

CIVIL DEFENCE DEBATE : 18th DECEMBER 1980

Public Meeting at the Town Hall, St. Albans

Organised by STAND (St. Albans Nuclear Disarmament Campaign)

Contribution by Councillor Harold Beck, supporting the Motion:-

THIS HOUSE BELIEVES IT IS THE DUTY OF BOTH NATIONAL AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT TO ENSURE THAT EFFECTIVE CIVIL DEFENCE PLANS ARE FORMULATED AND PUT INTO ACTION WITHOUT DELAY.

Mr Chairman, Ladies and Gentleman

It is not with pleasure that I second the motion before us. I speak out of a sense of duty.

The insight and experience gained as Regional Scientific Training Officer some twenty years ago just does not bear out many recent statements about shelters, protection, survival and other Civil Defence matters. I have checked to see if I was merely out of date and find that in 20 years there have been only minor changes, of a detailed nature. This is not surprising since the great majority of tests to determine the effects of nuclear weapons, including so-called modern developments such as neutron bombs, were completed by the early sixties. (Show fallout calculator).

The first point I would like to make in the current discussion is that it is very difficult to make reliable predictions about the nature of a nuclear attack and its effect on any particular locality. One obvious approach is to consider the worst that could happen. It has been estimated that a 4000 Megaton evenly spaced nuclear barrage would virtually (but not wholly) extinguish life in Britain whatever meteorological conditions are prevailing at the time. Between this extreme and no nuclear attack at all there are a large number of possibilities which it would be responsible to consider when determining Civil Defence policy.

For example, an attack could be mounted with the aim of knocking out the military capability of Britain. Instead of using the largest bomb in every case, a range of sizes may be used, each related to the type of military target to be destroyed. It has been estimated that for such an attack, a total of 200 Megatons would be required. There would be a huge number of deaths and injuries from a selective effective action of this kind but there would also be many survivors.

Moreover, the wind direction which results in horrific radiation for one town may prove favourable for another. As an example, if a 20 Megaton bomb goes off at ground level at the centre of London the main hazard to St Albans would be from radiation. If the winds are blowing in this direction a radiation level of several thousand Roentgen per hour could be reached, from which a fatal dose would be received out in the open in a few minutes. If the winds are in the opposite direction, the dose over 15 years would be only about one fiftieth of the Wartime Emergency Dose (W.E.D.), i.e. only about the same as we all receive now from natural sources.

It should also be borne in mind that in the ghastly event of nuclear attack the pattern may be more selective, countermeasures may be at least partially effective, some weapons may fail to detonate, others may explode prematurely at a height which virtually eliminates fallout and tactical weapons may be used. There is a wide variety of possible outcomes of a nuclear attack on this country with possible effects on any one particular locality ranging unpredictably from catastrophic to tolerable.

Are the opposers of this motion claiming that it has been proved beyond doubt that there will be no survivors from any kind of nuclear attack on this country or, indeed, on neighbouring countries?

There is one further possibility which must be taken into account. Even if there is no nuclear attack on this country, an attack on mainland Europe could result in fallout in Britain especially if the wind is in our direction. In, say, Essex and Kent, the radiation from a 20 Megaton ground burst in Paris would be very serious - and if similar bursts occur at French Channel ports, levels here could be highly dangerous. Clearly, if no part of Britain suffers nuclear attack, Civil Defence measures are still needed to protect the population from the effect of attacks elsewhere.

The W.E.D. I referred to earlier is a level which has been set, after a critical examination of much evidence, at 75 Roentgen. For most people, this dose will have little effect in the short-term, especially if accumulated over days or weeks, which allows time for the body's own repairing mechanism to work. There are long-term effects such as cancer, perhaps affecting up to 20,000 people in a million over 20 years. If exposure is about 6 times higher at 400 to 500 Roentgen, about 50% would die.

At the highest levels of radiation the shielding effect of houses would make no practical difference - a fatal dose would be received well within an hour. But at lower levels relatively simple precautions could make the difference between severe illness or death on the one hand and normal health with slightly increased long-term risk on the other.

Those concerned with the coordination and control of Relief Services and with advising on when to come out of houses and for how long, need to be located together in one place with plans, maps, data calculators, instruments and communication links and the ability to move around consulting, conferring and deciding on courses of action for the benefit of the population at large. Hence the need for some large, special shelters giving reasonable protection from radiation. Life would be anything but pleasant in these shelters.

There is an optimum level of Civil Defence activity which depends on the state of international relations. When all is calm and peaceful it would be foolish - and ineffective - to keep Civil Defence operating at a high level - apart from anything else, members of Civil Defence organisations would lose interest and a sense of purpose. At the same time, discontinuing Civil Defence activity altogether in times of tranquility would prevent it being revived quickly if international relations took a turn for the worse. In my view, Civil Defence has been held at too low a level for too long and no longer matches the national needs.

Moreover, there is much false information around about the effects of nuclear weapons and about Civil Defence. It is one thing to consider worst cases in the light of authentic information and quite another to invent, distort, misquote and misapply information - and to assert opinion as established fact. This misinformation could increase suffering and cost lives in the event of a nuclear attack and I would hope that if government responds to the terms of this resolution, part of that response will be a determined campaign to replace the false notions with which many members of the public have been provided by valid Civil Defence information.

Finally (and to cover all the points I would like to make would need the whole evening rather than the allotted 10 minutes) I will be signing the petition of the World Disarmament Campaign and urging others to do so. This petition, for which it is hoped to get 1000 million signatures throughout the world, is aimed at the 1982 United Nations Special Session on Disarmament and calls for general and complete disarmament and the transference of military expenditure to end world poverty.

Until that is achieved, effective Civil Defence plans are needed and National and Local Government should meet that need. It would be inhuman to deny people the information and services which may help them to survive.

I second the motion.