

# SCARING THE COUNTRY TO DEATH

**Government disinformation about the effects of nuclear war on the civilian population began as soon as they realised what those effects would be. Joan Smith and Carol Baker look into newly-released Cabinet papers**

THE BRITISH government recognised as long ago as 1954 that the effect of fallout from a hydrogen bomb on the civilian population would be 'bleak' — and was afraid this fact would provoke a public outcry against thermonuclear weapons if it were known.

Newly-released papers show that the then Minister of Defence, Harold Macmillan, wrote a top secret memorandum for consideration by the Cabinet in December 1954, warning that 'much of the present indifference of the public would vanish' if they discovered that the government was altering its plans to cope with such a degree of devastation. The papers also show that the government has long been aware that the effects of nuclear war would be much worse than those described in its own civil defence propaganda.

Macmillan wrote the memorandum after reading the very first assessment by British scientists of the effect of fallout from a ten megaton bomb. Although Britain was still more than two years away from testing its own hydrogen bomb, British scientists had been able to put together the assessment from 'all that we have been able to find out about the effects of the experiments by the United States in the Pacific and elsewhere.'

'There will be an inner zone of approximately 270 square miles in area (larger than Middlesex), in which radiation will be so powerful that all life will be extinguished, whether in the open or in houses', the scientists' report predicts. 'Because of the persistence of the radio-active contamination of this inner zone, general relief measures would be virtually impossible for some weeks, and possibly months.'

People in 'specially deep shelters' in this area, with uncontaminated food and water supplies, would have some chance of survival, 'provided they were not entombed by other effects of the explosion.' Outside this central zone, there would be an area of about 3,000 square miles (several counties wide) in which 'exposure on the first day might easily be fatal.' The report notes that 'no medical means of curing or even curbing the effects of radiation on human beings are yet known.' In the Marshall Islands, it goes on, 'natives on an atoll 110 miles from the explosion received about one-third of the lethal dose.'

The scientists' report raises the possibility that people in the direct path of fallout could be



Macmillan in the '50s, worried about disturbing public 'indifference' to the Bomb

evacuated from their homes in the immediate aftermath of the explosion, since 'fallout will not occur until 8-24 hours after the burst' — a proposal directly contradicted by more recent government advice on how to survive after the bomb. A film by the Central Office of Information, for instance, offers exactly the opposite advice. 'No place in the UK is safer than anywhere else,' it insists. 'No one can tell you where the safest place will be.'

MACMILLAN's covering memorandum for the Cabinet points out that the new facts about fallout 'must have a revolutionary effect' on the government's preparations for civil defence. 'Thought is already being given to its implications by the limited circle of Ministers and officials to whom this scientific appreciation is known', he wrote.

But he asked the Cabinet to consider a difficult problem. If those responsible for civil defence were given the information needed to revise their plans to take account of fallout, 'we must accept some risk that people may come to know quite soon that the Government are planning on this new hypothesis.' Since this might destroy the public's present 'indifference' to nuclear weapons, he called for guidance from the Cabinet on how much to tell government departments concerned with defence, and 'the manner in which the implications of fall-out for our defence policy should be presented to the public.'

Macmillan also proposed an approach to the Americans because 'there are indications that the United States Government are now considering the political implications of the hydrogen bomb for their home front.' (Indeed they were. Eisenhower had already rejected an assessment of the dangers of the arms race written by his chief speechwriter, saying: 'We don't want to scare the country to death.')

The exact decisions taken by the Cabinet after reading Macmillan's memorandum have not yet been revealed under the 30-year rule. Their tenor can be gauged, however, not only

by the anodyne nature of later civil defence instructions issued by successive governments — such as the *Protect and Survive* booklet — but by a short discussion at a Cabinet meeting late in December 1954.

Then, the Cabinet noted Macmillan's memorandum and went on to discuss the BBC's plans to produce early in 1955, a programme on the hydrogen bomb. The Chairman of the Atomic Energy Authority, in 1954, Sir Edwin (now Lord) Plowden had spoken about this to the Director-General of the BBC, Sir Ian Jacob, the Cabinet minutes record. Sir Ian 'had undertaken to make himself personally responsible for ensuring that those planning the programme consulted reputable scientists.' He had also given an assurance that the programme would be 'free of any political bias'.

The Cabinet was asked whether this matter could now be left to the 'discretion' of the Director-General. They decided not to take any chances. It was important that 'the Government should themselves retain control over the form and timing of publicity on the effects of thermonuclear weapons', the minutes record. They decided that the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, would arrange for 'further guidance' to be given to the BBC on how to deal with the subject in radio and television programmes. □

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