

# Call for answers over nuclear submarine fault

By Our Parliamentary Correspondent

A SCOTTISH Labour MP last night demanded answers from the Government over the decision to examine all the Royal Navy's nuclear-powered submarines following the discovery of a defect in one of the vessels' nuclear reactors.

Mr John McFall (Dumarton) raised the issue during the annual Commons debate on the Navy, arguing that if a "hairline fracture" had been discovered in the reactor of one vessel, others could be affected.

He said: "The Government should look at the situation and give us reasonable answers as to why there are so many boats in port at Faslane, Rosyth and Devonport. It may be that all Valiant and Resolution-class submarines have a similar problem."

Mr McFall's comments followed reports last week that all five of the Navy's Valiant class submarines were in port after the discovery of the fault on HMS Warspite.

Sources said that HMS Valiant, Conqueror and Courageous were at Faslane, HMS Churchill was at Rosyth and the Warspite was at Devonport. It was understood that a total of eight submarines were at Faslane, which was said to be an unusually large number.

Mr McFall referred to a number of anonymous telephone calls, reported to have been received by the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, concerning alleged cracks in the main reactor cool-



John McFall:  
"Others affected?"

ant circuit of the nuclear-powered submarines.

The callers claimed that the boats had been detained at Faslane because the emergency back-up cooling system on board did not work, and Mr McFall said last night that the use of technical language in the phone calls gave them an "element of credibility."

In a series of written answers last night, Armed Forces Minister Mr Archie Hamilton stated that no submarines were being recalled from operational tasks. However, he added: "Following the recent discovery of a technical defect in one of our nuclear submarines, all such vessels are being inspected as a precautionary measure."

"It is not our practice to comment on specific features of the Royal Navy's nuclear-powered submarines. These vessels are, however, designed to operate in accordance with rigorous safety standards."

The matter also was raised during the debate by Labour's Front Bench defence spokesman Mr Roland Boyes, who read out a section of a letter he had received from Mr Hamilton yesterday.

In the letter, Mr Hamilton gave an assurance about the safety of the personnel engaged in inspecting the boats and of the people living in surrounding areas.

The Minister had refused to comment in the letter on the specific nature of the defect which had been discovered, but said: "I should emphasise there has been no leak of radioactivity as a result of this defect and there are very high standards for our nuclear submarines both in port and at sea."

Mr Boyes said: "I am not at all convinced from the evidence I have received independently of Government evidence over the weekend that the boats are as safe and secure as the Government wants us to believe. I believe there are some quite serious faults with those submarines. I think that people could be in danger and that some submariners could be at risk."

Winding up the debate last night, Mr Hamilton repeated that the Government placed a very high priority on safety and that the decision to inspect submarines when they came alongside was in line with that policy.

He emphasised there had been no accidents or injury to anyone and that the submarines in port presented no hazard to the public.

Mr McFall challenged the Minister to state whether fractures could have occurred in other vessels, but Mr Hamilton replied that he could not comment because "the design of these power plants is classified."