



# THE SCOTSMAN

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## A deadly habit of secrecy <sup>SC</sup> (2/8/9)

IT is not altogether surprising that the public tends to over-react to the perceived hazards of nuclear technology. People always fear the unknown more than the known, and they have been given many reasons down the years to suppose that they are receiving less than the full picture about either the civil or military nuclear programmes. Much emphasis is given to mellifluous reassurance, rather less to hard information about what might, however improbably, go wrong. The consequence is to make the little that is known seem all the more sinister.

The trouble, familiarly, lies with the inbred instinct of British officialdom to conceal unless there is specific cause to disclose, rather than the reverse. It is a habit which this Government has commendably undertaken to discourage, though so far to little conspicuous effect. The example we report today shows the tendency at its most counter-productive and asinine. The essence of it is that the Ministry of Defence, which instructs both naval and civilian personnel in dealing with the consequences of an accident on a nuclear submarine, has chosen not to issue civil authorities with assessments of the worst levels of leakage imagined. The MoD justifies this because "local emergency planners are not expected to devise plans for accidents which are virtually inconceivable."

At root, this is the old argument: the material is not disclosed because it does not have to be — that is to say, the less the public knows the better. That is not to dispute the MoD's assessment that a disaster on such a scale borders on the impossible, though the documents we have acquired show the theoretical risk to be quantifiable. Neither is it to suppose that the civil authorities, had they been appraised of the scenario, could have put any very effective arrangements in place to contend with it.

But the MoD presumably sees some purpose in acquainting its own people with this material. To deny the same insights to the civil authorities would seem certain to undermine the trust and co-operation which is supposed to characterise preparations of this kind. It may also make some people wonder what else might be being withheld. Security is a proper concern of the military, but so is public confidence. Too often, the MoD still seems inclined to hide embarrassing information behind the convenient veils of the cold war. It may well wish to avoid nurturing public paranoia about matters nuclear. But paranoia feeds on ignorance, not knowledge.

Stein on just: