

Amber light for nuclear power

The long-awaited report on the future of nuclear power in Britain, a qualified licence to push ahead, is a proof that governments cannot delegate the big decisions.

PEOPLE who live in glass houses are often advised not to throw stones, for fear of the damage that might be done, but there is no reason why the injunction should apply to government inspectors such as Sir Frank Layfield, who for the past four years has been occupied with the single question of whether a pressurized-water reactor station should be built in Britain. The question is important because it was defined as such nearly ten years ago, when the previous British government told the Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) that it could have its wish, to build a novel reactor-type in Britain, only if there were a full-dress public inquiry in advance. By thus investing what should have been an engineering decision with great and artificial significance to both sides — those who would build nuclear power stations and their detractors — the then government and its successor, the present, made sure that the inspector would be fully aware of how high were the stakes. They put him in a glass house, and he has done his level best to see that the stones he has thrown, many of them effectively, are mostly little stones unlikely to shatter much glass. Nothing much else could have been expected in the circumstances.

The report is thus not the full-throated endorsement of expansion of nuclear energy in Britain for which some in the nuclear industry may have been hoping. Equally, there is no great comfort for the anti-nuclear lobby, although the Friends of the Earth have won a promise that CEGB should publish the final version of its safety plan when that is ready, so that interested parties can see whether their particular objections have been met. The most trenchant passages in the report are those in which the inspector takes elements of the bureaucracy to task for failing to talk each other's language, or simply to talk to each other at all. CEGB and the National Nuclear Installations Inspectorate plainly have to get to know each other better even after all these years. It would be wrong to say that Layfield sits on the fence, because there is nothing in the report to dissuade CEGB from going ahead, taking a few extra precautions along the way. But, ingeniously, the report will also make the fence broader at the top, on which it will be a little more comfortable to sit.

It may also seem strange, but is hardly surprising, that the inspector is able to complain that more than two years of evidence failed to answer all the questions that can be asked about the safety of pressurized water reactors; the complaint, of course, is directed at this method of public inquiry, which requires that all the arguments should be channelled through the head of a single person, the inspector. The Sizewell inquiry was made even more cumbersome by the requirement that all the evidence should be delivered orally as well as in writing, a way of making sure that the weight of evidence could not physically overwhelm the hapless man behind the desk, which is not a good likeness of how teams of professional engineers inquire into matters of safety and performance, which is even more labour-intensive. If there is a moral, it must be that governments cannot hope to delegate to inspectors their responsibilities for deciding the framework in which huge technically-complicated decisions should be made.

The irony of the Layfield inquiry is that it finished taking evidence before public anxiety about nuclear safety was raised

by the accident at Chernobyl last year, but that its recommendations will have to be turned into practical decisions by a government and public corporations such as CEGB all too conscious that the climate has changed. This, no doubt, is why the government has chosen to publish the report without saying what its own response will be. Rumours that the British government would pin its convictions to the mast of nuclear power may have been modified by the prospect of a general election within the next sixteen months. The difficulty now, given the rules of these inquiries, is that nothing can happen until the government gives some kind of answer. The most likely and perhaps the best outcome will be that the Department of Energy will rub CEGB's nose in the points on which Layfield has identified a need for change and then say that CEGB must make up its own mind.

That, Chernobyl or not, is what should have happened in the first place. In relation to nuclear power and other novel industries, governments have a proper role in the development of safety standards and the mechanisms for making sure that standards are enforced. Britain also has a parliament which can, in principle, ensure that the safety standards in force at any time are those that allow voters to sleep easily at nights. The British government, like some others, also has four nationalized electricity utilities (one in Northern Ireland, two in Scotland and one for the rest of Britain) whose needs of capital are potentially a strain on the public sector borrowing requirement; but that is an almost academic question when the issue is that of whether a single nuclear power station should be built by a cash-rich industry. There is also a Department of Energy, which oversees the utilities and the nuclear industry, which has, among other things, a responsibility for spending money on research directed towards the production of energy of all kinds. Constitutionally, in other words, there are many ways in which the issues delegated to Layfield could and should have been dealt with by the agencies and institutions to which the responsibility constitutionally belongs. If there were all the time in the world, the lucid Layfield report would be a good starting-point for many of these decisions. But the waiting time has long since been used up. □

The price of secrecy

The British government's latest self-made secrecy issue exemplifies its over-zealous policies.

THE British government seems perpetually in a jam about the secrecy of its own most secret activities, espionage and counter-espionage. For days on end last year, Britain's most senior civil servant, Sir Robert Armstrong, stood in the witness-box of an Australian court-room giving reasons why a former employee of British counter-espionage (called MI5) should not be allowed to publish some tales from his working life; it will be several weeks before the judge decides whether the British case is irreparably weakened by the government's apparent indifference two years ago to the publication of some of the same tales in a book by a British journalist, apparently with the connivance of the intelligence services and even, improbably, Lord Rothschild (see *Nature* 324, 396; 1986). Now, as if to make up for slackness then,