

Decommissioning could take up to 30 years Nuclear subs get a SW retirement

RETIRED nuclear submarines could be laid up in the Westcountry for up to 30 years while the Defence Ministry decides how to dispose of them, a senior Royal Navy officer has revealed.

GROWING NUMBERS of nuclear submarines are being decommissioned under the Government's Options for Change defence review. Yet the Defence Ministry has not made up its mind about what to do with them. SANDRA LAVILLE reports.

People in the Westcountry have been forced to face the issue of decommissioning nuclear-powered submarines since it was announced last year that Warspite and Conqueror may be scrapped on their doorstep.

More than a year later, the submarines remain at Devonport Dockyard in dif-

ferent stages of decommissioning, but the Ministry of Defence is not saying how it will eventually dispose of the nuclear reactor plants inside them.

A storm of protest surrounded the decision to scrap HMS Warspite as she neared the end of a £100 million refit.

When Conqueror, which sank the Argentine cruiser General Belgrano during the Falklands War, was towed into Devonport the controversy was reignited when she was purchased by a dinghy full of Greenpeace protesters.

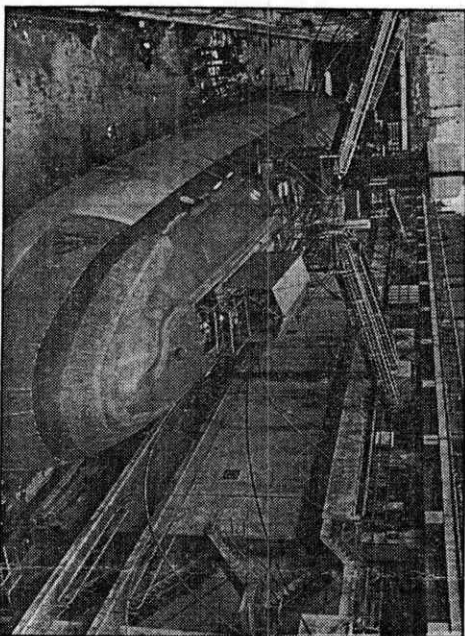
As Warspite sits in basin five and Conqueror lies docked in the submarine refit complex, the Ministry of Defence has still not said what will eventually happen in the final stages of decommissioning.

So far work on Warspite has involved removing the fuel rods from the submarine which make up 98 per cent of the radioactive material.

These are then stored at Sellafield and equipment which can be of use to the Navy is removed from the boat. The hatches have been closed and the submarine is now out of commission.

Devonport Management, which is contracted to carry out the work, says that the full extent of the work at Devonport is not yet known.

Captain Charles Pezey, the Navy's chief of staff (nuclear) at Devonport, said: "There are two very different stages to decommissioning. The first is removing the vessels from the fleet which involves taking out the fuel and equipment. The second is defuelling, sealing the pressure vessel and storing it and then taking it all out and putting it in a green field site."



IN THE DOCK: HMS Warspite high and dry in basin five at Devonport Dockyard

Balancing key issues of safety, jobs and security

JOBS and safety are the points which union leaders and politicians have to balance in the decommissioning question.

The key issue for Devonport is who refits the nuclear submarine fleet and in particular the Trident submarines.

Devonport Management Ltd have put in their bid for the nuclear submarine contract which will secure thousands of jobs. Now it is just a question of waiting.

For Bill Coffin, branch chairman of the Amalgamated Engineering Un-

ion, a package deal of refits and decommissioning is the only way the latter will be acceptable.

He said: "We are not prepared to accept decommissioning alone without the job security of the rest of the package."

"If decommissioning is part of guarantees with regard to the core work of nuclear submarine refits, then it is fair that we take the disadvantages with the advantages of that security."

He has accused the Government of having a hidden agenda and called for them to make a decision on the contract as soon as possible.

"They know exactly what they're going to do, which ships they're not going to repair and take out of service. It is simply a matter of coming the public."

Politicians fighting for the Devonport seat at the next election will have to grasp the issue and commit themselves on it.

