

Nuclear exercise ^{sc} was successful 7/5/98

Sir, - It is not my custom to respond to newspaper reports; however, your report on the exercise Short Sermon, ("Nuclear emergency plan fails test", 2 May), contains a number of errors and misrepresents by a wide margin the outcome of a successful exercise.

No objective reader of the report could conclude, as your headline does, that the plans and arrangements in place failed the test posed by the exercise. All agencies were of the view that their plans were satisfactory, and that the exercise had been a particularly demanding one.

As one might well expect, all agencies were also able to identify areas where improvements can be made to make the plans work even better; this, after all, is part of the purpose of conducting exercises.

Secondly, the report referred to was not secret. Your journalist has obtained a copy of the all agency post-exercise report; far from being secret, as he claims, the report was published recently and placed in the House of Commons library. I also sent copies to MPs local to the Clyde naval base.

When we honour our commitment to open government, it is disingenuous of the media to imply that we are keeping secret that which we clearly are not.

Finally, the report was not written by the Ministry of Defence. All the major agencies who participated in the exercise have contributed: the Ministry of Defence provided but one of some dozen contributions.

We also wrote the preface, which records the agreement of all the agencies on the actions that now need to be carried out. This is an excellent example of a wide range of public sector bodies co-operating for the public benefit.

I recognise that the public is concerned about nuclear issues and the possibility of accidents, however unlikely. We go to considerable lengths to make our systems safe, but we also take a responsible attitude towards preparing for emergencies.

We carry out these exercises precisely in order constantly to improve our safety and security. We publish our reports precisely in order to defuse suspicions of secrecy. What a pity this was not acknowledged.

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WHITEHALL, LONDON

9c11/5/98 Nuclear accident exercise questions

Scobson
11/5/98

Sir, - One of the major aims of the Short Sermon nuclear accident exercise carried out at Faslane last year was to test whether the public could effectively be protected from the health hazards expected from such a disaster. Having read the multi-agency report on the exercise, I am not assured this aim was (or ever could be) realistically met. The section written by Argyll and Clyde Health Board leaves particular cause for concern:

- 1, It admitted the decision of how far to extend distribution of Potassium Iodate tablets (PITS), and give advice on taking shelter, was not recorded; so different agencies worked with different figures!
- 2, The distribution of PITS was only carried out on paper. The report gives no estimate of how many households were theoretically visited, and in what time-span. But the fact that it is now reviewing the distribution mechanism suggests it has recognised that people living in the vicinity of a nuclear facility should hold their own supplies of tablets, with clear instructions on their use (as at the Naval base at Devonport)
- 3, The board's 0800 helpline dealt with 25 theoretical calls from those given tablets. This in no way tests its ability to cope with the huge number of calls it would get from people living in this area who are constantly kept in the dark about the consequences of a serious accident at Faslane.

Jane Tallents
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Sir, - The armed forces minister, John Reid, suggests (Letters, 7 May) that the veil has now been lifted from one of the most closely guarded secrets of the British military establishment, the safety of the reactors that power nuclear submarines. Would it were so!

The report on the Short Sermon exercise which is in the public domain, is not the full Ministry of Defence report. Experience shows that there will be another report which goes into far more details, but it will be classified and kept hidden from ordinary mortals.

The published report does not reveal how much radiation would have been dispersed into the atmosphere, or which parts of Scotland would have been contaminated by an accident at Faslane.

Had this been a civil nuclear exercise, these details would have been disclosed, along with maps showing radiation plumes crossing the country. So long as the MoD continues to hide the grim realities from the Scottish people, it is only right and proper that they remain suspicious about the floating Chernobyls moored on the Gareloch.

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