a certain illogicality about the arguments that are sometimes put forward about low level nuclear wastes. We are told that the dumping will be done carefully. We are also told that it is not necessary to do it carefully because there is no great risk.

The French have at Centre de la Manche, a repository for storing nuclear waste which I saw on a visit there with my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North and others. I was not deeply impressed by the approach of the French to the technology.

One reason for choosing Elstow is that it is on Oxford clay. The repository at Centre de la Manche is on shale. Oxford clay is supposed to be impervious, where as shale clearly is not. Yet we are told that it is vital to use an area having Oxford clay. That is one of the illogicalities in the argument which supports my view of the unproven nature of the technology.

Mr. Skeet: My hon. and learned Friend is speaking of the integrity of cement. He will be aware that Pompeii has lasted until this day with all the bodies there preserved. In other words, volcanic ash plus water is a cement, and in that case it has lasted for well over 1,000 years.

Mr. Lyell: My hon. Friend gives a good example of an excellent preservative cement. Volcanic ash may be considered as one of the options. I do not want to be flippant, by my point about high alumina cement must have struck home. That cement, which was intended to be particularly strong and effective, crumbled within a few years. I am not suggesting that that will happen, but we are dealing with an unproven area.

On the same point, although I am changing direction slightly, the United States has used trench methods for the siting of short-life intermediate level nuclear waste of the

kind that is to go to Elstow. The United States began by telling everybody that it was perfectly safe and that the radionuclides would stay within the perimeter of the site. However, those sites have been closed because it has been found that the radio nuclides have migrated outside the site area at a far faster rate than was expected. Again, I hasten to say that I do not wish to raise alarm among the public. If my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment believes that that information is incorrect or that it should be put into another perspective, I am sure that he will tell the House. I go only so far as to say that this technology is unproven.

My third reason is that I believe it to be utter folly, from a management point of view, to transport such large quantities of low level nuclear waste all over the country, unless it is necessary. The fact is that 70 per cent. of all low level nuclear waste will come from Sellafield. What is the point of carrying it right across the country to Bedfordshire when, if mud rock clays are the answer—and Oxford clay is a mud rock clay—there are substantial mud rock clay areas, often deeper than those in Bedfordshire, much closer to Sellafield? I ask that that option should be looked at again carefully.

My next point is that other options should be explored in much greater detail. Our knowledge is still limited because this problem has come upon us fairly quickly in the last three years due to the closure of what was first thought to be the best option—namely, dumping at sea. Therefore, I believe that we should have a period of dry storage on site, see how it works, and study the effects for another generation. There seem to be no technical difficulties about dry storage on site. I strongly suspect that the cost of such storage may be substantially lower. In this context, I take up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North about each generation solving its own problems. By going unwisely for shallow land burial, although we may solve the problem for ourselves and for perhaps the next 50 years, I believe that, because we do not know whether there will be water seepage and an escape of radionuclides, we may be storing up a problem for future generations—a problem which my hon. Friend professes, and I know sincerely wishes, to avoid.

Another very important fact is that the Oxford clay on the Elstow site is in itself an important mineral resource. That site was originally owned by the London Brick Company. It was compulsorily purchased by the Royal Air Force before the war and then sold to the Central Electricity Generating Board with a view to its possible use as a power station. It was understood initially that the site would return to its original owners, the London Brick Company. It is exactly in the path of the environmentally preferred route for the exploitation of brick clay resources in the next generation. The London Brick Company, if environmental considerations played no part in the decision, would prefer to go to Houghton Conquest and then up to Elstow, but the county council has said that on sound environmental grounds it does not want it to go to Houghton Conquest. Therefore, the preferred route for exploiting Oxford clay for brick-making purposes, the largest and most important single industry in the county of Bedfordshire, is exactly where this site is to be placed—a very strong and independent reason for turning away from this site. The fact is that there are about 10,000 square miles of Oxford clay in the country.

Furthermore, the depth of clay at Elstow is somewhat suspect. During the past 18 months NIREX has published different estimates of the depth of clay that it requires. In its earlier pamphlets it said that it required up to 20 m of clay. It is now widely believed that over most of this site 20 m of usable Oxford clay are not to be found. NIREX seems to be changing its requirements. Therefore, we must look extremely carefully, on technical grounds, at whether Elstow would be the right site in any event.

I return to the key political problem—the strength of local opposition. It will be well known to my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State that both the county council and the two district councils, north Bedfordshire and mid-Bedfordshire, are strongly against it. I hope that my hon. Friends in neighbouring constituencies will be able to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in order to express their views on behalf of their constituents. A poll was carried out recently. One should not attach too much weight to opinion polls. Nevertheless, they give a broad indication of people's views. An opinion poll was carried out in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North. I am told that 93 per cent. of those who were asked—the poll was carried out throughout the constituency, not just in the areas that is nearest to Elstow—are opposed to it. The opinion poll also took into account the efforts made by NIREX.

That brings me to the "unwisdom" of the approach which has been hitherto been adopted. NIREX has spent about £250,000 on propaganda in order to try to persuade the people of Bedfordshire of the beneficial nature of its Elstow proposals. It says that there is nothing to fear from them. I am glad in one respect that NIREX is seeking to do so. However, I would prefer NIREX to indulge in a more open and careful examination of the problem than to use propaganda in an attempt to persuade. The opinion poll showed that of those who received the NIREX propaganda—over 70 or 80 per cent.—45 per cent. said that they were not influenced one way or the other, while 53 per cent. said that the material made them even more worried than they were before. One might say, "They would say that, wouldn't they?" Of those who received the propaganda, only 2 per cent. said that they had been a little comforted by the material. We are dealing with the feelings of people. That is the profound political problem with which we are faced.

On the planning inquiry commission procedure, the Town and Country Planning Act 1971 has never been used although it has been on the statute book for nearly 15 years. It was sensible to try to formulate a more comprehensive procedure. However, it stems from the days when we were absolutely wedded to the notion of great public inquiries, as though somehow they would solve rather than merely defer political decisions.

I should tell the House what the right hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Mr. Shore) said when he had to consider using it. In 1978, in a statement, he said that he perceived the procedure to be defective. He took the view that the first, investigative, stage envisaged by the Act was bound to lead the commission to conclusions that arguments of policy and principle, as well as local issues, would also arise at the second stage of the local public inquiry, and that people would not feel that they would get a fair hearing. If people feel that they will not get a fair hearing, the principal purpose of having a major public inquiry will be defeated. The quotation which I took from footnotes to section 47 of the Town and Country Planning

[Mr. Lyell]

Act 1971 in the "Encyclopaedia of Planning Law," comes from a report at page 731 of the *Journal of Planning and Environment Law* in 1978.

I believe, therefore, that one should be cautious about choosing a planning inquiry commission per se. As my right hon. and hon. Friends in the Government have made clear, a major public inquiry is certainly needed and will be held, but we should not necessarily be wedded to the notion of a planning inquiry commission.

NIREX has been spending a great deal of money on propaganda and there is always a little humour to be found in these matters. I am told that NIREX has produced a video tape showing a little man—perhaps one of my constituents or one of the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North—settling down to write a letter opposing the NIREX proposals. The television set in the corner of the room suddenly starts speaking and telling him not to do that; it will be perfectly all right; it is all entirely safe. That is scarcely sensible propaganda. The only precedent for a television set to speak to people is to be found in the book "1984". That example gives some idea of the ineptitude of NIREX, which I appreciate has a very difficult job.

I was most grateful to see my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy in the Chamber at the beginning of the debate because basically this is a management problem for the Department of Energy. The technical questions should be under active and open debate and they should be ruled upon and investigated by the Secretary of State for Energy and his team. All hon. Members should have the opportunity to question the Department of Energy in detail about all the options. Parliamentary questions on this should not be transferred to the Secretary of State for the Environment, as now happens. My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, who takes such great trouble with these difficult questions, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State would then not be in the embarrassing position of appearing to be judge and jury in their own cause.

That would lead us away from the present position in which NIREX—which, I accept, is not the Government—chooses a site and it is assumed that everything must go ahead. It would lead us away from the notion that NIREX should do nothing but plug the case for the site that it has chosen and it would lead us back to a proper and open debate about how to overcome this very serious problem. If we can get back to proper and open debate, I believe that solutions can be found. In those circumstances, I and my very rational constituents will put all our efforts into seeking sensible solutions to this national problem.

11.4 am

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland): It is interesting to follow an hon. Member in whose constituency it is proposed to locate nuclear waste. Geographically and temporally, nuclear waste disposal is on the horizon for my constituency. It is also novel to be the second Opposition Member and also the second alliance Member to be called. At one point, I noted that four alliance Members were present, while only the shadow Minister was here to fly the flag for the Labour party.

The hon. Member for Bedfordshire, North (Mr. Skeet) should be congratulated on raising this important subject. I apologise for missing the first few minutes of his speech, due to a delayed plane. The hon. Gentleman gave a very detailed exposition of the issues as he sees them.

We are all aware of the public anxiety that this issue generates. When I was a Euro candidate in the south of Scotland in 1979, the possibility of test boring for high-level radioactive waste disposal in the Galloway hills was an important issue. At that time, there were similar fears in the Cheviots. Subsequently, the same anxiety has arisen in Billingham and Elstow. In my area there are now fears about the possibility of under-seabed disposal at Stormy Bank 16 miles west of my constituency.

In many respects, I believe that that public anxiety and scepticism are justified, because of the shortcomings of Government policy and the arrogance of the nuclear industry over many years. For far too long the industry acted in a paternalistic "trust us, we know best" manner and shrouded its activities in secrecy. In more recent times, there has been greater media and public interest in environmental issues and the industry has come under increased scrutiny.

The nuclear industry often complains that opposition is ill-informed or uninformed, but the industry itself must carry the can for some of the lack of information, in view of the secretive way in which it has sought to fob off the public with bland official assurances.

The tenth report of the Royal Commission on environmental pollution captured the situation well in paragraph 2.25, when it stated:

"Industry and pollution control authorities . . . must beware of adopting a 'we know best' posture. They must recognise that the public's subjective judgment, and even 'gut reaction', have an essential part to play. In a democracy it is an unhealthy sign when authority claims omniscience and dismisses grass-roots concern as 'irrational'. On the other hand, a similarly intolerant attitude on the part of the public and pressure groups is equally reprehensible if conditions exist for reasoned discussion."

Public confidence is not helped by bland assurances which turn out to be wrong, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Mr. Wigglesworth) showed in his exposition of the history of the Windscale/Sellafield incidents. An environmental pressure group had to reveal to the public the leaks that had occurred at the site. Government policy has also contributed to alarm and concern. In the late 1970s and in 1980 we were told by the Government that there was an urgent need to make arrangements for the disposal of high-level toxic waste. Then, at the end of 1981, we were told that it was not urgent at all and could certainly wait 50 years. What are the public expected to make of that?

Similar confusion has reigned in my constituency. I have been assured several times by junior Ministers that under-seabed disposal is highly futuristic. When the Secretary of State made his statement in January on present disposal procedures, he replied to a question from me that under-seabed disposal was many years away. On the same day, the media reported that desk studies were about to begin. The public simply do not know what to make of all these apparent inconsistencies.

I assure the House and the Government that any proposal to deposit nuclear waste under the seabed off the coast of my constituency will be met with the same sort of hostile reception that greeted similar proposals in Billingham and Bedfordshire. Even the perception that such things may happen can be equally damaging to my

local industry, particularly as so much of it depends on marine activities. Colleagues and friends have already said to me, "I see that they are going to dump nuclear waste off your constituency." That is not the case, but the public get that perception.

I should be reassured if the Minister would confirm that there are no proposals to dump waste or to do test drilling off my constituency. If there is a possibility of test drilling outwith the planning area, I hope that we shall be told something about what planning procedures will apply.

It follows from what I have said about secrecy that one prerequisite of any planning inquiry must be the fullest disclosure of information to the public in a form which can be understood by them. Commercial confidence often blocks the proper disclosure of information, but there are circumstances in which even that must be sacrificed if the public are to be confident that a proper environmental assessment is being undertaken before proposals go ahead.

The motion mentions the possibility of a planning inquiry commission, and serious thought should be given to that. It was put into planning legislation, but no Government yet have had the courage to activate such a body.

