

**nature**

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## Windscale issues need more debate

It is now two weeks since the publication of Mr Justice Parker's report, *The Windscale Inquiry*—the result of a hundred days of investigation into the application of British Nuclear Fuels Ltd (BNFL) for planning permission for 'a plant for reprocessing irradiated oxide nuclear fuels and support site services'. Two weeks in which the wide range of objectors have had a chance to absorb the criticism levelled at many of them and to start issuing responses. Two weeks in which Members of Parliament, to whom the decision now passes, have presumably been doing their homework.

Mr Peter Shore, Secretary of State for the Environment, in a parliamentary manoeuvre, rejected the application (favourable as Mr Parker's report was) in order to allow debate in public and in the House before a decision was taken.

There is no doubt that the document as a whole is impressive; no-one could be left with the impression that Mr Parker had not hoisted in all the technical questions. Nor on the whole can it be claimed that he was insensitive to the broad issues of principle which divided BNFL and the objectors. On the other hand, it does somehow seem as if once Mr Parker had decided that the decision should go in BNFL's favour he went out of his way to find for them on almost every issue—rather as a judge, confronted by a bunch of witnesses prepared to testify to a man's innocence, might dismiss their evidence *in toto* once satisfied that the man was guilty.

Should Britain go ahead with an oxide reprocessing plant to cope with the arisings from Advanced Gas-Cooled Reactors, possible Light-Water Reactors and foreign sources, in the first instance from Japan? We believe, unlike Mr Parker, that the case is not strong enough at present, and that there are good reasons for delaying for a few years.

The central plank in the argument in favour of going ahead now is that energy forecasts point to the necessity of bringing power reactors on stream regularly in the coming decades. Mr Parker was clearly exasperated by some of the details he heard about energy futures, for he speaks of some evidence as notably lacking in moderation and rational argument. He also notes that some parties seemed completely to overlook the great difference between making a forecast and having to take a decision which will affect the lives of millions. This seems to be offered as justification for taking only the government's forecasts into account except where objectors' evidence can be used in support of BNFL. In this way it is easy to see the desirability of building AGRs, but is not possible that within the wide spectrum of energy futures produced by people outside government there might be something every bit as convincing, not calling for such wholehearted nuclear commit-

ment? Certainly the inquiry was given evidence, not mentioned in the report, of such futures which even had growth built into them. It may well have been a misapprehension of Mr Parker, fuelled by an almost religious zeal in some quarters, that non-nuclear futures mean a decline in living standards. The business of energy forecasting is developing so rapidly and is turning up such interesting results that for this reason alone delay could be justified simply in order to learn more about what other options might be open to us.

The other major issue on which we believe the report can be criticised is that of proliferation. Indisputably there is more than one side to this question; for instance, reprocessing in Britain could be seen as a way of diminishing the need for other countries to set up their own plants, or it could be seen as a way of providing some sort of legitimisation for them to do so themselves. Mr Parker scrutinised the Non-Proliferation Treaty and came up (see page 302) with the opinion that the treaty, if anything, positively encouraged the establishment of a reprocessing facility for handling foreign fuel. This opinion may be legally correct in the sense that it is what parties to the treaty would have held in 1970, but a strict legal construction of an admittedly imperfect document eight years on seems wholly out of place. What is important is what people feel now about proliferation (though it must be admitted that the British government has done little to stimulate thinking on this matter outside official circles). If the Parker recommendation stands, certainly we will be able to offer foreign countries a reprocessing service, but no country will be obliged to use it. Any country looking to acquire nuclear weapons can simply respond that our price is wrong, or that its own nuclear engineers need employment building a reprocessing plant. And on legitimisation we have a recent example to bear in mind: the Indian nuclear explosion. In 1974 the Indians detonated their first nuclear device. Since the Americans and Russians had spent much of the preceding decade extolling the virtues of peaceful nuclear explosions the Indians called their device peaceful too, to considerable diplomatic confusion.

We do not know that Windscale will help, physically or morally, any other country to get into the weapons business. It may very well not. But it ought to be clear that discussion on proliferation issues is as yet too little advanced for such a major step to be taken.

A planning inquiry, however broad ranging, is not the place for the weighty matters of energy forecasting and nuclear proliferation to be resolved. These belong in the political arena and should not be decided in haste. □