

Retreat on principles

The British government's abandonment of its search for a nuclear dump is an awkward legacy.

THE British government's decision (see p. 93) to abandon the search for a disposal site for low-level radioactive waste is a bad business. Whether or not the decision, or its timing, has been prompted by electoral considerations, and in particular by fears that the loyalty of voters in constituencies bordering on the four candidate sites would be unduly strained in the impending general election, giving up the search will hang a millstone around the necks of future governments. And while the immediate effect of the decision will be further to cramp the nuclear energy industry in Britain, the decision will set an awkward precedent for all future public works that give offence to those directly affected by them.

At present, the only licensed nuclear dump in Britain is at a place called Drigg, on the coast of Cumbria in north-west England, a few miles from Britain's larger reprocessing plant, which has been steadily accumulating low-level radioactive wastes since the 1940s. For more than a decade, first the nuclear industry and, more recently, the waste disposal authority called NIREX have been searching for a new site. As the identity of successive candidate sites has become publicly known, there has been a local outcry and the authorities have looked elsewhere. The latest strategy, that of investigating four sites simultaneously, was evidently designed to suggest that misfortune would be equitably dispersed; the site eventually chosen would not merely have been technically the most suitable but also the one best calculated to minimize the inconvenience and risk to people living nearby. The snag, for the government, has been the cost (£15 million will now be written off) and that four local communities have simultaneously been up in arms.

For the rest of Britain, the immediate snag is that there will now be no disposal sites for low-level wastes. Yet at no point in the recent arguments about the safety of these disposal sites have the objectors been able to establish that dumping slightly contaminated rubbish from nuclear plants and laboratories would hazard the safety and health of those living nearby. The Secretary of State for the Environment, Mr Nicholas Ridley, now says that it will be "almost" as economical to dispose of the same rubbish in the still non-existent repository for intermediate waste for which NIREX is also searching, but other governments than the present one will have to pay the bills.

Rightly or wrongly, the government has decided that Britain must continue to generate electricity from uranium; how can it consistently hold to such a policy if it concedes that local objections to unwelcome consequences should be paramount? It is as if the government, having decided that a country such as Britain needs an efficient road transport network, should nevertheless give such weight to the objections of those who prefer not to live near motorways that it agrees that all new roads should be tunnels. The underlying principle, now sacrificed, is that policies for industrial, economic or social development which are democratically agreed should not be impeded by sectional interests, which is not to deny the right of sectional interests to make their objections known at public inquiries and, in some cases, to be compensated for their loss of amenity.

The issue of compensation has become conspicuous in the long wrangle over the waste disposal sites because Mr William Waldegrave, one of the most able of the government's younger ministers who has special responsibility for environmental issues, appears at one stage to have suggested that those not wishing to live near a nuclear dump should be enabled to move elsewhere "at no cost to themselves". This is tantamount to an even more radical concession of the principle that the awkward consequences of desired development are inescapable. The environmentalists are forever echoing Dr Barry Commoner's dictum that "there is no such thing as a free lunch", but the

Waldegrave doctrine, taken literally, is a way of pretending that there is — that the unwelcome consequences of desired developments can be hidden. In reality, developments whose unwelcome consequences are so seriously regarded that people will move house to avoid them are, by that test almost certainly misconceived. Generally applied, the doctrine is also probably a recipe for national bankruptcy. □

Back to Reykjavik?

The US proposal to cut strategic warheads by a half seems warlike to the Soviet Union.

IN any bilateral negotiation, the more successful partner is usually the one who can most vividly appreciate the other's position — who can look from 'over the hill', as strategists were fond of saying in the late 1960s. Last week, the United States bounced back at its bilateral negotiations with the Soviet Union at Geneva with a proposal that each side should cut by a half the number of nuclear warheads deployed by its strategic missiles, and earned for its pains a sour denunciation by the Soviet news agency TASS. There are many in the United States who will be genuinely puzzled that, after a decade's tacit compliance with SALT II (which froze strategic missile numbers), an offer to cut numbers of strategic warheads by a half could give offence. What follows is therefore diffidently offered primarily as an explanation of that phenomenon.

Historically, the argument goes back to 1972, when the United States and the Soviet Union signed the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. The two sides then agreed that their security could only be undermined by the further development of effective ABM systems. In practice, the Soviet government of the time was busily protecting Moscow with a missile system to do just that, with the result that the raw ABM treaty allows each side to have two ground-based point-defence systems, one for its national capital and one for its missile launchers. But addenda to the treaty, partly inspired by the disappointments of the US development of the SPRINT fast take-off ABM rocket, cut the number of defensible Soviet sites from two to one and eschewed US anti-missile defences of any kind.

It is easily forgotten how much the world has changed since then. In 1972, in the United States, it was not possible, as it is now, to walk into a retail store and come out with a box containing as much computer power as there had been in the whole world a decade earlier, in 1962. Undoubtedly, as the Pentagon is forever saying, the Soviet Union has upgraded the ABM defence of Moscow since 1972, but not at zero cost, part of which may be that there are few computer stores in the Moscow suburbs. Present alarms about the trading and technological relationship between the United States and Japan should not blind US taxpayers to the improvement of their skills, relative to those of the Soviet Union, in a mere decade and a half.

Soviet people are more conscious of this difference than are those who live in the United States. American sceptics of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), convinced that it will be ineffectual, should wonder why their Soviet colleagues denounce it as immoral, a much more loaded word. Their answer must be that Soviet people worry that even relative failure will yield some advantage to the United States and better early warning certainly, perhaps even radically improved techniques of terminal defence and certainly a ruinously expensive competition in the militarization of space. It must be concluded that, in Soviet eyes, it cannot be preferable to become economically bankrupt in isolation than to be assured of destruction mutually. That is merely one reason why SDI will be as much a stumbling block at Geneva as it was on last November's Sunday afternoon at Reykjavik. And, given Mr Reagan's attachment to the project, that is why the Soviet Union would prefer a deal on intermediate missiles now, waiting for another administration to strike the more important bargain on strategic arms. □