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Carter's energy message

President Carter has emerged from his self-imposed period of isolation to announce a six-point plan for cutting dependence on foreign oil imports. Those who expected his long silence to be followed by some dramatic gesture were to be disappointed; the content of his speech to the nation was confined to proposals which had received wide currency in recent months — holding oil imports to 1977 levels (themselves the highest ever) and paring down imports by a half over the next decade, developing synthetic fuels, making a more positive start on conservation and so on. Nothing was said about nuclear power. No imaginative political moves were made — but this is not President Carter's style.

At least Carter's aims are relatively modest. At the time of the 1973 energy crisis President Nixon wheeled out a plan, 'Project Independence', of which was intended to make the United States independent of foreign energy suppliers by the year 1980.

Perhaps the most eyecatching proposal is that alternative fuels, notably synthetic fuels, should account for 2.5 million barrels per day by the year 1990. This would be rather more than a tenth of present-day oil consumption. Even this (as David Dickson points out on page 181) is little more than catching on to a recent optimistic public mood that expensive synthetic fuels will eventually be acceptable in the market place. And environmental objections, including those concerning carbon dioxide (see also page 189), will have to take a back seat.

President Carter has chosen to couple his energy message with a deeper warning to the American people that there is a crisis of confidence, moral and spiritual, in the nation. There may be a crisis of confidence in the presidency, and certainly Americans are worried about their future industrial competitiveness, but to bring in moral and spiritual values is surely to confuse the real message: that a whole raft of institutional and social changes are going to be necessary to meet a new era of energy austerity. □

Aldermaston goes a little public

The invitation for a number of members of the press to visit Aldermaston, the centre of Britain's atomic weapons' research, was an unexpected and pleasant surprise. Defence research establishments rarely open their doors, and as far as anyone could remember this was the first time a contingent from the press had been inside the security fence. The purpose of the visit was, from Aldermaston's point of view, to demonstrate their new laser compression facility recently opened by the Queen — a facility which seemed strangely similar to another laser compression facility just 30 kilometres away at the Rutherford Laboratory. Why can't the weapons people and the academics pool their resources (the price tag is, after all, several million pounds) and share a bigger and better facility? The Americans seem to have far less inhibitions about doing defence and academic work in the same building.

But the purpose of the visit, from many of the journalists' point of view, was not so much to look at a laser, nor even at the splendid display of non-weapons-related research gathered in a giant marquee and discretely draped with reminders that a pay dispute was still on. Rather, it was a unique opportunity to fire at the Director of the establishment a whole range of questions about broader issues concerned with nuclear weapons.

The most persistent questioning concerned the return to action of the plutonium facility which had to be closed last August when some workers in it were found to have been exposed to higher than permitted doses of radiation. It seems that as yet a substantial fraction of the facility is still not fully in operation. One of the big problems is manpower — not just skilled craftsmen but also health physicists prescribed by the Pochin report.

Even on this matter the Director and his colleagues were the very soul of discretion. When it came to questions such as 'What is happening under the Polaris improvement programme?' 'What is going to happen to the US/UK agreement on nuclear exchanges, due for renewal this year' and 'How would a comprehensive test ban pose problems for nuclear weapons stockpiles', the discretion was absolute — each was answered with a 'no comment'

It would have been a somewhat disgruntled team of journalists which would have left Aldermston under these circumstances were it not that the message did seem to have registered that the lack of public information on the British nuclear deterrent, particularly at a time at which major decisions are being made, is a matter of some concern. Promises were made that the Ministry of Defence would look into giving the press a fuller briefing in the near future on nuclear policy. The sooner the better. □