I understand that the Radioactive Waste Disposal Advisory Committee recommended that at least 10 sites should be nominated for the disposal of intermediate and low-level nuclear waste disposal and that there should then be a procedure to narrow down the number. At first, NIREX nominated two sites, one of which is not to go ahead, and we are told that five sites are still to be named. It would have been better to have the 10 sites named, and perhaps a planning inquiry commission would have been appropriate to consider the whole issue. When it became necessary to hold a planning inquiry on a particular proposal, the alternative sites would have been discussed and put out of the way and the inquiry could consider the merits of only the proposal before it.

There is anxiety about the fact that planning inquiries such as those at Sizewell and Windscale and the one in Ayrshire, at which I represented one of the groups of objectors, always produce an imbalance in the resources available to the two sides. The nuclear industry commands substantial resources. Mr. Justice Parker drew attention to that fact in his report on the Windscale inquiry. He said in paragraphs 8 and 9 of chapter XV that it was a matter of concern to him that there should be such a disparity.

I should like the Government to contemplate giving legal assistance to objectors, because, as Mr. Justice Parker said, it must be in the public interest that counter-arguments are fully examined. Perhaps objectors would have to impose some discipline on themselves to get together, and that might reduce the time taken by some inquiries.

Much has been said about the planning procedures for the disposal of waste. We have to ask whether there is yet a need to dispose of intermediate and low-level radioactive waste. Part of the trouble with NIREX is that it is comprised of representatives from the industry—the Central Electricity Generating Board, British Nuclear Fuels Limited, the Atomic Energy Authority, and the South of Scotland Electricity Board—who have a vested interest in disposing of waste, and perhaps they do not look at other options. It is regrettable that NIREX has such a membership.

The Flowers Commission recommended that there should be a nuclear waste disposal corporation with a remit to

"protect the environment, rather than offer the cheapest terms to BNFL, the electrical utilities and others who might require its services."

It is unfortunate that such a body was not established.

Storage must be seen as a possibility. It would give us more time to see what happens to materials. The industry will claim that it knows all about the material anyway, but many years ago we put asbestos into our homes and factories in the belief that we knew all about it and that it was safe. Storage gives us the option of continuing to monitor material to see whether factors which we cannot foresee at present may arise.

In many respects, NIREX is hamstrung by Government policy. The then Labour Government set out in their response to the Flowers report a list of measures which they regarded as important in dealing with radioactive waste management. The two points at the head of the list were that the creation of waste from the nuclear industry would be minimised and that waste management problems would be dealt with before any large nuclear programme was undertaken.

NIREX cannot manage properly unless it also has some control over the volume of waste generated. At present it is comprised of people who are generating the waste, so Government policy must come in and we must question whether there is a need to produce the volume of waste which comes principally from the reprocessing facility. Reprocessing is one of the major generators of waste and most of the intermediate waste that was scheduled to go to Billingham would have come from the reprocessing facility.

The present facility was started when there were fears of a uranium shortage, but those fears no longer exist. My right hon. and hon. Friends who were in the House at the time opposed the thermal oxide reprocessing plant at Windscale. We were told that it was an urgent necessity, but it has still not been built. The right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) pioneered that project.

One of the economic arguments for the Windscale project was that it would be able to reprocess fuel from Japan. In recent weeks, I have visited Japan with the hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), and we learnt that the Japanese are keen on developing a complete nuclear cycle, including a reprocessing facility. Therefore, one must question the economics of the Sellafield proposal.

There is a pollution risk from the discharge of a reprocessing facility and a risk of proliferation in the military sphere. That was why the Carter Administration banned any further reprocessing in the United States in 1977. Economically, reprocessing is at a disadvantage compared with dry storage. If we are to minimise waste, we must examine our attitude to reprocessing and question whether we really need a reprocessing facility in this country.

The Labour Government also said in response to the Flowers report that waste management problems would be dealt with before any large nuclear programme was undertaken, but my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South has already pointed out that this Government have no coherent energy policy. We do not know how many nuclear power stations they wish to build. I agree that the nuclear option must remain open. We cannot leave a hole

[Mr. James Wallace]

in our energy supplies. Admittedly the programme that we are now talking about is not on the scale of the programme talked about by Governments in the 1970s. However, Torness is to go ahead in the next two or three years, and Sizewell is being promoted, though without any reference to the capacity need. Yet, while we are undertaking the commission of new nuclear power stations, we have not solved the waste management problems. The very fact of this debate today shows that the waste management problem has not been solved.

It is the responsibility of Members of Parliament and of the community at large to confront the problems posed by nuclear waste. It exists, and even if it is stored for a length of time it will have to be disposed of at some stage. It is equally our responsibility to ensure that the problem is not unnecessarily magnified by continuing a reprocessing facility which I suggest is not absolutely necessary and by a continued expansion of the nuclear industry while the waste disposal problem remains unsolved.

11.20 am

Mr. David Madel (Bedfordshire, South-West): Like my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Lyell), I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North (Mr. Skeet) on winning the ballot, on his motion and on the debate that he has initiated. I was particularly attracted by that part of my hon. Friend's motion which talked of the need "to adopt a satisfactory policy for the disposal of nuclear waste to ensure that people and the environment are protected from any hazards to which they may be exposed."

In my opinion at this stage that is the most important part of the motion.

Before I comment on those words, I want to underline three or four topics which have come out in the debate. The hon. Member for Stockton, South (Mr. Wigglesworth) referred to the highly effective campaign in Billingham and the way that people in Billingham had kept within the law, showing that it was possible to mount successful campaigns against proposals to dump nuclear waste in a lawful way. Of course, in Bedfordshire we are quite used to such campaigns. We have twice had to mount tremendous campaigns to stop the third London airport being built on our doorstep. At all stages of those campaigns the law was observed and democratic processes were used, as they are being used now.

The second aspect of the debate that struck me is that public fears about nuclear waste will not be allayed by drowning them in scientific detail and enormous scientific research. We have this political worry. The hon. Member for Stockton, South said that people in Billingham felt almost as though a nuclear bomb was being put under their houses. But it is not only that that worries people. People get their news basically from television. It can present views in a highly articulate and neat manner, and people are well aware of the accidents that have occurred in other parts of the world—not only accidents involving nuclear waste but accidents involving general harmful substances. Those news items have registered loud and clear with people. That, too, has come across in the debate, and it underlines my argument that scientific detail cannot do it all.

I was intrigued by the remark of my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North about Pompeii and volcanic ash. I did not quite follow it because, as far as I know, there is no volcano in Bedfordshire. I do not know whether it was a fair comparison. It was probably a necessary light aside in what is an extremely serious debate.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire described what happened when judges were appointed to hold inquiries, and he asked whether we could solve the problem in that way. Unfortunately, we cannot. There is a great deal of reverence for the law in Britain. Indeed, there is a great deal of reverence, period. However, when Mr. Justice Rōskill ruled that Cublington was ideal for the third London airport in 1971, I do not think that he realised the political volcano that he had set off. I hope that we shall avoid thinking that, because we have a judge or a panel of judges to rule on an issue as important as the disposal of nuclear waste, somehow, because the law is involved, the country will fall into line and accept the decision that is reached. The blunt truth is that it will not.

I also support those hon. Members who have said that this is not only a Department of Environment matter. I welcome my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment to the debate and thank him for the patience with which he has listened to us in Bedfordshire, not only about nuclear waste but about other matters which are outside the terms of the motion. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Energy because, like my hon. Friends, I take the view that this is very much a Department of Energy matter as well.

As I said earlier, the part of the motion that I wish to discuss is the part dealing with public worry. Where to store nuclear waste will always be controversial, and I should like to know what experience we have of other deadly substances. Such information would not necessarily allay public worry, but it would improve people's knowledge of these matters.

We read more and more about how we were not prepared for the last war, and it occurs to me that we had quantities of poisonous gas and other substances which could have been used in the war and were ready to be used if Hitler's army had invaded or if Hitler had threatened us with chemical warfare. It is well known that we had a mass of poisonous gas and other chemical substances. Where were they stored, for how long were they stored, were there any accidents and what lessons were learned about their storage? Are any of the sites used to store poisonous gas and other deadly substances suitable for the storage of nuclear waste? I ask all those questions with the obvious proviso that national security may prohibit answers. However, I do not believe that national security prohibits answers to all those questions, and answers to them at some stage would be extremely useful.

The hon. Member for Stockton, South referred to the arguments between those who live in rural areas and those who live in urban areas about where these substances should be stored. I believe that the bulk of the poisonous gas that we had to have ready in the last war was probably stored in a rural area. Any information about it would be useful.

Reference has been made to other countries in Europe and their attitudes to the disposal of nuclear waste. What is the level of European co-operation? I understand that other countries are embarking on long research

programmes to see whether what is proposed at Elstow will do for them. Are we joining in that research? What sort of contact do we have with those west European countries which are taking a long-term look at this matter? If we are not actively involved, could we be? I think that we could be. If we are not, how long would it take to get ourselves involved in their research and what contribution could we make?

The Elstow proposal obviously dominates the debate for Bedfordshire Members of Parliament who are present today in large numbers. The green document entitled "Radioactive Substances Act 1960" was produced by the Department of the Environment and the Scottish and Welsh Offices in December 1984. I have picked out three topics which are being discussed in Bedfordshire and which are relevant to the debate and to future consideration.

Chapter four is headed "General Principles". Paragraph 1.c. says:

"a site must be selected where it is unlikely that future development of natural resources, or of the site, will disturb the facility."

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire answered that to some degree when he referred to the history of Elstow when the London Brick Company owned it, and to the use that could be made of the Oxford clay for the production of bricks. Bearing in mind the reference in paragraph 1.c. to the future development of natural resources, that instantly cuts across Elstow and begins to render it unsuitable.

Paragraph 1.c. then talks of development of the site disturbing the facility. On the site in question there is planning blight, but no one knows what use may be made of the site. We are constantly seeking ways of attracting more industry into Bedfordshire which will provide more jobs. Therefore the second part of paragraph 1.c. is just as relevant as the future development of the clay for the necessary production of bricks.

At the bottom of page 23, part of the appendix on the environmental assessment, it says:

"Social considerations: likely effects on employment".

At the side of the page, under bodies to be consulted, it mentions the Department of Employment and the local planning authority. That is crucial to Bedfordshire, because the county has a big employment problem. Planning blight already exists and we must find ways of attracting more industry. However, the county has a limited amount of space available for attracting new firms and jobs and that leads me to my next point.

On page 24 one of the factors listed for consideration is the proximity of green belts. That gives rise to quite a tale in Bedfordshire. We have a sort of green belt policy. In its structure document, the county council went for low growth and now it is thinking about changing that. The balance between village and town, industry and agriculture is a narrow one in Bedfordshire. The county is fairly small in total acreage, but there is what is almost a green belt quite near to Elstow. Therefore, the local planning authority must be consulted. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire said, the district councils are opposed to Elstow and one reason for that is the future of green belts in Bedfordshire and the necessity to have a balance between town, industry and village and to recognise that not everybody who works in Bedfordshire can live there and not everybody who lives there can work there. We are interdependent on our next-door neighbours,

but that interdependence and the seeking of the necessary balance has been somewhat upset by the present proposal on Elstow.

Those three points in the document published in December 1984 lead me on to two questions. What do Whitehall and Westminster see as Bedfordshire's role in what is basically an industrial country? When they have decided what they want Bedfordshire to do, can they say that sufficient help has been given to Bedfordshire to enable it to fulfil that role?

Although Whitehall and Westminster have not been as forthcoming as they might have been over the years, they see Bedfordshire's role as providing jobs in the manufacturing and high-tech industries while at the same time doing as much as it reasonably can to solve its housing problem, it being clearly understood and remembered that in the past Bedfordshire has made a big effort to help London with its overspill and housing problem. However, that is now over and London has so many empty spaces and houses that it is asking people to come back if they possibly can. Nevertheless that does not undo what happened in the past.

Bedfordshire has been doing two things. It has been trying to find jobs and trying to solve its housing problems and those of London as it was compulsorily required to do in the 1950s and 1960s. One of our problems has been that we have not had the financial advantages of Government help that our next-door neighbours have had in housing and industry.

