UK atomic authority 'was a great mistake'—Benn

THE creation of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority in 1955 "hived off policy formation as well as execution". It was, in retrospect, "a great mistake", the UK Secretary of State for Energy, Mr Tony Benn, said last week.

In a *Nature* interview with Mr Benn and his chief scientist, Sir Hermann Bondi, Mr Benn criticised the constitution of the UKAEA—under which research on waste management was relatively neglected for a long period. "If—in the creation of the Authority—the government had hived off Harwell and Aldermaston as research establishments, but kept the leading figures in nuclear policy within government, their relationship with the minister would have been very much closer than it is", he said.

Mr Benn has been minister in charge of the Authority from 1966 to 1970 and from 1975 to now. He believes "we have suffered" from its political autonomy.

In fact Sir John Hill, chairman of the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority, sought an interview with Mr Benn last week to discuss how to improve the flow of information between the Authority and the minister. After the meeting, Mr Benn announced that he would be sending a letter to Sir John outlining "a new list of areas of legitimate ministerial interest".

"It's not a question of control", said Mr Benn "it's a question of the integration of this very high technology with the democratic process. There are some very serious defects, but they don't arise from wickedness. They arise from the nature of the problem.

"Sir John came and said 'I tell you everything. What's wrong?'; but actually the problem of observing, watching, and connecting all these issues that a minister has, is quite different from the role of a manager of an authority. I am interested in all sorts of things—like, for example, what was that explosion in Russia in 1958? What happened to the 200 tonnes of uranium lost in the Mediterranean? I am interested in the movement of plutonium nitrates from Dounreay to Windscale, the real role of fusion, and all the areas relevant to the International Fuel Cycle Evaluation Programme. I try to preside over a range of issues as intelligently as I can, and need to keep informed on them all."

A second institutional problem, said Benn, is that in an agency set up to develop nuclear power the consequential effects of the technology "have tended to become subsidiaries to the agency's prime purpose". In practice,

Tony Benn: seeking more information on nuclear power

however, the effects have turned out to be very important.

"Where you fail to institutionalise basic conflicts that ought to exist in political discussion, then what happens is that the conflicts are solved at the Deputy Secretary level instead of at the Cabinet level. You must institutionalise the control of nuclear power to the point where all real arguments come to the top."

"The issues are enormous", said Mr Benn. He lists among them "the flow of information, the role of secrecy" in all high technology industries—including oil and gas—not just nuclear power. Also civil liberties, "where when you centralise, you then find the package deal includes a degree of intervention in civil liberties which is potentially unacceptable. All these things need to be brought out."

"In the end—however complicated a technology is—the public have the right in a democratic society to say no, as we've seen in Austria and very nearly saw in Switzerland. There is no escape from the ultimate provision of consent. The job of a minister is not to mystify, or to over-simplify, but to clarify, so that people know what they are doing. And you have to do it much earlier in the case of high technology."

"If it's a case of a road—do you want the M3 to go through Aldershot or not?—then you have a planning inquiry; but in the case of fast breeders, or nuclear power, or any other high technology, decisions will be taken that pre-empt things that will not happen for 10 or 20 years."

"The role of a minister as a public interrogator, who goes on asking questions, and then publishes the questions and invites the debate, is essential—otherwise you wake up one day and find that all the key decisions were taken 10 years ago. Then people get frustrated, they get violent, they get pessimistic, they get cynical. That is destructive of the whole democratic process, and it undermines the technology on which you have spent billions

and billions of pounds."

"This is my main interest in politics: how to get democratic control established effectively over areas where high skill, high complexity, high security, make the normal operations of democracy very very difficult."

Sir Hermann Bondi thought that the history of nuclear waste management "was an extremely interesting case". What the UKAEA had failed to foresee, said Sir Hermann, was not the need for the management of wastes, "but that there should be public anxiety about it".

In a sense the issue fell between two stools: "it fell into that gap between the institution and the politicians, so that neither saw that there would be an issue on which the public would become excited. The institution felt that all that the public were worried about was getting the power out of the plug cheaply, and they felt that technically the waste problem was soluble, so that there was no hurry yet to solve it."

Mr Benn illustrated the point with a story about cufflinks. "Have you had the British Nuclear fuel cufflinks?" he asked Sir Hermann. Sir Hermann had not. "I was sent a set of cufflinks by BNFL" said Benn "which is an ordinary set of cufflinks, but on the side where you would have a piece of jade or whatever, is a little brown, glass thing, and the card with them said 'These cufflinks represent how much vitrified waste you would generate through household usage in a year if all electricity were generated by nuclear power'. This was to show how small the problem is. They ignored the fact that they have got to last 20,000 years, and that even 40 million cufflinks make a pile." The idea that waste could be tackled by "the PR techniques of cufflinks" was "absolutely fantastic. I've never worn them because they are to me such a precious example of the wrong way of presenting a problem to people."

Robert Walgate