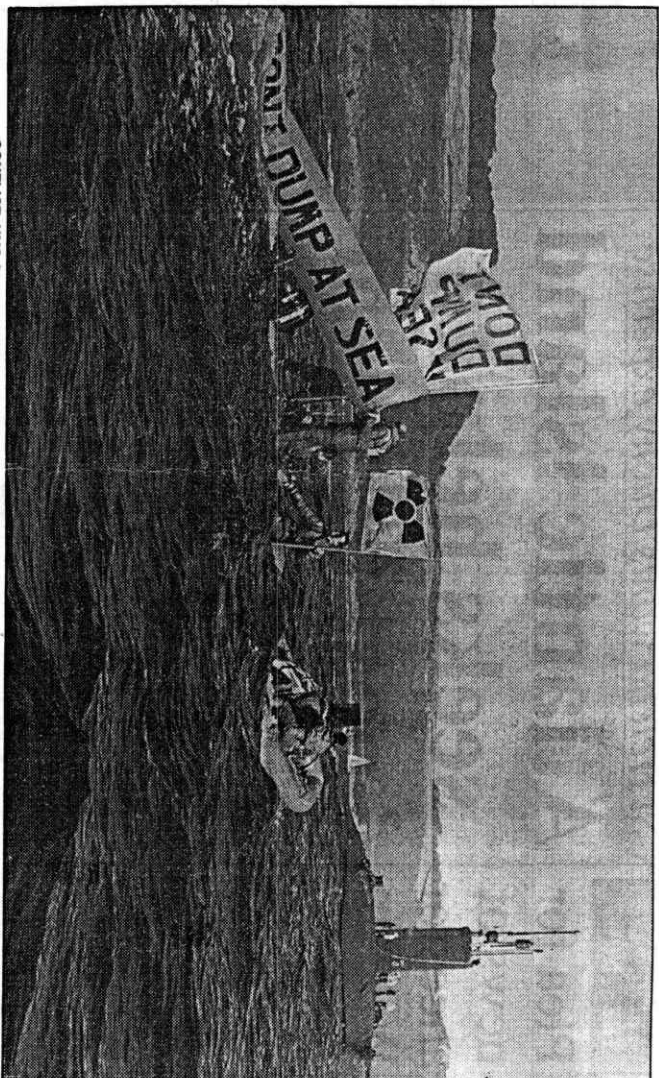
Dr David Owen said: "I don't intend to accept a hushed up and hurried through decision that changes the nature of the work and means we cut up the nuclear reactors in Devonport without knowing what the safety issues are."

Harold Luscombe, SNP councillor and prospective Parliamentary candidate for the constituency said: "At the end of the day it means jobs and we have to take the importance of employment into account."

The report being discussed today by Dr Robert Wharton from the Edinburgh Radiation Consultants is intended to address safety issues of storing defuelled submarines at Devonport prior to decommissioning.

But for Labour's prospective Parliamentary candidate, David Jamieson, the anti-nuclear Dump Information Group, said: "If a submarine is left for 30 years at Devonport before the plant is disposed of and other substances are being taken out of submission we will have success on our doorstep."

The small risk that the Navy say is involved in storing decommissioned submarines is made greater because they are in the middle of a highly populated area.



CONFLICT: HMS Conqueror heads for Plymouth as Greenpeace protesters are towed out of the way by navy craft

Captain Pezey said: "Our instructions are to move Warspite to basin three where she could be stored for up to 30 years before being sent to a maintenance base, but we are kept water tight and radiologically safe."

So far Devonport Management Ltd, for the Navy, has gone no further than defuelling and storing.

Further than that, the Ministry of Defence has not committed itself and DML has insisted its work is in no way equivalent to the final dismantling and disposal of the vessels.

The company insist radiation checks are rigorous at the dockyard.

"We are controlled by the Nuclear Installations Inspectorate and the MOD. We currently undertake 89 routine radiation surveys, 13 of which are daily, 48 are weekly, seven are fortnightly and 21 are monthly," said Euan Williams, press officer for DML.

The final disposal of the nuclear reactor plant will be done either by dumping at sea, in a shallow land site or by deep geological disposal, according to a report on decommissioning prepared for the MOD by Peter Morgan from the Nuclear Protection Board.

Peter Morgan from the Nuclear Protection Board said: "The MOD had issues shelved any hard and fast proposals on how final decommissioning will be achieved."

"We anticipate that it is very likely DML will be involved when it comes to decommissioning, but the proposals haven't yet involved them or us."

If these discussions lead to a decision to carry out full decommissioning at Devonport then the plant will be removed from the submarines in the dockyard.

The plant weighs 850 tonnes and is about eight metres in length and 10 in diameter. The MOD line at the moment is that deep geological burial in a disposal site is the most favoured option.

According to the NRPB the site would be one which may be constructed by Government nuclear safety agency NIREX in the next decade.

NIREX has ruled out the possibility of accepting the reactor plant whole.

Anti-nuclear groups cite fire on board as the biggest threat and have reproduced information from Greenpeace to support their arguments.

Greenpeace says the USSR have predicted a worst case nuclear accident at their refit port of Murmansk would lead to 65,000 people being directly exposed to radiation with more than 26,000 citizens suffering serious long term health effects.

The decision on who will get the submarine contract is expected some time next year.

Kevin Owen, chairman of the anti-nuclear Dump Information Group, said: "If a submarine is left for 30 years at Devonport before the plant is disposed of and other substances are being taken out of submission we will have success on our doorstep."

The new limits drawn up by the National Radiological Protection Board will become law via a European Community Directive.

The present legal dose limit is 50 millisieverts a year for nuclear industry workers and 1ms for the public.

They are recommending a 20ms limit a year for workers with an average of 15ms over five years.

Trades Unions and Devonport Management Ltd are aiming to have limits of 5ms in any six months running and not more than 10ms in any 12 month period.