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Labour urges recall of nuclear fleet

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ALL five of the Royal Navy's oldest Valiant and Churchill class nuclear submarines were in port yesterday following the discovery of a fault in one of their reactors.

The Labour Party's naval spokesman, Mr Roland Boyes, said he was demanding the immediate recall of all nuclear submarines for checks to ensure there was no danger of radioactive contamination. "I am greatly concerned about the effect this defect might have had on the men," he said.

The Ministry of Defence continued to insist that none had been prematurely recalled — a move that would have signalled possible radioactive danger to crews at sea.

It was pointed out that the defect in HMS Warspite — believed to be a crack in the reactor's cooling water system — was found early last month during a refit at Devonport dockyard, when other submarines were still in port after their Christmas leave.

Nor was the rapid return of a Polaris missile submarine which left Faslane on January 14 connected with the Warspite reactor problem, naval sources said, although the four Polaris ships are of the same 1960s vin-

tage as the faulty hunter-killer.

The Ministry of Defence has already said that although submarine crews are routinely monitored for contamination, there was no dangerous radioactive leak associated with the Warspite defect or the current refit.

The reactor defect is said to be related to Warspite's age. It was launched in 1965 and is now the navy's second oldest nuclear submarine in service. It may therefore be suffering from the same weakness that occurred in the oldest ship, HMS Valiant, in 1981 while she was operating off the Cornish coast, described in a Greenpeace nuclear accident report as "a hairline crack in the primary cooling system". A small quantity of water apparently leaked and was drained off into a lead tank for treatment.

In Warspite's case, naval sources insist the fault is repairable, which presumably means that a section of the cooling circuit can be removed and replaced. Speculation that the hunter-killer submarine might have to be scrapped was dismissed.

Mr Boyes said he was asking the Defence Secretary, Mr Tom King, to consider the premature retirement of the navy's older nuclear-powered submarines, of which 10, including the four Polaris missile ships, were laid down in the 1960s.