

# GREEN FORUM

## TAKING <sup>III</sup> the CHAIR

JACK WOOLFORD

I took the chair for the third time at a Green Forum meeting on 9th January, this time in Dover and on the subject of "NUCLEAR WASTE THROUGH KENT: How Safe Is It?". Despite gale, rain and difficult parking at the Boys' Grammar School the turnout was over 70, including some by-now familiar faces (including five members of the Dover Society).

The case that it was safe was presented by Bob Phillips, Chief Press Officer of British Nuclear Fuels, who also spoke for Nuclear Transport Ltd. He said the nuclear-fuelled power stations were here to stay, and that there was nothing new or unusual about the shipment of nuclear waste and that in the thousands of shipments over the last 30 years there had been no accidental release of radioactivity. The reprocessing of spent fuel, which is not stored but returned to its place(s) of origin, is big business, worth billions of pounds. The 80-ton container flasks, each containing 2-3 tons of spent fuel, were pre-tested by a 9 metre drop on to steel-cased concrete and in 1985 it was the locomotive, not the flask, which was smashed in a high-speed collision test.

Transit to Dunkirk from mainland nuclear power stations is by lorry with leak-testing and monitoring throughout and with Dept. of Transport validation certificates verified at each frontier-crossing. Transit from Dunkirk to Dover is by SNCF in train-ferries with fire-fighting equipment and trained crews. The numbers of flasks passing through Dover has risen from 2 to 35 per annum now and there is a prospective increase to 50; i.e. one per week. It is safe!

Greenpeace was represented first by

Jack Cade (sic) who said that, unlike his namesake of the 1450 Kentish insurrection, he is a reformer not a rebel, who has fought for 12 years against Sellafield reprocessing where an accident was waiting to happen. Accidents in transit could not be ruled out. Why did advanced countries like Germany and Japan not re-process their own waste? Involving, as it did, links with disease and death it was a moral, not a commercial issue, the more so because plutonium, the nuclear bomb material, is also involved.

John Large, a Consulting Engineer, also spoke for Greenpeace. He noted that this was Dover's first opportunity to query the operation. He produced models of fuel rods and container flasks (parts of which later fell off, by accident or design) and distinguished between short-term exposure to radiation by contact and inescapable life-long contamination from atmospheric dispersal (witness the Welsh sheep contaminated by fall-out from Chernobyl). He demonstrated the water cooling system inside the flask (with its fins like a motor-cycle cylinder), necessitated by the continuous generation of heat (as well as radiation) by the spent fuel, and compared the validity of testing against impact (here) with that of testing against exposure to

**II2** fire (in the USA). As to the release of, for example, radio-active caesium from a ruptured flask, expert estimates varied from .01 to 30/40% and of the area of dispersal from 40 metres to 40/400 kilometres. A 30-minute fire test was unrealistic: ship fires could last for 23 hours.

Despite the chairman's request for questions, most participants made speeches, most of them self-righteously indignant, emotional and well-rehearsed in advance. Consequently at least as much heat as light was generated in the exchanges of accusations, statistics, facts, and opinions masquerading as facts (and vice versa). In addition to the sinking of the Titanic and the Herald of Free Enterprise, the discharge of nuclear effluents into the Irish Sea from Sellafield, the safety of ferries, the Ramsgate Harbour ban on nuclear waste transport, the problems of the Dungeness nuclear power stations, the vitrification of waste, and the comparative fire-fighting facilities of Barrow-in-Furness and Dover were variously rehearsed. Dover Harbour Board was abused both for participating in the traffic and for not charging enough for it.

From the volumes of applause on the one side and the volumes of silence on the other it was not difficult to conclude that most of the people who spoke had come to demonstrate rather than to learn. Had the chairman had time to summarise at the end of the meeting he would have quoted the observation, attributed to the London School of Economics: "Six experts, seven opinions!", noted the obvious difficulty of choosing between them and regretted the virtual impossibility of unbiassed choice.

The nuclear waste interest would certainly be well advised to send experts rather than PR men to public meetings and their opponents to employ "independent" experts less strident and rhetorically committed to their employer. Nevertheless Green Forum is to be congratulated on its initiative in organising such meetings despite the costs and other difficulties involved. Dovorians certainly have good need to be concerned about the chances of a nuclear accident even closer to the White Cliffs than Dungeness and the French nuclear power stations across the Channel. No topic of current controversy more needs informed public opinion for its resolution.

## The Logo of the Dover Society

Philomena Kennedy's design of the Society's "has been accepted by all as the badge of the Society that may be proudly worn or displayed as an indication of membership. As part of our effort to increase our numbers, and our 'visibility' throughout the area we cover, our Committee has agreed that the logo be produced as a car or window sticker. Within the covers of this *Newsletter* you will find a badge that can easily be applied to the corner of your car's rear window or to a window in your house — just moisten the

printed side and lightly press it to the inside of the window.

Further copies may be obtained from 24 Castle Avenue.

## BINDERS for the new format NEWSLETTER

A number of requests for the "Cordex" Binder for the smaller *Newsletter* have been received but the number is not yet sufficient to make up the minimum order. Details of the offer are on page 97 of the previous issue, and an order form is enclosed.