

Prime Minister 1

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Agree to invite the CCU to consider the
lessons of the handling of Chernobyl?

SECRET

cc: J/W

DES

PRIME MINISTER

Yes - but cannot

16 May 1986

16/5.

have a recommendation - quickly
not

THE CHERNOBYL INCIDENT - CONTINGENCY PLANNING

In Tuesday's Nuclear Debate, Kenneth Baker and Peter Walker shrewdly presented a multiple target - the Government's recent handling of the Chernobyl incident, the Government's continued commitment to nuclear power, and the possible sites for the disposal of low-level nuclear waste. Had attention been focused exclusively on our handling of the Chernobyl incident, some pretty maladroit footwork could have been exposed - especially in the initial stages.

Over the Bank Holiday weekend, when the fall-out first occurred, you, Geoffrey Howe and Bernard Ingham were away in Tokyo. Whitehall lacked a firm lead. Plans existed for an emergency arising from a nuclear installation in the UK, but not from an external source.

Anxious telephone callers inundated MAFF and seriously hampered communications. Not until after the weekend did DoE and Environment Ministers firmly take charge of the Government's response. Before that, the ill-co-ordinated nature of the information and advice aroused rather than calmed public anxiety. There were moments of farce: for example, when William Waldegrave unwittingly gave Radio 4 listeners the telephone number of the DoE drivers rather than the Technical Information Centre.

SECRET

For the most part, the nuclear professionals performed satisfactorily. They have a well-established network of contacts and talk the same language. The snag is that without careful translation that language can be confusing and sometimes alarming to the public.

Many people don't understand statistical probability, especially of very low order. For example, on the day that Kenneth Baker assured the public that the risks from the Chernobyl fall-out were insignificant, John Dunster, Head of the National Radiological Protection Board, was saying that the death toll in the UK would run to tens of people. Both conclusions derived from the same assumptions and analysis. Dunster was quantifying what he regarded as an insignificant risk. The next day he had to explain that the tens of deaths would arise from cancer over the next 30-40 years, during which time millions would die from cancer wholly unconnected with the Chernobyl incident.

The Lessons

1. Effective contingency planning entails more than drawing up plans and putting them on file. Constant effort is required to keep the emergency arrangements in good working order. All the incumbents of key jobs, including Ministerial positions, need to know their responsibilities and who initiates the machinery. Telephone numbers must be kept up to date; likewise,

maps, fact sheets, etc. Occasional exercises are required to expose the weak spots.

2. The acid test of effective contingency planning comes in the first day or two when confusion and public anxiety are greatest.
3. The media's hunger for information and comment, coupled with the tendency to dramatise and exaggerate, is inescapable. The need for good, well-briefed spokesmen should be catered for in the contingency plans.

Recommendation

It would be worth getting, say, the Efficiency Unit to compare contingency planning in Whitehall with the best practices in large industries engaged in operations which might entail serious emergencies.

No. This is CCU territory.

JW

JOHN WYBREW

SECRET



LOS AAV
cc Prof Griffiths
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10 DOWNING STREET

From the Private Secretary

MR. UNWIN
CABINET OFFICE

CONTINGENCY PLANNING

The Prime Minister is concerned that over the Bank Holiday weekend when public concern about the Chernobyl incident was increasing, the Government gave an appearance of disarray. Her impression is that there was a lack of co-ordination of the Government response and that the information and advice given to the public and the media was not always helpful.

The Prime Minister would be grateful if you could prepare an early report on the Government's handling of the Chernobyl incident, with recommendations on how the contingency planning might be improved.

DAVID NORGROVE

19 May 1986