Milton Keynes has a brand new railway station, plenty of bypasses and a brand new bus station. An enormous amount of public money has gone into Milton Keynes to build it up to enable it to do what it is now successfully doing. On the other side of Bedfordshire is Stevenage. That has taken an enormous amount of London's overspill. It was earmarked as the place where London's housing problems would be solved and where jobs for Londoners would be provided. In order that Stevenage would fulfil that role it was given extra Government resources.

In between those two towns is Bedfordshire, without the financial back-up that those two towns have had. There has been a squeeze on the county. The problem now is simply that the second generation of London's overspill families in Bedfordshire are all trying to seek employment in the county or as near to the county as possible. Choosing Elstow as a nuclear waste dump will do nothing to help us solve that employment problem. In fact, it will hinder that. It will do two things. It will not help us in our search to get new industry into the county, and therefore will not help us with our employment problem. Nor will it help us with our housing. I have taken on board what has been said about what happens to housing, property values and possible housing development when an area has been chosen for a nuclear waste dump.

Bedfordshire is doing its level best to attract more industry and to build up its infrastructure, by, for example, building more bypasses. Moreover, we take an enormous amount of London's waste into the brickfields. The hon. Member for Stockton, South talked about the transportation of dangerous goods and substances, and so on, and a lot of that is done in Bedfordshire. We are very much the crossroads county between the industrial midlands and the east coast ports and between the south-east and the north-west.

What Bedfordshire is trying to do to boost its employment prospects by getting more jobs will not be

[Mr. David Madel]

helped by the Elstow proposal. The three points that I have picked out of the 1984 document cut clean across Elstow as a possibility. Therefore, I hope that the proposal—Elstow is close to my constituency, a mere two miles from the parish of Cranfield—will not be proceeded with, so that Bedfordshire can resume its normal course of doing its level best to provide better housing, more jobs and more industry.

11.36 am

Dr. David Clark (South Shields): I add my congratulations to the hon. Member for Bedfordshire, North (Mr. Skeet) on his success in the ballot which allows us to debate this vital and important matter today. It has been a well-informed debate on both sides of the House. The way in which hon. Members from Bedfordshire have rightly defended their county against something which they find undesirable is understandable. But, in a sense, that shows the dilemma in which any Government—I stress that—find themselves. I shall return to those points later, although it is obviously not up to me to prejudge the issue and no hon. Member has sought to do so.

There has been much interest and debate nationally. We have heard of the situation in the Orkneys. My hon. Friend the Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Ryman) is here and I know that he is deeply concerned with the Cheviots, as I am. We have also had reference to the early drilling programmes in the Galloway hills. But the debate is also an international one. The disposal of nuclear waste is an international problem. I hope that the Government, while accepting our national obligations, will accept that we also have international obligations.

Let me begin by looking at the motion, which mentions the miners' dispute. Naturally, with the scarcity of mines in Bedfordshire, that point has not been raised, but, representing a constituency in an area which still has coal mines, I want to comment on it. We are debating the motion when we have had the longest coal strike in British history. One of the tragedies of that strike has been that, in a sense, its issues were never discussed. I remind the House that the strike was not about wages or conditions but about energy economics. That is what the motion refers to.

All energy is obtained at a cost. Nothing is free. Some costs are hidden and some are overt. The cost of producing coal was at the centre of the dispute. I have not mentioned this before in the House, but a student from Leeds sent me an article from an accountancy magazine. It was written by lecturers at Manchester business school, Sheffield university and Manchester university. Those eminent experts say that the NCB's accounts are "a mine of misinformation". The article states:

"Careful scrutiny of NCB accounts produces the conclusion that they fail to form an adequate basis for informed management decisions."

That is an important point. The article demonstrates that it is not sufficient to look solely into the cost of mining coal. More costs than that are involved in producing energy. It is sometimes as well to remember that.

Some hon. Members may think that I am wrong, but I believe that there is a future for the coal industry. The motion refers to the percentage of electricity produced from nuclear sources, but I believe that coal has a very

exciting future. I think that the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Mr. Wigglesworth) or the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) said that we were an energy-rich nation. Consequently, we must not allow the coal industry to degenerate so that it forms only a minor component of energy production. Our coal industry has an exciting future if we can persuade the Government to press ahead with all sorts of environmentally-led techniques, such as fluidised bed combustion.

The main thrust of my argument is that all energy is produced at a cost. Things such as the Morecambe bay barrage may seem cost-free, but there is a price to pay. There is not only the cost of construction but the effect on wildlife. I can imagine the letters that the Minister would receive if he had to follow that path, as he might have to do.

Hydro-electricity is clean and renewable and apparently involves no cost. However, I have followed the debate in Norway. That country has no nuclear power. The Norwegians have to go way beyond the Arctic circle, to Spitzbergen, to mine their coal. They rely heavily on hydro-electricity and the debates held there are now being reflected in Scotland.

I was also interested in the scheme intended for the Talladale and Grundie rivers, near Loch Maree, in north-west Scotland. The hydro-electric board wanted to build a dam and to produce hydro-electricity, but that would have meant damaging some very sensitive environmental areas. Therefore, there is always a cost. I am labouring that point, because nuclear energy also has a cost. We must never forget the cost of disposing of and storing nuclear waste. I do not think that that cost has been taken into account when considering the economics of nuclear energy.

The Labour party is not against nuclear energy. We believe that there is a balance to be struck. By their presence here today, hon. Members have shown that they are informed and interested in the subject. A very eminent scientist told me that no nuclear power plant could justify its existence in energy terms. He argued that the cost of producing that energy, of running that nuclear power station, and of decommissioning and storing the waste was greater than the value of the amount of energy that it could ever produce. I do not know whether that is right or wrong, but we must bear that in mind. Nuclear waste has a lifespan—or, as it is called, a half-life—that varies from a few hours to billions of years. That must not be forgotten.

There is a price to pay for everything, and we must ultimately work out whether it is worth it. In a sense, the price is public confidence. That point was well argued by the hon. Member for Stockton, South. The Secretary of State has made no secret of it. On 24 January he made a statement and said that it was important to maintain public confidence.

Many people will share my view that public confidence has been greatly shaken during the past two or three years. British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. must accept considerable responsibility for that. It is not only accidents like that on Three Mile Island that worry people. Many other things have happened over here—there have been cover-ups, attempted cover-ups and denials.

I pay tribute to the work of Greenpeace, not because it disobeyed the court, but because it did that work in the Irish sea and forced BNFL to take action. We very much welcome the millions of pounds now being spent on

cleaning up the effluent. All power to Greenpeace's elbow in drawing that matter to our attention. But people knew about that in Cumbria. People who worked in Sellafield knew about it, but knowledge of it was suppressed by the management of BNFL. Thus, we welcome openness, because we need it.

I think that we can all agree that it is best to keep high-level waste on site, and stored above ground level so that an eye can be kept on it until we have the technical and scientific knowledge to deal with it appropriately. Consequently, I should like to concentrate on low-level waste. I had a very interesting discussion with a Government official of one of the Nordic countries. Of course, the Nordic countries have a tendency to know the answers to everything, including nuclear problems. I asked him what was done with the radioactive material. He said that there was none. I pointed out that I thought that the Nordic countries had pretty good cancer hospitals. His face fell and he said, "Oh, I had not even thought about that." Of course he had not. The Nordic countries flush out the very low-level stuff into the sea and bury the rest on the land, in the way outlined to us by the hon. and learned Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Lyell), and it is quite safe. Thus we have not only an energy problem, but a medical problem, although it is a very welcome one, in that many people have been cured and great hope is offered for the future.

As the Minister knows, my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Mr. Wardell) has taken a particular interest in this subject. I have a copy of the *Western Mail* in front of me, dated Thursday 7 March. It says that 10 premises discharge radioactive waste into Swansea bay. I do not wish to create any alarm about that, because it is quite safe. However, I should like to refer to an oral question of 4 March 1985, which in turn refers to Singleton hospital.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower has discovered that there is a process by which Amberlite IRA 410 resin is used to remove radio-iodine before discharge, but he has not been able to elicit from the Welsh Office how much research is being done on that process. It is inevitable and necessary that medical processes produce low-level waste, but the effects of radioactivity can be cumulative. If there are processes by which it can be removed it would be worth while developing them. I hope that the Government will investigate the question whether there is a viable way of removing very low-level radioactivity. I understand that the half-life may be only a matter of hours, but still, during that time, the waste can be dangerous.

My hon. Friend has told me about a letter that one of his constituents, a local authority worker, has received, advising him to keep out of the main sewer from the hospital to the bay on a day when radioactive material was to be flushed out. The material is dangerous for a time, even though the safety levels are not exceeded. I hope that the Government will step up research into the possibility of removing the radioactive qualities of materials.

I turn from the question of low-level material for medical use—a question which must be tackled even though there is no great danger—to the question of public confidence. We all accept that the planning procedure is one means by which we must try to allay public fears and ensure that what is done is done in the national interest. All Bedfordshire Members have discussed how that should be done. I believe that we must adopt a twin approach to assuaging public fears. There are

the planning procedures, and there is Government action. I have already applied some brief strictures to British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. I believe that that company has learned its lesson and now realises that it must be open.

I do not want to prejudge the Elstow proposals. I thought that the hon. and learned Member for Mid-Bedfordshire was somewhat unfair to the people of west Cumbria. I understand that at Drigg it is a matter of shallow clay trenches, but that the Elstow proposal is a duel proposal. One proposal is for a solution identical to that at Drigg. NIREX—I have the material here—states that one reason why it wants a site such as Elstow is that there will soon be over-capacity at Drigg. There is also a proposal to go slightly further and have higher-level intermediate waste that would be encased in concrete.

Mr. Skeet: No. The waste will be intermediate but it will be shorter-lived. The idea on Teesside was to cater for higher-level intermediate waste where the radiation would last for a long time.

Dr. Clark: I have not made myself clear. I was trying to compare Drigg with Elstow. The hon. Member for Bedfordshire, North is quite right, and I shall discuss Billingham in a moment.

I am not trying to make a constituency point. I have no constituents in west Cumbria. I am simply trying to highlight a dilemma. There is over-capacity at Drigg. If it is safe for west Cumbria—I am talking about the clay, not the concrete—it must be safe for Bedfordshire. If it is not safe for Bedfordshire, we need speedy action in west Cumbria.

Mr. Lyell: The hon. Gentleman highlights one of the serious inconsistencies in the argument. If shallow trenches are perfectly safe at Drigg—I believe that the water just runs through them, and the material is in plastic bags—what is the point of transporting hundreds and thousands of cubic yards of material hundreds of miles across England to dump them in Bedfordshire? Why is there a need for Elstow clay? Why not just dig another trench at Drigg, or somewhere nearby? If it is not safe to do that, there is a good reason for our anxiety. Can the hon. Gentleman cast any light on that dilemma?

Dr. Clark: No, I cannot. The hon. and learned Gentleman and I are trying to elicit the same information. We are talking about the clay proposal, not about the concrete, which is a different matter. We need an answer from the Government. The hon. and learned Gentleman makes a logical point when he asks why the material should be transported. Perhaps Cumbria does not have the necessary facilities. Perhaps the material does not all come from Sellafield. Perhaps—terrible thought—some of it may even have to be transported through my constituency. We are in a dilemma; that is why we need information from the Government.

Mr. Lyell: I understand that 70 per cent. of the low-level nuclear waste comes from Sellafield and that the need to turn to somewhere other than Drigg is caused by crowding out at Sellafield. I hope that my hon. Friend will enlighten us on that point. If the material can be put in open shallow trenches, why should that not be done at or near Drigg?

Dr. Clark: I hope that the hon. and learned Gentleman and I have made it clear to the Minister what information we seek.

[Dr. Clark]

The evidence convinces me that the low-level, short-life intermediate waste is safe. However, much depends on the topography and the clay, and on soil science. That being so, I am sure that I speak for the Liberal party as well as for my hon. Friends when I say that it is sheer folly for the Government to reduce the amount of money made available to the soil survey by 50 per cent.

We need the experts to consider such matters. I do not know the answer. The hon. and learned Member for Mid-Bedfordshire does not know the answer. If the Minister knows the answer, he knows it because he has been advised by the scientific experts. I know that the Minister has a good minder at the Ministry of Agriculture—I saw him at work in Committee earlier this week. I hope that the Minister will try to persuade the Ministry of Agriculture of the importance of reconsidering that decision. It cannot make sense to reduce the amount of money made available for scientific research with a practical application. That is the sort of thing that shakes public confidence.

