

PRIME MINISTER

*Original filed on Fishing Act Fishing limits  
copy filed a Nat Health July 1982  
St David's Hospital*  
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STATEMENTS ON FISH, ST DAVID'S HOSPITAL AND RADIO ACTIVE WASTE MANAGEMENT

These statements caused no surprises, and a considerable amount of boredom.

FISH

On the Agricultural and Fisheries Council, the Opposition, led by Norman Buchan had two main questions. First, if the September Council reached agreement on the CFP, would the Minister reserve his position until the House had a chance to have a debate? Second, if no agreement was reached by the end of the year, would the Government ensure that there would not be a free for all, with fishing up to the beaches? On these points, Mr Walker said that he hoped for agreement at the September Council, and that he would not reserve his position pending a debate; he would come to the House and defend the agreement afterwards that was the line that John Silkin had taken when in office. If there were no agreement, he would ensure that there was no free for all. He would also ensure that any agreement was acceptable to the majority of the United Kingdom fishing industry.

ST DAVID'S HOSPITAL, DYFED

Mr Edwards got some credit for publishing the report on St David's Hospital, and coming down to the House to make a statement. The Opposition, led by Alec Jones, seemed mainly interested in discovering who was responsible for the sorry state of the hospital, and whose head should therefore roll. They also tried to suggest that the main problem was a lack of funds for the hospital. Mr Edwards pointed out that the Chairman of the Regional Health Authority had only received the report today, and it was much too early to specify who was to blame. Many attempts had been made to correct the relative under-funding in the Dyfed area, but one of the main problems was that the Health Authority had itself accorded very low priority to mental illness services, despite pressure from the Welsh Office.

RADIO ACTIVE WASTE MANAGEMENT

Denis Howell spoke at some length that Gordon Wilson rose on a point of order to complain. In the course of about fifteen minutes, he managed to put only three questions. First, why was there no independent element in the new Nuclear Industry Radio Active Waste Executive; second, would the NII and NRPB still retain their existing

functions; and were the Government's intentions over the disposal of highly active waste still the same? Mr King pointed out that it would be quite inappropriate to have an independent element on the Executive, but that the Executive would submit its proposals to the Waste Management Advisory Committee, on which there was a strong independent element. The functions of the NII and the NRPB would be unaffected. The AEA's borehole drilling programme had been stopped because new technical advice suggested that surface storage of highly active waste for 50 years or more was quite sufficient. Most of the subsequent questioning centred on the need for an independent element on the Executive, and a decision to abandon the borehole drilling programme, and on safety of surface storage for highly active waste.

wrk.

22 July, 1982

Home Again

and, in the world of mental handicap as opposed to mental illness, I have just launched a major new initiative to do this. I hope to make a statement about it in the very near future.

### Radioactive Waste

4.43 pm

**The Minister for Local Government and Environmental Services (Mr. Tom King):** With permission, Mr. Speaker, I wish to make a statement about radioactive waste management. The Government are today publishing a White Paper, copies of which are available in the Vote Office.

The sixth report of the Royal Commission on environmental pollution made a number of recommendations for the management of radioactive wastes. The previous Government published a White Paper, Cmnd 6820, on their response to the sixth report. This White Paper reports on the present position and sets out the Government's priorities for further action.

The Government attach the highest importance to the safe management of radioactive wastes. As a result of research undertaken in this and other countries over the past five years, the Government are satisfied that all the wastes currently envisaged can be managed and disposed of in acceptable ways. The main task is to identify the most appropriate method for each category of waste, and then to ensure its efficient implementation. In this we shall continue to be advised by the independent radioactive waste management advisory committee, which was set up by the previous Government following the recommendations of the Royal Commission.

The Royal Commission also identified the need for an executive organisation to develop and manage radioactive waste disposal facilities and to accept solid waste from those who created it. The Government have now reached agreement with the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. and the generating boards that they will set up forthwith such an executive to be called the nuclear industry radioactive waste executive. In the first instance, the executive will take responsibility for intermediate-level wastes. It will also take over responsibility, as from next year, for the sea-disposal operations for low-level waste. It will have a staff at Harwell, provided by the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority on a repayment basis, and will be supervised by a directorate made up of senior representatives of the component bodies. The costs of disposal operations, which are expected to be roughly £65 million over the next 10 years, will be met by the producers of the waste. The Government believe that this executive is the most suitable form of organisation for these present tasks. Its establishment in no way affects the clear responsibilities of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State together with my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales. They are responsible for the overall strategy on waste management. In addition, in conjunction with the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food and the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate, they retain the regulatory powers to ensure that the executive maintains the necessary high standards. The new executive will make periodic reports to the Secretaries of State. These reports will be published.

