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NBRM

MUS 28/7

2 MARSHAM STREET
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My ref:

Your ref:

28 July 1983

Dear Michael

You asked for a short background note on sea dumping of low level radioactive waste and where we now stand.

The UK makes an annual dump in the deep Atlantic of low-level radioactive waste in accordance with the terms of the London Dumping Convention. The waste comes from production and use of radioisotopes for medical uses, from power stations, research and defence establishments. 3,500 tonnes of waste, of which 90% is concrete and steel packaging, was due to be dumped three weeks ago by the newly formed Nuclear Industry Radioactive Waste Executive (NIREX). The site for disposal is 500 miles south-west of Lands End, and its suitability was recently confirmed by the OECD Nuclear Energy Agency. Extensive research over many years has shown no detectable effect on human health or the marine environment.

The disposal operation is currently blocked by the Executive of the National Union of Seamen (NUS) who have instructed their members not to sign on for the dump ship, the MV Atlantic Fisher. The Executive is strongly influenced by Greenpeace, and supported by ASLEF, TGWU and NUR. Its reasons are "environmental" with political undertones. This is not a trade dispute.

The waste drums are presently on trains at Bicester (material from Harwell Laboratory), Thatcham (from AWRE Aldermaston) and Winfrith (UKAEA Laboratory), waiting to move to Sharpness, Glos, for loading on the Atlantic Fisher. The ship is stuck at Barrow however while the owners try to negotiate with NUS.

It is likely that my Secretary of State will consult colleagues by letter later today about the options. These include road movement of the waste to the port, and the use of a MAFF stern trawler or other vessel with non-NUS crew. Naval involvement has so far been ruled out. Action in sympathy with NUS by drivers, dockers, or other seamen could thwart a fall-back operation and it would certainly be difficult. My Secretary of State has already approached Len Murray to use his good offices in resolving the problem, and this seems the most promising way forward at present. We gather that a meeting of the TUC Fuel and Power Committee yesterday endorsed the use of sea disposal.

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If the dump is prevented this year, it will be almost impossible to resume next year. Greenpeace will consolidate a victory won on non-scientific grounds and one of the only disposal routes for radioactive waste will have been closed. The waste will have to go into temporary storage, probably until new disposal facilities are developed on land; in itself a highly sensitive issue. There will also be repercussions on AWRE, Harwell and Amersham International in particular, who rely on prompt disposal in managing their wastes.

There has been some media interest in the situation in recent weeks and to make the position clear, an arranged PQ is to be answered today (text enclosed). An EDM signed by 72 Labour MPs has also been tabled.

Yours sincerely

John Ballard

John Ballard
Private Secretary

Michael Scholar Esq

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Dr John G Blackburn (Con - Dudley West):

82 To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, whether it is the Government's policy that the United Kingdom should continue to dispose of low level radioactive waste at sea.

MR WILLIAM WALDEGRAVE

Yes. Disposal at sea of low-level wastes from laboratories, medical uses and other sources is a part of the government's comprehensive policies for waste management. In international law such disposal is permissible under the London Dumping Convention if a licence is issued by the national government. A site in the Atlantic, and detailed procedures, have been recommended by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the OECD Nuclear Energy Agency (NEA) appoints an observer from another country to accompany such operations. The NEA also issues guidelines on packaging, which currently takes the form of concrete.

The UK's use of this method is supported by extensive scientific evidence collected over many years and summarised in the NEA review of the site published in 1980. As recently as May, a special group of experts from a number of countries convened by NEA at the request of the Spanish government confirmed that the 1980 review remains valid. In waste management generally the government receives authoritative independent advice from the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee under the Chairmanship of Sir Denys Wilkinson FRS. The Committee's Fourth Report, published in June, after considering the views expressed about this method of disposal in reports

commissioned or circulated by the pressure group Greenpeace, concluded that there is in fact no evidence that present practices are harmful, and that it is proper for the UK to continue to use them.

Great care has therefore been taken to confirm the environmental acceptability of this method, and in February the UK took the initiative in obtaining a further scrutiny of the scientific evidence within the London Dumping Convention (LDC). Although a resolution was subsequently passed by the LDC Consultative Meeting calling for suspension of dumping pending the outcome of this scrutiny, that resolution does not have any legal force and was not based on scientific evidence.

The organisation of disposal operations is the responsibility of the Nuclear Industry Radioactive Waste Executive (NIREX), working where appropriate through the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority. However there is also a clear national interest in ensuring that difficulties are overcome, waste management policies are carried out, and safe and appropriate disposal facilities remain available.