Similarly, there is the case of the Natural Environment Research Council. It is crazy of the Government to cut the grant to the NERC from £66 million in 1984-85 to £57 million in 1989. Such decisions weaken public confidence in the Government. There must be a scientific and technological answer to the problem. Even if we decommissioned every nuclear plant tomorrow, the problem would remain. Will the Minister please get that policy reversed? In January, the Secretary of State mentioned the work of the NERC in a project with HMS Discovery.

The NERC does long-term research, terrestrial and marine. Its work cannot be done by giving short-term contracts to universities or private consultant organisations. The NERC's record has proved its worth to all Governments, and it is reprehensible that the Government are cutting its funding.

As the Opposition spokesman on these matters, I recently had the opportunity to familiarise myself with the work of Merlewood research station at Grange-over-Sands. I had a long meeting with members of staff and the director, Mr. Jeffers, who told me about the exciting work that they are doing on, for example, control of bracken and, dare I mention it in front of the Minister, acid rain. One essential piece of research that they are doing, which is vital to this debate, is their monitoring of the aerial emissions from the Sellafield project. They are alone in that. It is a long-term study monitoring soil, grass and sheep droppings in that part of Cumbria. We are all seeking public confidence and public safety. I should like a categorical assurance from the Minister that no financial restrictions will stop that vital research project. If he is unable to give me that assurance, public confidence will be severely shaken.

I hope that NIREX has learned a lesson. The hon. Member for Stockton, South, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cooke) and their colleagues fought a campaign which effectively persuaded the Government and NIREX to change their minds about Billingham. It was crass folly to contemplate putting higher-level intermediate waste under Billingham, as it would have been under an industrial area which also happens to be probably the most complex chemical industrial site in Britain. The proposal was stupid and has

caused more damage to the credibility of the nuclear industry than almost anything else. I am aware that other countries are examining the possibility of storage under the sea and underground. The Swedes have a scheme for tunnelling out under the Baltic. I do not know whether they hope to be able to deal with Soviet submarines. I am not discounting the idea of storage, but it cannot be done under a major industrial complex.

Mr. Lyell: I cannot entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman. Was not the anhydrite mine frightfully good environmentally?

Dr. Clarke: The word "anhydrite" makes the point. It is dry. Westoe colliery in my constituency would not be used for storage because the water comes in far too quickly to make it useful. Scientifically, the choice was right, but we are dealing with more than a scientific matter. The public must have confidence. As the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland said, rumours now abound, nowhere more so than in the north-east. The hon. Gentleman mentioned rumours in his constituency, but, within two weeks of the Billingham decision, I was told that one of the NIREX's proposals was to dump off my constituency. I do not know whether that was a red herring, but it is a serious rumour that is causing great anxiety.

I have a long letter—I do not know whether I dare mention the name with the Minister here — from Brendan Quayle, the director of Community Service for Durham County. My hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) has also asked me to draw attention to alarm at the possibility of NIREX dumping nuclear waste in Weardale. Brendan Quayle wrote:

"The area is characterised by unstable rock formations and the former lead and fluorspar mines are liable to flooding and subsidence. In addition, the watercourses which penetrate these old mineral workings lead directly into the river Wear which flows through a number of highly populated urban areas, including Durham City and Wearside".

His mentioning unstable rock formations reminds me of the brouhaha about dumping high level waste in Galloway and the Cheviots. An article in yesterday's *Times* says that a senior geologist in America has suddenly discovered that one of the three sites which were to be considered for nuclear waste is in an unstable rock formation. It is important that NIREX acts quickly and that the Minister takes the opportunity to answer my questions and dispel fears.

Dumping at sea seems, on the face of it, to be an attractive alternative. It is a case of out of sight, out of mind. As I represent many seamen, I might be more aware than some that it is not so attractive. I do not want to prejudge whether we should dump in the sea—it is a matter on which the experts should convince us. Disquiet was expressed in February 1973 at the conference on dumping in London. Other Governments, especially from countries around the North sea, such as Germany, Norway and Denmark, were worried about Britain's actions. I was pleased that the British Government were prepared to accept the pressure from our neighbours and to suspend dumping while the inquiry went ahead. We have since had the Holliday report, and it might be opportune for the Minister to comment on some of its recommendations today. That report recommends that dumping should not be resumed until current international reviews and the comparisons of sea dumping with land-based alternatives have been completed.

I am deeply worried about our becoming isolated from our neighbours on environmental matters. It happened on acid rain. We had a long and interesting debate on Tuesday about the Food and Environment Protection Bill, in which the hon. Member for Bedfordshire, North participated. The figures show that we dump more material in the North sea than any of our neighbours. The figures I have, of 98 per cent., was confirmed in chapter 4, paragraph 100, on page 109 of the Royal Commission report.

We have a different perspective of the North sea from our neighbours. We have fast rivers, assume that dumping is safe and think that the risk is minimal. We have strong tides, but our neighbours do not. The Federal Republic of Germany has a completely different attitude from ours, as do most of our neighbours. Environmental isolation involves economic cost. I know that the Minister was not responsible for Tuesday's debate, so I draw his attention to the fact that the Swedish Prime Minister has already said that, unless Britain acts responsibly, in an environmental sense, economic action will have to be taken against us. I make that point only to urge the Government not to follow their course of dumping in the sea.

We are talking about material that is dumped on the surface of the seabed. Regarding the research work on canisters that are dumped on the seabed, not under the bed, has any work been undertaken to see whether those canisters can be retrieved? Similarly, would it be possible to retrieve barrels which have been dumped in various seas, if it were discovered that our scientists were wrong? It is amazing how scientists make mistakes as, indeed, we all do on occasions.

The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland may have touched on the proposal by Ensec to emplace torpoe-type canisters, into wells drilled in the seabed. We would use the technology of the oil and gas industries to do that. I do not wish to prejudge the issue, and I can see both advantages and disadvantages in doing that. As I understand it, capsules containing intermediate waste would be emplaced, and with the decommissioning of the old Magnox plant and other old facilities, there will be an increasing problem. The wells into which the canisters are placed are sealed on top with concrete.

I have had brief discussions with the company, which assured me that it would be possible to retrieve those containers easily. Obviously that has certain attractions, but to do that, we need scientific evidence and the international co-operation of our neighbours. It would be folly to do that without them. I am not endorsing the scheme in any way, but seeking to explain it to the House, because it has not been explained as fully as it might have been. Is Government research being done to examine that interesting project?

The problem will not go away. I re-emphasise that even my right hon. and hon. Friends who are so green that they do not believe in nuclear power must face up to the problem. It is interesting that Sweden had a referendum and decided to phase out nuclear power by the year 2000 or 2010. However, it still faces the problem of what to do with the waste. Whatever party is in power, it will have to solve that problem. I have approached the debate in that spirit. I suggest to the Government that we have as much openness as possible, that together we try to build as much public confidence as possible, that we scotch as many rumours as possible and that we proceed with as much

caution as possible, bearing in mind that waste and its management is a cost that must be borne in mind when we deal with nuclear energy.

12.14 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): I have been sitting among a cluster of distinguished hon. Friends from Bedfordshire, but I cannot claim such a direct interest in the debate, as I come from Somerset, which has not received the same attention from the nuclear power industry, although in the past various sites near Somerset have been mooted as possible areas for waste disposal. We have two nuclear power stations at Hinkley Point near Bridgwater. I shall, therefore, speak generally to the motion.

Public misunderstanding on the issue is high. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North (Mr. Skeet) for instituting this debate, which I hope will dispel some of the misconceptions that surround the issue. I appreciate the presence of my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment this morning. It is wrong for the Department of the Environment to be seen simply as sweeping up behind the nuclear power industry, when we need a co-ordinated approach between Government Departments, in order to get the right policy nationally.

Nuclear power has been overshadowed during the past year by the miners' dispute, although the dispute has brought home to the public the need and desirability for a diversified energy supply. The Sizewell inquiry also may have postponed some thinking about nuclear energy. We await eagerly the publication of the report. However, before then, it is necessary for us to pay continuing attention to how nuclear waste is to be dealt with. Whatever route we follow, nuclear waste will have to be managed and disposed of, and the long time lag between the decision and the implementation of it means that we must discuss these matters now rather than later.

Unfortunately, technology and politics collide in this issue, and technology does not come off best. Few hon. Members are technically equipped—I plead guilty to that, although I am an enthusiastic amateur and try to discuss science and technology as rationally as I can. I have noticed that people who are otherwise sane and sensible allow emotion and instinct to cloud their judgment on technical issues. However, the fault is not all theirs, because technicians frequently fail to understand the political dimension of, and to underestimate perfectly legitimate public anxiety about, some of their activities.

I have little to say to people who equate nuclear power with nuclear weapons. Recently I was on a trip to Japan and visited Hiroshima, which was the site of the first atomic bomb explosion, and a Japanese nuclear power station. The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) was an excellent companion on that trip. He will agree that it was reassuring to see that although Japan has suffered from atom bombs, it is turning the same physics to safe and peaceful use.

For other people, the benefits of nuclear energy are plain to see but the risks are simply too great. It must be said immediately that they are right in one sense: no human activity is entirely free from risk. Life can never be completely safe. But we do not ban cars because many people are killed in them, and we do not stop building dams or flying in jet aeroplanes because catastrophes occur. The same is true of energy. There is no risk-free

[Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory]

way of producing electricity or energy, and there is no means of doing so that is free of an environmental impact on the surrounding countryside and atmosphere.

The hon. Member for South Shields (Dr. Clark) was right in saying that with energy production there are associated costs which must be taken into account. Indeed, the burning of coal is risky. It has to be mined, and that costs miners' lives. It has to be transported in bulk by road or by rail—chiefly by road now, I suppose. It has to be burnt, and that pumps carbon dioxide into the air. That gas is not itself polluting, but many scientists are concerned that the amount of carbon dioxide in the air has risen substantially in the past 40 years or so. That creates a greenhouse effect, which could be heating up the surface of the earth, with unpredictable consequences.

There is also the problem of acid rain, with a complex bundle of causes and effects, but it is certain that the emissions and exhausts from coal-fired power stations play a part and have a damaging effect on forests, lakes and rivers. The exact mechanism is unknown. It is perhaps a paradox that, although we have been burning fossil fuels for centuries, the chemistry of what happens, and its effect on the environment, has yet to be worked out.

I do not want to do to the coal industry what the enemies of nuclear power have done and spread general alarm and suspicion. I hope that we shall continue to burn substantial quantities of coal, and I believe that we should. However, I part company from the SDP spokesman, the hon. Member for Stockton, South (Mr. Wrigglesworth) when he calls for an energy plan. It is not sensible to predict exactly what proportion of our electricity will be generated by the various means until we can see how the economics are evolving. For example, it was wrong to make predictions about future coal use until we saw how the coal dispute was going to end. I hope and think that, if we can achieve sensible economies in our coal industry, we should be able to remain substantially dependent upon coal for many years to come.

All electricity generation is accompanied by risks and drawbacks, and so it is with nuclear power. It is our job to identify those risks and to minimise them. Fortunately, a great deal is known about nuclear reactors, radiation and nuclear waste, even though the technology is still evolving. Radiation in particular is easy to detect, even in small dosages. That conflicts with public perception. The public think that radiation is difficult and mysterious, whereas it is emissions from coal-fired power stations which are more difficult to detect and control, and less is known about them.

I think that the public living near nuclear power stations have confidence in the technology, and that confidence is to some extent supported by responsible research. For example in November last year, Somerset county council published a report entitled "Leukaemia in the West of Somerset", which is relevant to the debate, because that is where the two nuclear power stations at Hinkley Point are situated. In contrast to a number of other reports about leukaemia in other parts of the country, the tone of the report is sober. It goes into great detail, analysing medical statistics. It concludes that there is no special incidence of the various forms of leukaemia in the area of west Somerset, and certainly none that can be attributed to

radiation emitted from Hinkley Point. But I am afraid that it is true that reports of that nature are not read by the public and are not picked up by the media.

The same is true of the report that followed the accident at Three Mile Island near Harrisburg in America. I dare say that if one were to ask a cross-section of the public in Britain what happened at Three Mile Island they would say that hundreds of people had been killed and that it was indeed a catastrophe. The fact is that no one died as a result of the accident at Three Mile Island, and the Kemeny report which was subsequently published showed conclusively that the surrounding residents were subjected to only a very slight increase in dosage.

