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Nuclear power ponders a secret future

Viewpoint By Walt Patterson

Nuclear Electric, the state owned company that operates nuclear power stations in England and Wales, is scheduled to publish its annual report tomorrow. But although the company is expected to show a greatly improved financial performance, restoring some of the credibility of nuclear power as a commercial source of electricity, the nuclear industry's eyes are focused not on the past year but on the future, in particular on 1994.

The Government has scheduled a major 'nuclear review' for that year. Yet, despite its importance, nobody appears to have any idea how this 'review' is supposed to take place.

On 9 November 1989, John Wakeham, the then energy secretary, put Britain's nuclear power programme on hold, pending a review in 1994. Since that time, whenever a nuclear issue has surfaced, assorted ministers and other worthies have invariably alluded to the coming review as a way of avoiding the question.

But 1994 is approaching at speed and the promised review is itself becoming an issue. Who is to carry it out and under what auspices? Is it to be yet another in the dismal succession of backroom investigations of British nuclear power policy, whose lamentable track record has done so much to bring the industry to its knees?

Will it be an ad hoc examination undertaken in secrecy by interested parties, unsuitable for public viewing? How does that fit into Mr Major's scheme of more open government? A 'nuclear review' by civil servants behind closed Whitehall doors will simply perpetuate the climate of suspicion that still hangs over nuclear power, and make nonsense of the assiduous public relations exhortations to drop in to your friendly local nuclear plant.

Now that the Department of Energy has vanished into the maw of the Department of Trade and Industry, the DTI presumably has inherited Mr Wakeham's commitment to the 1994 review. Let us assume that Michael Heseltine, president of the Board of Trade, and his colleagues at the DTI are not so foolish as to believe that a secret review would suffice – not when the public is still subsidising nuclear power to the tune of about £1,300m a year for nuclear electricity alone. This same public needs to know who is to carry out the review, and how. It needs to be assured that the review will receive evidence from witnesses not already committed to future expansion of the nuclear programme.

It also needs to know the scope of the review. Will it be confined merely to a go/no-go decision on new nuclear power stations, such as the twin-reactor Sizewell C already being mentioned in dispatches from Nuclear Electric? Granted, Nuclear Electric has inherited planning permission for a pressurised-water reactor [PWR] at Hinkley C, but that does not necessarily translate into equivalent permission for two PWRs at Sizewell.

Indeed, Scottish Nuclear has made dubious noises about building another station based on a Westinghouse design that will then be more than 10 years old. Hungry eyes are watching from across the Channel; Nuclear Power International, the Framatome-Kraftwerk Union venture, is

desperate for an order. However, the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate has lately become significantly stricter about licensing requirements, and might raise difficulties about importing a standardised German-French PWR into Britain. In theory, that could see Sam Harbison, Britain's Chief Nuclear Inspector, hauled up before the European Court as a 'non-tariff barrier' to free trade within the EC.

Think, too, of all the other nuclear questions queueing up for review. British Nuclear Fuels proposes to ship separated plutonium – nuclear weapons material – halfway around the world. Scottish Nuclear claims, on the contrary, that reprocessing is both unnecessary and too expensive compared with dry storage of spent fuel. UK Nirex has made a shambles of the safety case for its proposed disposal site in the Lake District. What is to become of Dounreay, and the fast breeder reactor? Nearly four decades after the start-up of Britain's first nuclear power station, no one yet knows what will become of concentrated 'high level' radioactive waste, or of defunct reactors. Will the nuclear review address these questions? Or will the nuclear Micawbers order more nuclear stations, on the basis that 'something will turn up'?

The 1994 review, then, could have plenty to ponder. When will it get under way and how long will it last? What will be its terms of reference? Who will it hear? When will it report? Will its report be published? Will it be laid before Parliament for debate? Oh yes, and one last question. Would the Government care to test the validity of the review's findings by privatising nuclear power – before a new nuclear station is ordered? Over to you, Mr President.

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