

PART TWO

CONFIDENTIAL FILING

Report on the B701 leak at Windscale
Incident (Leakage) at BNFL Sellafield

ENVIRONMENTAL
AFFAIRS

PT 1: July 1980

PT 2: February 1987

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3001

Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date	Referred to	Date
23.2.87. 2.10.87							
PREM 19/2140							

MFA

to note for P.Q.S.
N.L.W.Prime Minister
to note.cc/BG.
cc/B1

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PRIME MINISTER

N.L.W

2-10

THE 1957 WINDSCALE FIRE

Saturday, 10 October is the 30th anniversary of the Windscale fire. The occasion will be used by the anti-nuclear lobby to attack the nuclear industry and is already attracting significant media coverage. Demonstrations are planned for Sellafield, Sizewell and other nuclear sites. Criticisms will occur on two main fronts: safety and secrecy, and their implications for the nuclear industry today. Official papers relating to the fire are due for release under the 30 year rule on 1 January 1988. Anti-nuclear campaigners have already suggested that the Government will seek to withhold papers.

I believe we need to take a concerted and positive approach, emphasising and demonstrating the openness and safety of today's nuclear industry. The industry also takes this view. I thought you should know what action we are planning.

The 1957 fire took place in the Windscale Piles, which were constructed in the late 1940s to provide plutonium for the weapons programme. It resulted in a significant release of radioactivity. The piles were permanently closed after the fire. A White Paper reporting in detail on the accident was published in December 1957. The likely health effects of the radioactive release have been well documented in a number of published studies.

The Chairman of the AEA will announce at Sellafield on Monday, 5 October, that major work on the decommissioning of the piles and associated buildings is about to start. This work has been planned for some time but the announcement has been timed to pre-empt the anniversary activities.

John Collier will be frank and open in briefing the Press. He will acknowledge that, despite the great technical achievement of building the piles in less than three years, the priority of



producing material for the UK weapons programme led to features and procedures we would not countenance today. He will emphasise that the lessons learned from the fire have led to the development of today's rigorous and independent regulatory framework.

I myself shall be visiting Sellafield on Tuesday, 6 October, and I shall be reinforcing this line.

We are taking the same approach with the release of official papers. Nigel Wicks' letter of 10 September to Peter Gregson asks about this. If papers due for release are not made public at the earliest opportunity, there are likely to be accusations of a cover-up which could be damaging to the credibility of the nuclear industry. We are therefore taking concerted action to identify papers for release and prepare briefing, and we are on target for 1 January.

Although a number of files have still to be examined, it does not appear that the papers due for release contain new information about the fire or its consequences not already made public. There are however several issues on which we shall be preparing briefing against media queries or adverse press comments:

- (i) Deficiencies in organisation of the project. These cannot be denied. The production of special nuclear material was considered paramount, and corners were cut to achieve this. But this was all made public at the time. We shall point out that we have learnt a lot in the intervening 30 years. Such a fire could not happen again.
- (ii) Suppression of the report of the Committee investigating the fire. The then Prime Minister (Harold Macmillan) was not prepared to make the original report public, and



nearly all copies of it were destroyed. The White Paper said that the original report was a technical document dealing with the design and operation of a defence establishment and it would not be in the national interest to publish it. There have been claims since then that the original report contained embarrassing facts not revealed. In fact, the full report contains nothing which is currently thought to add significantly to published documents. It has now been declassified and will be made available on 1 January.

- (iii) Pre-fire releases of radioactivity. Papers are also due to be released on 1 January showing that releases of radioactivity from the Windscale piles before the fire were reaching maximum permissible limits for children. The papers indicate that in 1957 Mr Macmillan decided that the information should be kept secret, but it was in fact made available publicly in a low key way two years later. In making the material available again we shall point out that the material was made publicly available in 1960.

There are still a number of issues to be considered on the release of papers but we have action in hand on this and on appropriate briefing for 1 January. I shall look to colleagues to assist in this as necessary.

I am copying this minute to the Lord Chancellor, Nicholas Ridley, George Younger, John Moore, John MacGregor, Malcom Rifkind, Peter Walker, Tom King and Sir Robert Armstrong.

C.P.

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY

2 October 1987



By Hand
CBS

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SECURITY

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From the Minister for Health

NEA
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BY HAND

Ms Mandy Laurence
Private Secretary to
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NEA

25.2.87.

Der Mandy

CANCERS IN NORTH WALES

I am afraid that in error Mr Newton's letter of 23 February 1987 was not copied to you.

I am sending a copy of this and the letter to Andy Bearpark and Private Secretaries to members of H Committee and Sir Robert Armstrong.

My apologies for the oversight.

Yours sincerely
C. M. F.

CRAIG MUIR
Private Secretary

Encl.

NSN/DNo.5



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL SECURITY

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From the Minister for Health

cc Mr & Mrs Kerslake
Mr Lewis
Mr Grafton
Mr Sklar
Dr Lewis
Dr Heppel
Dr Abrams
Mr Harris

CA 7 uncopy

* with copies of letter
1/10 February



The Rt Hon Nicholas Edwards MP
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23 February 1987

See Nick.

CANCER IN NORTH WALES

Officials will have reported that I am very uneasy about the proposed answer to the Robert Harvey PQ. I accept that the figures will have to be given but in my view it would be better, if at all possible, not to set up another committee to examine them.

It would be inappropriate, of course, to refer it to COMARE since we do not want to imply that radiation be involved. But it is exactly the sort of task that the proposed small Area Statistics Unit at the London School of Hygiene could undertake. I appreciate that this is not yet operational and that the final details of their contract are still being discussed between officials. But even if it does take a little longer, it would be much better to go down this route which would enable us to be seen to be adopting an overall UK approach. I would be grateful, therefore, if you would amend your proposed answer so that we do not at this stage announce the establishment of Professor Campbell's committee.

You could do this by deleting from "without delay" and simply saying: "and are considering how best to undertake this".

I am copying this letter to Peter Walker, Simon Glenarthur, Richard Needham, William Waldegrave, David Trefgarne and John Gummer.

*over.
Tony*

TONY NEWTON

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CCBG



nbpm

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23 February 1987

As with

will request if needed

CANCERS IN NORTH WALES

You copied to me your letter of 10 February to Willie Whitelaw about the incidence of cancers in North Wales. I am grateful to you for agreeing to extend the deadline a little.

I do, of course, accept that it would not be appropriate to refer a case of this sort, where no hypothesis exists for the cause of the elevated figures, to one of the existing bodies such as COMARE which are already active in this field. Indeed to do so could very well carry the implication that the Government itself believed there was a link with environmental radiation.

I do, however, see a risk in setting up yet another expert group to look into the North Wales' figures, of giving the appearance of an unco-ordinated, ad hoc approach to these issues by Government. There is, I gather, a proposal by DHSS to establish a Small Area Statistics Unit under Professor Rose at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in response to Recommendation 5 of the Black Report. The task of this Unit will, I understand it, be much the same as that of the expert steering group you have in mind and, subject to the views of colleagues at DHSS you may wish to consider the possibility of referring the North Wales figures to Professor Rose's Unit in due course as an alternative to establishing a separate ad hoc group.

Copies of this go to the Prime Minister, members of H Committee, Tony Newton and to Sir Robert Armstrong.

[Handwritten signature]

PETER WALKER

● PART 1 ends:-

DHSS to PS/UPC 22.7.87

PART 2 begins:-

SS/6N6RGT to SS/WALGS 23.2.87



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