Hon. Members may or may not know that most radioactivity to which they are subjected occurs naturally. About 80 per cent. comes from the atmosphere, from the food that we eat, the houses in which we live, and so on. The bulk of the remaining 20 per cent. comes chiefly from medical sources, X-rays and so on, and only a tiny fraction can be attributed to emissions from power stations or from the reprocessing of fuel. Therefore, a slight increase in that section has an almost negligible effect on the overall dosage that the public are receiving, and so it was around Three Mile Island, but that is not the public perception.

There is a great gap between the knowledge of the experts and the knowledge of the public. I hope that responsible commentators and people in the media will realise how important it is to understand the issue and not to scare the public with sensational reporting and misunderstanding of statistics which are readily available.

Apart from the nuclear power stations themselves, the management of nuclear waste coming out of them poses a special problem. As far as I am aware, the cost of management and disposal of such wastes is taken into account in assessing the economics of nuclear power. I believe that the hon. Member for South Shields was mistaken in that respect. The figures that I have seen, comparing the costs of electricity generation, provide for the disposal of nuclear wastes. It is still true that base-load electricity is cheaper to generate by nuclear means.

Dr. David Clark: I fail to see how that can be taken into account when we do not yet have a policy for the storage and disposal of the waste. That is what the debate is about today. There may be a very general estimate, but there cannot be anything like an effective cost evaluation, because we do not yet have a policy. We are trying to feel our way towards one. I take the hon. Gentleman's point, but I hope that he sees my point.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's point, but while he is right in saying that the details are unknown, even if exceedingly generous allowances are made for the subsequent costs of the disposal of nuclear waste, in most cases nuclear power is still slightly cheaper than alternative means of producing electricity.

Technology is still developing, and it is essential that the House maintains pressure on the regulatory authorities, the BNFL and NIREX, to ensure that safety and public protection are given a higher priority than simple economy and convenience. If that does not happen, nuclear waste might become a burden on future generations. Like the coal pits at Aberfan, it might one day take revenge. That is why it is necessary to address ourselves, not just to the convenience and economy of the matter, but to safety for many generations to come.

There may be a breakthrough with fusion power. Fusion is a means of producing heat and energy through fusion, rather than fission, of atomic nuclei. Even if I fully understood the physics I would not try to explain it, but such a power station would produce very little waste and have an almost inexhaustible supply of fuel. The engineering barriers to be overcome are formidable, and at the moment fusion remains a dream, although a dream worth pursuing. Research is going on not just in this country and other parts of Europe but in America, the Soviet Union and Japan. However, for the foreseeable future, we shall be operating conventional nuclear power stations from which waste is inevitable.

Low-level waste from nuclear power stations and from other sources such as hospitals may be disposed of by shallow burial, and that is relatively uncontroversial, because the radioactivity is fairly shortlived. Of much greater concern is the intermediate and high-level waste, on which this debate has mainly focused. Such waste is produced from spent fuel coming out of power stations and from the reprocessing of that fuel. It is stored mostly in liquid form at Sellafield or existing power stations, and it is the aim to vitrify this liquid, which not only reduces its bulk but makes subsequent storage a great deal easier and safer.

I hope that we can move without too much delay towards the final disposal of radioactive waste and that we do not have a continuing policy of long-term storage. On this I differ from the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland, who was suggesting that long-term storage is preferable. Although storage is necessary for a time, while radioactivity decays and heat is lost, it creates difficulties of management and security. There is already a heavy enough responsibility on the management of Sellafield, without burdening it with the long-term storage of waste simply because we fail to provide disposal sites.

I do not want to go into the methods of long-term disposal. Most of them entail deep burial of one sort or another, and investigations are still proceeding. It can be done without long-term risk, but I do not wish to suggest, and it is not for me to propose, that Elstow in Bedfordshire is the right or suitable site. It is probably necessary to take account of population. Scientists and technicians may feel that the overriding priority is to find a safe site that is perfect from the technical point of view. As politicians, we must understand that people's concern, even if not strictly rational, must be taken into account. It may be necessary to site the long-term storage depots away from population centres, even if it is the second-best technical solution.

Waste disposal is inextricably bound up with the technology and the means by which we develop our nuclear industry. I shall touch on security and its association with our fast breeder reactor programme. Research into a fast breeder reactor is proceeding not only in this country but in many other countries, often in a collaborative programme. The fast breeder reactor uses, as part of its fuel, plutonium, and the operation of the reactor produces or breeds more plutonium, and this enables a more complete use of the uranium fuel. In other words, it is more economical. It allows us to be less dependent on outside supplies of uranium and it can use plutonium used in other reactors. A great deal of plutonium is already being stored at Sellafield, anticipating the commercial operation of a fast breeder reactor.

That may be well and good, but I am concerned because the increased use, transport and storage of plutonium raises questions of security. Plutonium is a highly poisonous substance and in the hands of terrorists could be extremely dangerous. It also has implications for nuclear weapons proliferation, because if fast breeder technology becomes generally available throughout the world, and can be bought by developing countries, it could become more difficult to control nuclear weapons proliferation because of the quantity of plutonium and the ease with which it could be acquired.

I may be exaggerating the danger, but the fast breeder programme may have a technological momentum which may be taking us down a path regardless of the merits of the case. Fast breeder reactors will always be more expensive to build and more complex to operate, and although they will use less fuel, there is, nevertheless, plenty of uranium in the world—reserves are enormous—and it is difficult to see that uranium shortage will ever be a constraint on our or anyone else's peaceful nuclear power programme.

Therefore, I have reservations about the fast breeder reactor, not about its safety or operation, but about its associated fuel cycle, and I hope that the prospect of a fast breeder reactor in commercial use is not in any way holding up our waste disposal programme.

Nuclear power can be managed safely and effectively. Mistakes have undoubtedly been made, particularly at Sellafield, but none of that underestimates my basic confidence and my hope that our continuing successful programme will not be held up through a political and institutional failure to provide disposal sites.

It is important that we move towards a satisfactory waste disposal route. It needs a lead from the Government, but above all it needs informed public debate, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North for giving us this opportunity to discuss the matter today.

12.37 pm

Mr. Graham Bright (Luton, South): I shall reiterate some points that have been made in the debate, especially those on behalf of Bedfordshire. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North (Mr. Skeet) on bringing the matter to the House for discussion, and it has turned out to be an extremely informative debate. In particular, I thank my hon. Friends who represent Bedfordshire constituencies for their constructive speeches. They have clearly given the subject a great deal of thought.

This issue arouses strong feelings. The prospect of the establishment of inland sites into which low and intermediate-level radioactive waste may be disposed is the cause of considerable concern to residents of the areas under review. They have no means of telling whether the process will be safe. Inevitably, therefore, they prefer not to take any risks—a view which I understand and share.

I have every sympathy, however, with the Government, who are faced with the responsibility of deciding where the waste should go. It is not a choice that can be avoided, because we must face the problem. It will not go away. The Government have a duty to satisfy themselves and the nation that their decisions are as acceptable and safe as expert judgment can render them.

Reference has been made to short-term and long-term storage and disposal. Bearing in mind that we are thinking,

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not of three or four years, but of thousands of years in some respects, perhaps we ought to consider storage in the short term and ways in which the waste material can be retrieved. As such rapid progress is being made in science, I am convinced that eventually we shall find a solution to this problem. It is important that this material should not be put into the ground in such a way that it cannot be retrieved. Therefore, I have misgivings about the Elstow storage depot in Bedfordshire.

The view that that site is completely unsuitable is widely held throughout the county and it has been expressed by my hon. Friends this morning. We do not know whether the Elstow site is geologically safe. We do not know whether the clay belt is thick enough. In recent weeks there has been a great deal of confusion about that. We do not know exactly what safety measures will be required or what kinds of transport will be used. This material will be brought into the county from all over the country. There are great fears throughout the county about how it will be transported through the towns and villages of Bedfordshire. All these matters have still to be clarified.

The obvious way to clarify them is by means of a public inquiry. I understand that in October 1983 the Department of the Environment gave undertakings to Bedfordshire county council that such an inquiry would take place before NIREX began investigatory works at Elstow. The news that a special development order could be granted to permit NIREX to conduct its preliminary investigations, thereby cutting out a planning inquiry at this stage, came as a considerable shock. What concerns me is that because no public inquiry is to be held, a great deal of propaganda and publicity is being put out by NIREX. A very good survey has been carried out during the last week by Anglia Television. It shows that people are more alarmed by the publicity material that they have received from NIREX than they were before they received it. It underlines the fact that a public inquiry and a debate on the issue should be held, rather than that we should merely rely—

Mr. Skeet: We have just finished the Sizewell inquiry, which lasted for 340 days. I do not suggest for one moment that this inquiry would last for so long, but will my hon. Friend say perfectly frankly that he would welcome such an inquiry, so that the nuclear waste issues can be fully discussed and the facts evinced?

Mr. Bright: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I should greatly welcome such an opportunity. That is what I am asking for. There should be a public inquiry at an early stage. The decisions which seem already to have been made are not very helpful. They have disappointed Bedfordshire county council and the district councils. The people living in and around Elstow are afraid that their views will not be taken fully into account before a final decision on the establishment of a disposal site is taken. My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment has a chance to set their minds at rest. I hope that he will take up the challenge and do so.

Detailed tests are, of course, necessary to discover whether a site is suitable. Those who are in favour of this site must understand that they have to prove their case. Evidence must be made available for public scrutiny and be open to formal challenge. The voice of local residents, organisations, district and county councils and of the

safety experts must be heard. Only then will an impartial assessment of the evidence and a decision that can be defended be possible.

My constituency is at the southernmost tip of Bedfordshire, and about 15 miles from the site. Nevertheless, there is widespread alarm at the prospect of nuclear waste, however low its radioactive level, being dumped in the county. By no stretch of the imagination can Bedfordshire be described as sparsely populated. Elstow is an urban area, and no amount of evidence or argument will satisfy the real fears of residents in that area.

I urge the Government to think again, especially about the way in which they are handling the planning and the opportunity for a public inquiry, because they are dealing with the fears and emotions of people and they should not rely on mere scientific theory, which is sometimes highly questionable.

12.46 pm

Mr. John Ryman (Blyth Valley): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Bedfordshire, North (Mr. Skeet) on raising this important topic. I wish briefly to put the case for the north-east of England, where there is deep anxiety about this problem.

It is an open secret that the CEGB is running around the Cheviots and the area of Druridge bay making the most fiendish plans in the most surreptitious way for the future use of land in that areas for the dumping of nuclear waste.

Public confidence has been mentioned in several very able speeches from both sides of the House. To me, a public inquiry is a two-edged weapon. It provides a semblance of fairness in that objections are heard, a senior judicial figure conducts the inquiry with great fairness and dignity and many days or weeks are spent hearing evidence and perusing proofs of evidence. I strongly suspect, however, that often it is no more than a charade because the Government have already made up their mind about the action to be taken. Two and half years ago, the Secretary of State for Energy—now Chancellor of the Exchequer—when he was contemplating setting up the Sizewell inquiry, said in reply to a parliamentary question from me that that inquiry was to be the first of several in various parts of the country where the Government wished to site pressurised water reactors. That reinforced the alarm in the north-east, especially in Northumberland, in view of the plans for a nuclear power station at Druridge bay, which is strongly opposed by all sensible public opinion in the area.

Half-way through the Sizewell inquiry, which lasted almost two years, the CEGB chairman, Sir Walter Marshall, publicly stated on television that the board was determined to have a nuclear power station at Sizewell, that the inquiry was merely a formality to give members of the public, objectors and pressure groups a reasonable opportunity to raise their objections and that he felt absolutely confident that the outcome would be permission for the board to build the power station. That is a totally unsatisfactory state of affairs. I suspect that public inquiries are used by the Secretary of State for the Environment as a sop to allay public anxiety by giving a semblance of fairness when the executive decision has already been made by the Government. Indeed, in law the Government are right, because a public inquiry leads to a report by an inspector—appointed by the Secretary of

State—who simply makes recommendations which the Secretary of State may accept or reject. In certain cases, the inspector has the right to make the decision himself.

