

Is it taking a liberty?

THE number of lectures and conferences devoted to it is growing all the time. Barely a day passes when there isn't some discussion of it on radio or television or in the newspapers. The subject is the "nuclear issue", and the immediate reason is the decision, due now but delayed a few months, on whether to go ahead in Britain with a demonstration commercial fast breeder reactor. The Minister responsible, Mr Anthony Wedgwood Benn, called for a public debate, and he's getting it. That there might be no "answer" seems to be distracting no one from the search.

The latest contribution comes in a joint publication from Friends of the Earth, the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the National Council of Civil Liberties called *Nuclear Prospects*. Subtitled "A Comment on the Individual, the State and Nuclear Power", it begins to fill a widening hole in the debate, namely a consideration of the social and political implications of nuclear power. The two authors have written what they call a speculative and highly conjectural paper explicitly with the fast breeder decision in mind.

The authors say a postulated commitment to the fast breeder, involving hundreds of tonnes of plutonium-enriched fuel, thousands of fuel shipments annually and some 100 reactors (50 of them breeders), would pose security problems even more enormous than those already caused by existing threats of theft and sabotage. Any attempt to overcome them would extend vastly the existing system of surveillance, policing and vetting inside the industry, and would provide justification for their further extension outside too. Civil liberties would be so threatened that it might be easier for even the Minister himself not to be answerable to the public.

Equally, their argument goes, electricity authorities wanting sites for nuclear stations could clash with local people who, demanding a say in what happens to land, attract wider anti-nuclear sentiment. That would threaten civil discord through direct action if people were unconvinced of the efficacy of parliamentary scrutiny and suspicious of the independence of the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate. Altogether the possible consequences make nuclear power an issue not to be argued simply at a technical level.

Certain obvious points are to be made in confronting these arguments. The security problems posed now by theft, terrorism, sabotage and bombs—even by existing stocks of plutonium—already raise serious questions about civil liberties. Countries cannot opt out of the risks unilaterally if neighbouring countries are "going plutonium". And the social consequences of an insufficiency of energy could be as dire as any caused through the use of fast breeders.

Nuclear Prospects acknowledges the first two of these points, quickly (perhaps too quickly) disposing of them. The authors wonder if civil society would adapt to standards of military security for the benefits of plutonium-based power; perhaps it might. They contend that there is "a world of difference" between exceptional precautions to combat terrorism and the steady erosion of rights threatened by the day-to-day use of plutonium; perhaps there is. But they barely address themselves to the third point, the very one that makes the first two interesting at all.

This may be because there isn't much discussion generally of the matter. Certainly if there is now any received truth in the "great debate" it is the premise that the need for energy will increase and go on increasing in a way that makes the fast breeder decision a decision that must be taken and taken soon. Voluminous documentary support exists for that view, and it cuts little ice at the moment to say that since 1971 no generating plant has been ordered (the companies concerned are reeling) because of simultaneous and seemingly unending inflation and recession.

But consider. Britain, some say, is suffering a long term decline to a subservient neocolonial status in Europe and the West; if so, her predicted energy problems (though not perhaps the world's) could arise even further into the future than presently projected. That is more grist to the mill of those already looking to a comparably financed effort in energy conservation and such alternatives as wave and solar energy to tide them over to a day when fusion or hydrogen might offer inexhaustible supplies of energy. These people imagine a nuclear interlude for Britain, not a nuclear future. Is this really a fantasy? The matter needs more discussion, not just by scientists; it cannot be divorced from a discussion of Britain's future when the cost is so gargantuan.

For consider again. Even those who acknowledge, in strictly energy terms and not with an eye to Britain's electricity industry, the need for a fast breeder, recognise that because of the resources involved the project could only succeed through international collaboration. For Britain, that means with either the French and Germans or with the Americans. The question of who will have her, assuming she can even afford to buy in, is not being discussed in public. But it makes a big difference to the value of any mere internal debate.

Perhaps it is unfair to criticise *Nuclear Prospects* on points that are beyond its intended brief; it certainly deserves praise for trying to fill a great gap in the debate. Mr Benn's decision is mostly symbolic. The debate is far from ritualistic. □