Radioactive wastes vary very widely in radioactivity and toxicity. For the small quantities of high level heat-generating liquid waste, work is going ahead on vitrification plant. The solid blocks thus produced will then be stored for a period likely to be at least 50 years, until the radioactivity and heat generation have declined

[Mr. Tom King]

substantially. Meanwhile, further research will be undertaken to help identify the most suitable of the available methods for longer-term management.

For intermediate level waste, there is a need for the early development of land disposal facilities employing existing technology. This will be the first main task of the new executive.

For low level wastes, satisfactory methods of disposal are already in use, and the advisory committee has confirmed that these should continue to be used, subject to the continuing monitoring of appropriate controls. In the case of liquid discharges from the Sellafield works of BNFL, which have been reduced substantially in recent years, a new and more stringent authorisation will be issued after the treatment plant now under construction comes into operation.

I should like to make two further points. The first is that the cost of waste management measures must be met by the industry and be reflected in its accounting practices. The industry has confirmed to me that it fully accepts this.

The second is the need to secure public confidence in the management of both existing radioactive wastes and those that will arise.

As this White Paper confirms, the Government attach great importance to keeping the public properly informed and will seek to ensure that this is done at all stages.

**Mr. Denis Howell** (Birmingham, Small Heath): The Minister will appreciate the great length of time that has been taken, not only by his Government but also by the Labour Government, to deal with this matter and to respond adequately to the report of the Royal Commission in 1976. I am not complaining overmuch about that, although it will be a matter of some public concern that, six years on, we now have a White Paper that takes up the recommendation of the Royal Commission for the establishment of the proposed executive and that in the interim we are to have the assistance of the radioactive waste management committee.

I welcome the Minister's statement. It is extremely important as he says, to carry public opinion with him and to allay the considerable public concern on a matter of critical importance to many people.

The Minister will not expect me, I hope, to give a detailed response to a White Paper of some 70 paragraphs, which is extremely technical, which needs to be studied carefully and upon which the Opposition need advice. However, the right hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to know that the first action that I must ask him to take is to provide time in the House as soon as possible so that we may debate the White Paper after opinion has been expressed to us and we have had an opportunity to consult over a wide area. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will be able to provide that opportunity early in the new Session.

One immediate question arises about the new executive. It is not proposed that the executive will include an independent element to represent the public interest. The Opposition doubt whether it is wise to exclude an independent element when dealing with the critically important matter of the disposal of nuclear waste.

The executive will report to the directorate, but that too will be composed of representatives of the component bodies. They have a direct interest in the matter. The

executive will report to the various Secretaries of State responsible for the overall strategy, who also have a direct interest. The Opposition think that it is absolutely vital—with great respect to the waste management committee—that the new executive should contain an independent element that will have the confidence of the country. I shall press for that.

I have one or two detailed questions. What will the new executive's relationship be to the other statutory bodies that already deal with such matters, particularly to the nuclear installations inspectorate—in which the public has confidence—and to the national radiological institute? Will their responsibilities be maintained, and if so how? Will new legislation be required to relate the new executive to those existing statutory bodies?

I hope that the Minister does not mind my saying that many of the questions about land disposal facilities that need to be answered have not been answered in the White Paper. I accept that that is inevitable to a certain degree, but one is led to the conclusion that the Government could have been more forthcoming had they known the answers. Even today, after so many years, the Government probably still do not know the answers to many of the vital questions about nuclear waste disposal. That is no doubt why the White Paper is silent on that matter.

**Mr. Dennis Skinner** (Bolsover): Because the questions have not been asked, that is why.

**Mr. Howell:** I do not want to interrupt my remarks to deal with my hon. Friend's intervention. As usual, he is on the ball. With this Government the Opposition must ask the necessary questions. [Interruption.] How nice it is to carry the House with me when we are approaching the Summer Recess. There are some vital questions to be asked about drilling and planning requirements. Some extraordinary things have been happening. Paragraph 41 of the White Paper talks about Drigg. What is the capacity of that disposal area and for how much longer will it be available? What sort of time scale are we talking about for Drigg and its successors?

The White Paper says nothing about the extraordinary position that arose over Loch Doon and following the public inquiry. What has happened as a result of that planning inquiry? It seems to have disappeared without trace. It is important to Scotland, and it is not mentioned in the White Paper. We must have the answer to that question.

Dr. Stanley Bowie, the independent geological consultant, resigned from the radioactive waste management advisory committee because the Government abandoned further research into the drilling programme. In its third annual report 1982 the committee says:

"This decision must inevitably put off the day when a definite decision can be taken about the specific and permanent solution for the management of high level waste in the UK."

What is the Minister's response to those criticisms by the radioactive waste management advisory committee?

**Mr. Gordon Wilson** (Dundee, East): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. Is the right hon. Gentleman making a speech or is he asking questions? He has now taken about 10 minutes to put his question.

**Mr. Speaker:** I believe that that point of order is a little untimely. The right hon. Gentleman is about to conclude.