I do not share the confidence of many Members that a public inquiry allays the anxiety of the public. I suggest that such inquiries are often no more than window dressing or public relations exercises and that often the decision has already been made.

Mr. Skeet: The hon. Gentleman is talking about Sizewell, which was a PWR. The decision was simply whether to have it or not to have it. Naturally, a number of safety measures had to be examined.

How can the hon. Gentleman say that the Government have decided that there should be a nuclear waste repository at Elstow? There are three possible sites. They have not been compared and no research has been done. The repository could be put at any one of those sites or at none of them. The Government cannot have made up their mind. Therefore, a public inquiry could not be a facade.

Mr. Ryman: I do not say that the Government have made a detailed decision. I suggest that they have made a decision in principle, with the details to be worked out later. I am not qualified to comment on the affairs of Bedfordshire, which is well represented in the debate.

However, I know that the informed opinion in Northumberland is that the Government are determined to have a nuclear power station at Druridge bay and to dump nuclear waste in the Cheviots. Little men from the CEGB were running around last summer and the one before drilling test holes and so on in the middle of the night. When we have asked the CEGB for information, we have been fobbed off with vague generalities and evasive answers, and ambiguous press statements have been issued.

There is no doubt that plans are afoot to build a nuclear power station at Druridge bay, which is strongly opposed by all sensible people in the north-east, and that there are carefully laid plans to dump nuclear waste in the Cheviots, which would be a monstrosity and is opposed by county and district councils and hon. Members of all political parties and by pressure groups representing, among others, residents and environmental societies.

We would not be satisfied with a public inquiry, because we know that the Government plan to site a power station at Druridge bay and to dump waste in the Cheviots. If the persistent rumours, based on tangible evidence and ambiguous denials by the CEGB, are wrong and the evidence is incorrect, I hope that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment will repudiate them. I hope that he will not fob off the House with a vague general statement. There is a mass of evidence that such plans are afoot and the Government are aware of the strong opposition to them in the north-east.

It is an insult to the intelligence of ordinary people for the Government to say, "Don't worry. Before we make a final decision we shall have a public inquiry, appoint an eminent lawyer as the inspector, have lots of experts, give the objectors funds to pay for legal representation and provide premises and proofs of evidence. You can talk for a year or two, because we have not made a decision." People know that in many cases the decision has already been made. The proof of the pudding is the arrogant utterances of the chairman of the CEGB. Not only during the Sizewell inquiry did he make these pronouncements.

He has made press statements—there is one in the national press today—that he is fully confident that the Government will decide in favour of siting a nuclear power station there, whatever the inspector says in his report.

Many people were at the Sizewell inquiry for months on end. The general opinion is that it will be very difficult to persuade the Government not to site a nuclear power station there, no matter how strong the evidence against it.

The general impression amongst people taking part in that inquiry is that the decision had already been made and that the onus is upon those who oppose that decision to persuade the inspector and for the inspector to recommend to the Government that that decision should not be implemented. But that is putting it the wrong way round. The onus should not be on the objectors. The onus should be on the Central Electricity Generating Board to satisfy the inspector that there are good grounds consistent with public safety and energy and environmental needs to site a nuclear power station at Sizewell. That is my point, and I do not think that I can improve upon it by repeating it.

In this lengthy, comprehensive and elegantly worded motion, reference is made to the miners' dispute, and in that respect I must take issue with the hon. Member for Bedfordshire North. It is as plain as a pikestaff to anyone with the slightest knowledge of the industry that our future source of energy is coal. Although the Government has paid lip service to "Plan for Coal", they have decimated the coal industry and are in the process of closing pit after pit. That is what the coal miners' dispute was about. It was not about pay, conditions or productivity. The lengthy mining dispute has been about jobs, pits and communities. Anyone with only an elementary knowledge of the industry knows that there are rich coalfields to be mined in many parts of the country which can be made economically viable. It is only the asinine energy policy of this Government which has jeopardised again and again the successful mining operations of our coalfields.

It is a heavy responsibility on the Government that they have sought on narrow financial criteria to close pit after pit. In the north-east of England they have been engaged in a ferocious and unintelligent pit closure programme.

In my constituency, the National Coal Board invested some £2 million a couple of years ago in new pit props in the Plessey seam of Bates's colliery in Blyth, which employed 1,700 men. A year later, before the mining dispute started in March, the board engaged in negotiations with the National Union of Mineworkers because it wanted to close that seam in which it had invested £2 million the year before and make 800 miners redundant because, on further reflection, it had decided that it was an unwise investment, and that it had better cut its losses, close the seam and throw 800 men out of work.

That is the level of commercial judgment exercised by the National Coal Board management in the north-east of England. The board invests £2 million of taxpayers' money, and a year later it says, "Sorry, we made a mistake. We shall close the seam after all."

The National Coal Board is closing the seam and throwing those men out of work because it is part of the Tory Government's policy of pit closures in the north-east. It is difficult to close a big pit, such as Bates's colliery with 1,700 men. It is easy to close small pits, as it has done at Eccles and Dudley, throwing 500 and 600 men out of work. It is not possible to close a big pit straight away. Instead, through the National Coal Board, the Government

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make a big pit smaller by getting rid of half the men, and then they say in a couple of years that it is only a small pit and it will have to be closed. I mention that only as an example, because the miners' dispute is specifically referred to in the motion.

It is asinine for the Government on the one hand to murder the coal mining industry with indiscriminate pit closures based on the wrong criteria and on the other to exhort the country to switch to nuclear power and to deceive the public on the siting of nuclear power stations by the vehicle of a public inquiry.

The anxieties of the people of Northumberland have not been allayed at all by any of the fine speeches heard this morning. I hope that the Minister will, when he replies to the debate, give us some assurances on the Government's intentions in the north-east.

1 pm

Sir Peter Mills (Torrige and Devon, West): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North (Mr. Skeet) for having initiated the debate on the disposal of nuclear waste and other matters. I want to turn my attention to the transportation of waste and the important question of soil survey.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Ryman) feels that they are all little men at the CEGB. Some of them are good and deep men, certainly in my part of the world. They are only carrying out their instructions and orders. In the south-west of England, where I come from, they carry out their task well, whether they are big or small.

We in the south-west are worried about the transportation of nuclear waste, particularly as we have the naval dockyard at Plymouth, and special trains run from Plymouth to the recycling plants or factories. Some people fear that there may be an accident, although I do not really share that fear. The system is pretty safe on the whole. The modern tests on the waste-carrying wagons seem to show that they are substantial and that the situation is under control.

For all that, there are fears. Will my hon. Friend the Minister assure us that in all such matters there will be the utmost vigilance and that the Government will constantly look at new techniques for the transportation of dangerous waste material? I hope that the Government will keep a close watch on those matters.

Fears cannot be dismissed. I well remember as a boy, during the early part of the war, the huge ammunition trains trundling through the West Country up steep inclines. There was always the fear that they might come off the rails, resulting in a terrible explosion and tragedy. People must be reassured, and the Government must keep a close watch on that.

The soil survey is important. I share a little concern about what is happening in that area. The officers who are carrying out those tasks have come to see me in the House and to my Back-Bench agricultural committee, and they are worried about the cutbacks. A lot has already been done in soil surveying in Britain. A first-class job has been done and there is much information about our soils. The Government will continue with that work, perhaps on a reduced scale, but private enterprise should play a bigger

role. If people wish to have the information, and if it is to their advantage, that they should help to pay for it, pound for pound, does not seem unreasonable.

I hope the Minister will reassure us on those two counts. I hope that the soil survey will continue, perhaps on a limited scale, and that every encouragement will be given to private enterprise and those who benefit to take part in financially aiding the survey.

We in the south-west of England are perhaps a legitimate target for the disposal of nuclear waste, because there are very old tin and other mines in Devon and Cornwall. They may seem suitable to some people for waste disposal, but I would be against that, because, although I am not an expert, I am not happy about nuclear waste being deposited in mines or on the land. I am very much in favour of disposing of it in the sea. Mention has already been made of drilling deep holes into the bowels of the earth, under the sea, and of putting in canisters. That would seem to be the right sort of place for it.

If it is safe to put this nuclear waste somewhere in the United Kingdom, it must be safe everywhere. I do not see that there can be any argument about that. The waste can be disposed of on the land, below the land or anywhere else. If it is safe, it must be safe everywhere. But I am sure that many people in the south-west are opposed to the waste being disposed of in Cornwall and Devon. It should be disposed of in the sea, in wells that can be drilled. We already have the techniques needed, because of oil.

Fears do exist. Fears may be expressed in Bedford, but there are also fears in the south-west, particularly given the enormous number of holiday makers who support our tourist industry. Nuclear waste and nuclear power are here to stay. We should not exaggerate the problems and difficulties, but should act responsibly. The press, and those with vested interests, should be careful about what they say, and should not spread alarm, gloom and so on. We should think very carefully about how we make any pronouncements on such matters. In my brief speech, I hope that I have been careful not to alarm people in the south-west. Nevertheless, there is some fear. But we must not exaggerate, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will help to put our minds at rest.

1.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment (Mr. William Waldegrave): One of the central messages of the speeches during this debate is that there is a very real burden on hon. Members to explain the issues properly, without stirring up unnecessary trouble, and to lead as well as to represent.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North (Mr. Skeet) for introducing this debate and for allowing us the opportunity to hold an interesting and thoughtful debate on a multiplicity of different aspects to the problem. I pay tribute also to his expert knowledge. As a very junior hon. Member compared with him, I hope that I do not sound patronising if I say that I pay tribute to him too for the courage that he displays. He has not thrown over his well-known and often-stated allegiance to the nuclear industry, although in some senses the matter has become rather inconvenient at home. I do not in any way criticise anyone else, but I greatly respect the way in which my hon. Friend has led from the front in trying to find out the truth and to represent his constituents. He has also pointed out that there is a national interest too.

I once wasted some time studying academic logic, although it is of no help to anyone who wishes to become a Member of Parliament. There used to be a famous academic dilemma, and many gallons of ink were spent writing about it. It was called the prisoners' dilemma. It is a formal logical problem in which two separate decisions have to be taken by two separate people, and the best outcome for both can be achieved only if they work in conjunction. We face a similar problem. The interests of each constituency in the land, added together, do not necessarily produce a national outcome. In this matter, we have to represent the nation's interests as well as our own, and the tension between the two can cause problems for us.

There have been several things on which all those hon. Members who have spoken have been agreed. My hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North and the hon. Members for Stockton, South (Mr. Wrigglesworth), for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace) and for South Shields (Dr. Clark), and others have all agreed on the importance of openness. The present Government have patiently and doggedly tried to maintain the importance of and necessity for openness. I was grateful for the tributes paid to us in that respect by the hon. Member for Stockton, South. Openness can make the job of leadership even more difficult. If I may so without sounding too critical of one aspect of his speech, the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland gave a good example of that when he said that he wanted me to lay to rest the rumours about the possibility of burying waste in the seabed off Orkney. He then said—as did my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire (Mr. Lyell)—that we must be quite open in the discussion of options and consider every possibility.

The trouble is that the more open one is about every tentative investigation, the more the rumours spread and the easier it is for people to get up scares and make rational discussion difficult. That is something that we have to face. It behoves us, therefore, to be very careful about how much currency we give to rumours.

For example, let us consider the Ensec proposal—the matter to which the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland was, I think, indirectly referring. The hon. Member for South Shields referred to it directly. He told us that he had met representatives of Ensec, as I have done. As far as I know, the proposal is one that has been honourable advanced by a serious company with a good record in oil drilling and expertise. The company's geologists and engineers have suggested that there may be an application in the nuclear field for their expertise and equipment. I can answer the question asked by the hon. Member for South Shields by saying that the Department cannot make a judgement on the matter simply by looking at the brochures. We have therefore decided to look into it and to refer it to the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee for assessment, and to include it among the options to be studied in consequence of the Holliday report.

At this point, those who feel that there is a danger that some decision will be taken in consequence, years ahead, which may involve changes in planning law, and even in international treaties—those who fear that they might have to cope with that situation—begin to try to block off that route. It is difficult rationally and openly to

compare all the different routes without being driven back by the pressure groups which want to pick off one or other of the options.

That is a real dilemma for the Government. The Government are willing to take the flak that results from their openness. It is right that we should do so. However, we may sometimes have to tell people that we will not deny a rumour that a particular option is being considered. We will tell the truth. We will say that the investigation is at a very early stage, that nothing has been settled, that such a decision would involve various consequences, but that we will not wholly rule it out. Such an attitude may create some anxieties in the country, but if we take the easy way out and rule out all anxieties early on, we may find that we have ruled out investigations of options that might, perhaps be feasible.

I accompanied my Secretary of State when he had that self-same discussion very recently with representatives of the TUC fuel and power committee. It is right that we should discuss such matters with the TUC. The general secretary of the National Union of Seamen said in regard to the Discovery and the Laird contract that he did not want us even to consider the possibility of dumping high-level waste on the seabed. He said that he did not want the ship to sail with the penetrators on board, never mind radioactivity. We are now engaged in a dialogue with him and it behoves us to convince him that, if there is to be validity in the scientific method, scientists must be allowed to assess things, even if only to rule them out. If we do not allow that, there will be no comparisons and no way in which to convince the constituents of my hon. Friends from Bedfordshire that we have examined everything. We had a friendly and constructive discussion with the TUC, and I hope that we shall make progress.

Dr. David Clark: Perhaps I might assist the Minister and the House. Can he make it clear that my understanding of the experiment is right? Is it intended to drop canisters on the seabed and then monitor how they react? May we have a categorical assurance that the canisters will not contain radioactive material?

Mr. Waldegrave: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for enabling me to put something useful on the record. "Canisters" is not quite the right word. The devices penetrate the sea bed, take samples, monitor local geological behaviour and assess the reaction of the devices. This is not a matter covered by the motion, but is part of a research project, aimed 50 years ahead, for high-level waste. Nevertheless, I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that no radioactivity is involved.

I shall speak only briefly about that part of the motion which concerns the electricity supply industry, because we have had some excellent speeches on energy. My hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) made an interesting and powerful speech, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North, who is a great expert in these matters. I must disagree with the hon. Member for South Shields on whether nuclear power stations can justify themselves in economic terms. Whatever the origins of the dispute, every nuclear power station has justified itself, and more, in the past year.

I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Member for South Shields that we must ensure a bright and stable future for coal. Much of the anxiety and conflict of the past year has been about differing interpretations of how to reach that

[Mr. Waldegrave]

bright secure future. We have no less a commitment to it than have Opposition Members. We believe that what we are trying to do is more practical. Whatever fuel we use, we must pay full attention to the environmental impact of it.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North, will not mind my agreeing with the hon. Member for South Shields, who said that we must not forget the waste problem with nuclear power or, indeed, any energy source. Like others, he has pressed the Government to do more about acid rain. In effect, he is saying that we are not taking into account the environmental efforts of coalburn and that we should charge more costs to coal because we are not using the pollute-pays principle properly.

That could equally be argued on the nuclear front. The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland criticised NIREX for having an interest in the generation of waste, as if that were bad. That is a good institutional example of the polluter-pays principle. We can tell the nuclear industry that is its job to make proposals and to pay for the proper disposal of its waste. That is what is meant by the polluter-pays principle.

That is a powerful and fundamental argument to show why it is right that the executive agency, which bears the costs of disposing of the waste from the nuclear industry, should be part of the industry. The responsibilities should fall on the partners of that industry. It would be wrong to make taxpayers bear that responsibility in the form of a statutory corporation. The interests of taxpayers, the community and of safety must be met in other ways, through the controls that we place on the executive agency. It is essential that the executive agency should be linked to the industry, because that is an institutional representation of the vital polluter-pays principle.

Mr. Wallace: I wish to ask the Minister, not about that point, but about the previous point. He rightly stated, and the debate has displayed, the links between any fuel policy that we follow and the environmental implications of it. That has been illustrated in many ways. Can the Minister give any hope of a resuscitation of the Commission on energy and Environment, as recommended by the tenth report of the Royal Commission on environmental pollution?

Mr. Waldegrave: I cannot give any hope of that. I wish to seek the indulgence of the House on a matter. I have calculated that I have 78 questions to answer. If new questions come faster than I answer the original questions, we shall get into an infinite regress. My hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Hordern) has the next debate, to which I shall also reply, and I do not want to waste the speech that I have prepared for it. The punishment for having been up until 6 o'clock this morning at the Council of Ministers in Brussels is to return to find that one has not one but two debates to reply to. When one goes away, one volunteers for work, as hon. Members well know.

It may be helpful if I briefly outline the present position. An overall strategy was described in the White Paper, "Radioactive Waste Management", which was published by the Government in 1982. My Department is responsible for ensuring that a long-term national strategy is developed and implemented, in conjunction with the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales. Several of

my hon. Friends, including my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire, suggested that the Government should reconsider whether the devision between the Departments is right, and whether we worry people by making it appear that we are judge and jury of our own case. There is no fundamental difference between the role of the Secretary of State as the ultimate appellate authority on planning and the Department's responsibilities for housing or any other land use.

It is important to recognise that the Secretary of State for the Environment has a vital dual role in a range of different activities. He is responsible for house building and for speeding the provision of houses. He is also responsible for structural plans, which in some cases may not go in the same direction and, above all, for the appellate authority at the top of the planning system.

Mr. Lyell: With respect, my hon. Friend is not responsible for energy policy. The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy is the junior Minister responsible for that. While it was skilful to give an example of dual responsibility, nuclear energy is not such a case.

Mr. Waldegrave: I certainly would not claim that my right hon. Friend has a responsibility for energy policy. I was saying that there is nothing necessarily illogical or suspect in my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State having a particular function—in this case the disposal of waste—along with his planning functions. He was originally given the responsibility, quite explicitly, for the disposal of waste jointly with the Secretary of State for Energy, but with himself in the lead. That was in response to the Flowers report, as an attempt to ensure that people did not think that it was all sewn up by the energy industry. It was an honourable attempt to do that. If it is not having that effect we shall consider it again, but the original arguments were quite strong and should not be underestimated.

We are also, therefore, responsible for the rigorous control of the disposal of nuclear waste to protect the public and the environment from any hazards. For that purpose we are advised by Her Majesty's Radiochemical Inspectorate. I am glad to use that term for the first time in this House. The inspectorate has only recently been given that title. It deserves it, because it is a strong and formidable part of my Department. In many cases the responsibility is a joint one with my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

The nuclear and electricity generating industries have executive and financial responsibility, as I have said, and I argue that that is right as an embodiment of the polluter-pays principle. I shall try to simplify what is a complicated picture, because nuclear wastes vary considerably in their characteristics and therefore in their most appropriate method of management.

By far the largest part of the radioactivity is contained in small volumes of heat generating waste which comes in the first place from the reprocessing of spent reactor fuel. The policy is to store them in solid form for at least 50 years. I have to tell the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland that if we were to close down the whole of the nuclear industry, including the reprocessing side, we would still have an urgent need for a lower and intermediate-level disposal site. Therefore, in terms of the difficult decisions that face us, we have no rabbit hole to go down; the problem will remain with us.

The policy is to store high-level waste in solid form for at least 50 years at Sellafield and Dounreay until the rate of heat generation has been substantially reduced by natural processes. NIREX is not, therefore, concerned with them. With low and intermediate-level waste there is no similar advantage from delay. That is why work has proceeded on developing two types of disposal facility for such wastes—one deep underground and the other near the surface.

If I understand my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North correctly, he is not so much disputing the content of the strategy as emphasising that there must be full opportunity for public discussion of such matters. I think that that was the main theme and burden of his speech. He was concerned with the technological options available and the potential sites for such facilities. I assure him once again, as I did at the beginning of my speech, that the Government are in absolute agreement with that objective.

I have to say that we do not agree with my hon. Friend about the particular planning route by which to reach a planning inquiry commission, and I shall explain why, but I should like first to say a brief word about the public discussion of the technological options.

The technology was comprehensively reviewed in the Flowers report on "Nuclear Power and the Environment", the sixth report of the Royal Commission on environmental pollution, which was published in 1976. One of the recommendations of that report was the creation of a committee to give Ministers the best possible advice on broad issues of policy. As a result, the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee was appointed in 1978. It has had two exceedingly distinguished chairmen: first, Sir Denys Wilkinson, FRS, and, since the beginning of last year, Professor Paul Matthews, FRS, former vice-chancellor of Bath university. The chairman and a majority of the members are independent, and they include trade unionists. For the first time, recently we appointed a trade unionist from outside the industry to join those from inside. The committee contains members from the industry, both management and unions. The committee has provided important advice, which formed the basis of the 1982 White Paper.

What is especially relevant to the debate is that that advice has been set out clearly and publicly in five published reports. They have made more information about radioactive waste more widely available to the public than ever before. The hon. Member for Stockton, South rightly said that there was a certain oddity, in that we concentrate so much on those matters in the nuclear industry. Perhaps we do so because of the information that is so much more widely and easily available than the information about many other exceedingly dangerous and, in some cases—particularly dioxins—equally persistent substances which are not radioactive. That is a paradox. I am not trying to get away from my commitment to make all this information available.

That is only one part of the story. My Department has deliberately adopted the approach of making available the fullest possible information about waste management. In addition to the statistics about the discharge of radioactivity into the environment, there are reports on scores of individual, Department of the Environment funded, research projects in this sector which are freely available in the National Lending Library. There are annual progress reports on the research programme as a

whole, and I could, although I shall not, as I see my hon. Friend the Member for Horsham looking at his notes, list the many other publications in this sector from both my Department and other bodies.

All that research and advice can be regarded as contributing to finding what is often called the best practicable environmental option for this type of waste. None the less, my Department is now engaged in a formal study covering all disposal and storage options. I repeat, for the benefit of the hon. Members for Orkney and Shetland and for South Shields, who are interested in this, that we are covering all disposal and storage options at sea or on land to draw the threads together and to establish the best practicable environmental options on a comparative basis.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North said, this work stems from the important and excellent review by Professor Fred Holliday and his team on the disposal of low-level wastes in the north-east Atlantic. That report was jointly commissioned by the Government and the TUC and has been accepted by both. The detailed analysis now being carried out will be completed before the end of the year and will result in a published report.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North mentioned sea dumping. The most striking thing about the Holliday report is the thorough endorsement that it gives to the science of the past. That independent committee, with a well-known and sceptical environmentalist, who I argued strongly should be on the committee if it should have the validity that it sought, has given a clean bill of health to the science of the past. There has been no detectable damage to the environment of the north Atlantic, let alone to people.

The hon. Member for South Shields asked about the retrievability of the drums put into the sea. The irony is that although some have been retrieved by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food as part of the research programme, if we want to do that, the drums cannot be found unless we deliberately fix radio transmitters to them. The radioactivity in them is not detectable and that gives some sign of the safety margins in that process.

Dr. David Clark: The main recommendation of the Holliday report was that there should be no further dumping at sea until there was an international agreement to do that. Is that the Government's policy?

Mr. Waldegrave: Yes. The Government accepted all the recommendations of the Holliday report. That recommendation is not based on any doubts about the science of the past but is about the wider context of sea dumping.

When we are discussing technological options, we have to be aware that the Select Committee on the Environment, under the Chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Sir H. Rossi), has recently embarked on a thorough study of the subject. My Department and other Departments are co-operating fully on the study, and we shall await its conclusions with interest. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has undertaken that we shall not reach final conclusions, following our review of options, until the Select Committee's report is available in the latter part of this year. I hope that I have said enough to convince my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North that extensive public discussion of general policy has not only taken place but will continue to take place.

[Mr. Waldegrave]

There are specific proposals for new disposal facilities and opportunities for discussion on them. Any proposal such as this will be judged against principles for the protection of the human environment, which were published in January by the authorising Departments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North asked for reassurance that, when a site was filled and completed, there would be no radioactivity over the perimeter of the site. That will be the case while the site is a working nuclear site, as it were, and under the control of the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate, and so on, when the margins of error would be of the order set out in the assessment principles, which my hon. Friend has studied and which, he will agree, are low even in terms of the nuclear industry.

The principles to which I referred are the result of wide consultation. They were published as a consultation paper in October 1983, and 117 organisations and individuals responded to the invitation to comment. A summary of their comments, together with the responses of the authorising Departments, is also available in a report on the consultation exercise, which is in the Library.

The assessment principles relate primarily to the authorisation of a facility under the Radioactive Substances Act 1960. Planning permission is required, and the Government have said that the necessary regulations will be made so that the facility will be licensed during its operational life by the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate of the Health and Safety Executive.

That is an impressive range of safeguards for the public for now and for future generations. We have undertaken that any such applications will be the subject of a public inquiry under an outside inspector, and we have said that NIREX will be required to prepare a detailed environmental assessment of any proposal.

I am glad to say that at about 4.30 this morning, in the European Council of Environment Ministers, after eight years the Danes withdrew their constitutional objection to having a directive on environmental impact assessments, so that will now become Community law. We had already said that we would do it voluntarily.

That means that NIREX will be required to prepare a detailed comparison of other sites. But we have gone even further than that. In response to widespread feeling—and in response to what was urged on me by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire; I hope that I am meeting one of his concerns—we thought that it would be wrong for only one site to be considered.

I must rebut strongly the allegations—I cannot call them anything less than that—made by the hon. Member for Blyth Valley (Mr. Ryman), who unfortunately is not in his place, about the behaviour of the Secretary of State. The hon. Member, as a barrister, should know that he must be careful when accusing the Secretary of State for the Environment of having a closed mind on planning applications. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that he can show that my right hon. Friend has made up his mind about planning applications before they are even put in, under the Wednesbury rules my right hon. Friend is challengeable and is open to having his decisions reversed. The hon. Gentleman said that people did not have confidence in the planning system. I thought as he

was talking that that was exactly the way to undermine confidence in the system. He made an unfortunate speech for a distinguished and senior lawyer.

I have discussed the assessment principles. In addition to those, we have the environmental impact assessment and a comparison of sites. We took the view—here I disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Luton, South (Mr. Bright)—that to subject the inhabitants of wherever it may be—Elstow may be on the short list; three or four may be on the list—to long planning inquiries one after another would be a nightmare.

The inspector at the first inquiry might try to confine matters simply to drilling and investigations, but he would find it difficult to do that. There would be the prospect, if there were two inquiries end to end, of three or four years of such hardship—if Sizewell is anything to judge by—when people would be subjected to great uncertainty and distress.

The special development order procedure allows information to be gathered so that comparisons may be made. Parliament can then debate the matter, and that is an essential part of the public discussion of the whole issue. That is a sensible procedure, and I think that I have the support of hon. Members in saying that.

I said that I would refer briefly to the reasons why the Government do not propose to have a planning inquiry commission. My very well briefed hon. and learned Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire has already deployed some of the arguments, so I can pass over them fairly quickly. All I can correct him on is that the planning inquiry commission procedure goes back to 1968 and is repeated in the 1971 Act.

The basic problem to which my hon. and learned Friend referred, which previous Ministers in the Department of the Environment could probably confirm—and my hon. and learned Friend quoted a previous Labour Secretary of State on the matter—is that we do not see how allegedly general decisions taken in the first part of a planning inquiry could be considered as having closed the mind of the inspector in the second part of the inquiry.

A fundamental problem about the planning inquiry commission route is that it has never been used. For such a difficult and controversial matter as this, I believe that it would be dangerous to use it for the first time on this occasion. However, the issues have already been and still are being discussed by the Royal Commission, the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee and a Select Committee of this House. Therefore, I do not believe that the planning inquiry commission has much to add. I fear that the single public inquiry, which would compare the short-listed sites, would be a long inquiry. However, it would not be quite so lengthy as two inquiries held one after the other.

I shall now deal with some of the many questions that have been raised. I can say to my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North that the Atomic Energy Authority is doing a great deal of work on packaging techniques, research into containers and the reliability of concrete. That work will be continued. Some of it is funded by my Department and some by the industry.

The hon. Member for Stockton, South paid tribute to the campaign in Billingham. I believe that my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North said that in purely environmental terms that was probably the ideal option. However, we had to take into account the fact that the owner of the site did not wish to co-operate. As one of my

hon. Friends said, that would have involved a very prolonged and difficult compulsory purchase procedure and just as with the two inquiries, a long period of uncertainty and distress for the region. Therefore, it could not be tolerated.

I join the hon. Member for Stockton, South in paying tribute to the way in which the campaign was conducted. I met the campaigners the day after the Brighton bombing. It was a fraught day. I remember that I travelled with an unusually large number of special branch officers. We came across many chanting people who were standing by the side of the road. I said to the special branch officers, "What about this lot? Are they fierce?" "No", he said, "they are not fierce at all." So we stopped the car and spoke to them. They showed me the utmost courtesy. That is the way to conduct matters in a free country.

The hon. Member for Stockton, South mentioned people's fears. I have already briefly referred to this problem. As the hon. Member said, politicians have to recognise people's fears, and we do. However, where the fears are groundless, we have to try to still them. We are not doing our job if we represent only the fears. We have to try to sort out the justified and the unjustified fears.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire said that only land in public ownership should be used. In the search for sites, those which are not in public ownership will not be automatically ruled out. However, my hon. and learned Friend made the fair point during the discussion on Billingham that one can land oneself in very prolonged and difficult procedures. However, if no site in public ownership can be found anywhere, we shall have to think again. Wherever it is, the site must be safe. That point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and Devon, West (Sir P. Mills), who represents a constituency in a less densely populated part of the country. If it is safe anywhere, it must be safe everywhere. Just because there are only a few dairy farmers in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Amery), but proper care must be taken for their safety as much as for anyone else's safety.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire referred to the depth of clay and the overriding national interest, as it were, in the supply of clay. That is the type of issue that should be discussed at a public inquiry in the first instance and I know that my hon. Friend will not seek to tempt me into pre-empting its decisions.

My hon. and learned Friend and the hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland both mentioned storage. There is bound to be a good deal more storage because of the slow process of all this. The BPEO study will be considering medium-term storage. All storage is medium term, although other countries are investigating storage followed by long-term disposal. We shall try to assess storage options alongside other options.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire asked why NIREX had chosen impervious clay when the French had chosen permeable shale. The answer is that we have a better site than they have, although the defence for their choice is that the drainage water from the site goes into the sea and is diluted, so that there is no serious worry. *Prima facie*, however, an impermeable site seems much better.

The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland referred to the arrogance of the nuclear industry. When I worked in industry I was in a factory which, although not associated

with the nuclear industry, was on the same site as part of the National Nuclear Corporation. We should perhaps be careful when talking about people who have worked for many years in an industry which until very recently received great public support and praise. The magnificent official history of the Atomic Energy Authority shows the almost saintly position of the early nuclear power programme and the euphoria surrounding it. In those days Professor Quatermass doing secret things behind a high fence was our idea of a hero of society. That was certainly silly, but it would be equally silly now to cast the nuclear industry in the role of the source of all evil.

I, too, do not envy NIREX. It is easy to blame the messenger when one does not like the message. We should not blame the people involved. I do not seek to defend everything that NIREX has done, but it has an inherently difficult task and one must have some sympathy for it.

The hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland made an interesting and thought-provoking speech and I am sorry to have to criticise it. He said that we should not be reprocessing because it would lead to proliferation. I believe that exactly the opposite is true. The hon. Gentleman may not have noticed, but we have already proliferated. We are a nuclear weapons state, so reprocessing here will not lead to proliferation. If we encourage other countries to have reprocessing facilities, the ability to produce enriched uranium will become more widespread. There is thus a strong case for encouraging those without such facilities to have their reprocessing done here.

I have dealt briefly with emplacement in the sea bed. My hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, South-West (Mr. Madel) apologised for having to leave early for an important constituency engagement. He asked about future disturbance and the social considerations with which the planning inquiry will have to deal. That is the proper place to deal with them. He also asked an intriguing question about where poison gas was stored during and after the last war. I fear that such storage places will not necessarily be relevant to the storage of radioactive waste. Nevertheless, I will look into the matter and write to my hon. Friend.

The hon. Member for South Shields said, engagingly, that he did not understand the meaning of the phrase "half-life". I shall have a shot at explaining it to him, which is dangerous because I am in front of an expert. As I remember, this is an asymptotic curve and one can measure the time that it takes for half the energy to be dissipated from a substance, but, as the curve meets the X axis at infinity, one cannot say when it will all have disappeared. Therefore, one measures half the dissipation.

The hon. Member for South Shields rightly said that medical waste also has to be disposed of. He asked a question about Singleton hospital and its waste. I shall write to him on that detailed matter.

Important points were made about Drigg and its relationship to Elstow. It is the intention that Drigg should be reserved in future for Sellafield waste. As soon as another facility is available, other waste will go there. As my right hon. Friend said on 24 January, the new facility will probably consist of concrete-lined trenches up to 60 ft deep, covered by a thick layer of concrete and an amount of earth. That is the concept that we are dealing with, at least in the early stages. Drigg is perfectly satisfactory, but the new facility will be significantly better than Drigg.

[Mr. Waldegrave]

The answer to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Mid-Bedfordshire is that much of the waste currently going to Drigg comes from Sellafield. That will continue, but the pressure on Drigg will be relieved by the new facility which will take waste from elsewhere.

Mr. Lyell: I had understood that 70 per cent. of all the low-level waste came from Sellafield and that it was proposed to send much of that to Bedfordshire. Is that correct?

Mr. Waldegrave: I will write to my hon. and learned Friend, but I understand that all the Sellafield waste will go to Drigg and that Elstow would take waste from elsewhere.

The hon. Member for South Shields asked a direct and important question about the funding for work on radioactivity at Merlewood and he said that that work, which deals with, among other things, gaseous emissions from Sellafield and is of great importance to my Department, might be affected by the re-organisation within the NERC. He asked what would happen to that work. As it is directly funded by my Department, I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that it will continue.

I have dealt with the questions of the hon. Member for South Shields about the retrievability of drums on the seabed. I pay tribute to the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Wells, who spoke about the nuclear industry as a whole. As he said, the fast breeder reactor can be a useful eater of waste. One can either breed plutonium for it or tune it to eat plutonium or enriched uranium. In certain circumstances, the fast breeder reactor can make a useful contribution to a waste disposal strategy.

I have made some brief and critical comments about the speech of the hon. Member for Blyth Valley. It is important that, for the sake of the constituents of the Bedfordshire Members who are here in such force, I should stress that no secret decision has been taken and that nobody's mind is closed. These matters of intense importance will be considered with all the rigour and analytical power available to the Government. That means that people will hear more than they ever wanted to hear about the pros and cons of various aspects of the nuclear industry.

I fear that people will also be subjected to all sorts of scares from people who wish the nuclear industry ill, including a small minority among them who wish our

country ill. We must be realistic about the motives of some people. The great majority are genuinely concerned, but there are wreckers about. I promise the public that no decision has been made and no secret conspiracies are involved in this matter. I can give them one important assurance. If there were any secret conspiracy, I am sure that hon. Members who have attended this debate in such force would soon find out, and I do not think that it would be worth any Minister trying it on.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and Devon, West and the hon. Member for South Shields asked about the soil survey. It was set up to conduct its great project, which is getting towards completion. That of course is why my right hon. Friend the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, whose responsibility it is, has had to take the rather harsh decision to limit the resources for it. However, as my hon. Friend the Member for Torridge and Devon, West pointed out, if people argue that it is an essential input into decisions in the nuclear industry, for example, it behoves that industry to put its money where its mouth is and to place contracts with the soil survey, which it is free to do.

We have had a very useful, responsible and thoughtful debate, which I hope will have made some contribution to the process of public consultation to which my hon. Friend the Member for Bedfordshire, North rightly attaches such importance. We shall hear much more of this subject over the coming years, and I hope that all our debates are of the same high quality as this one has been.

Mr. Skeet rose in his place and claimed to move, That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Main Question put accordingly and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House, while congratulating the electricity supply industry on the production of some 18 per cent. of its power from nuclear sources as compared with 48 per cent. in France, and recognising the need following the miners' dispute to have a diversity of fuels available for the manufacture of electricity in the United Kingdom, acknowledges the need to adopt a satisfactory policy for the disposal of nuclear waste to ensure that people and the environment are protected from any hazards to which they may be exposed; expresses the need to hold a full and comprehensive inquiry into the siting of such repositories and into the several options technology has made available to the industry in such a manner that the public may participate and be fully informed of all relevant facts; and asks the Government to consider the prospect of employing the planning machinery contained in sections 47 to 49 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1971 relating to a planning inquiry commission.