

Who protects the nuclear survivors?

An examination of the capacity of civilian administration to support the community after nuclear attack by Roger Taylor

A fundamental but worrying aspect of central government war planning lies in the assumption which it makes that the civilian local government structure can and will be used in a modified form to provide a basic service to the community after a nuclear attack.

There is, underlying the publication *Protect and Survive*, an expectation that even after the Apocalypse the men from the town hall will be there to help.

The men from the town hall must start asking themselves: will they be there and can they help?

If there is any uncertainty about the answers to these questions now is the time to say so in order that plans can be modified and policies changed.

I am not discussing defence policy; I accept the risk of nuclear attack as a fact. Here I confine myself to asking whether assumptions about the role of local government officers in the provisional form of government proposed are realistic.

The proposed structure of government after nuclear attack is decentralised to region, county and district. Problems of communication mean that there is a flexible arrangement for the devolution of power to county and district. There the powers will be exercised by the local authority chief executive supported by his most senior staff, working in concert with the local police and army commanders.

Most of these staff at chief and deputy chief officer level are already designated. Few will have professional experience relating to their proposed role. In almost no cases will their wartime role have been discussed at the time of their appointment to their present post.

The likelihood is that in the event of a nuclear attack of any magnitude on the United Kingdom, these groups, county and district control as they will be known, will be the only discernible form of government responsible for absolutely basic matters such as the provision of food and water, the controls of all manner of equipment and supplies, the regulation of public order and the maintenance of public health. These services will all have to be provided in the context of almost inconceivable suffering when, by any predictions, public order is likely to collapse, all public services will have failed, and out in the streets the law of the jungle will not be far away.

The decisions which will need to be taken by controllers may well include how refugees from urban areas should be turned back from the rural areas and how much force should be used. Whether to feed all the surviving population or only those who have not already been exposed to fatal doses of radiation and, right at the end of the spectrum, the administration of summary death penalties. There is nothing secret about these possibilities, they are the appallingly real choices which in the event of nuclear attack will

almost certainly fall to be taken by what are in effect county and district council management teams.

Will the man from the town hall be there? This question really has two sides: first will he himself have survived; and second will he have turned in for work?

To answer the first question it is necessary to look principally to see if there exist adequate means of protection for this key group of staff so that they can survive the holocaust and what follows. Much of the information in this area is classified but it would not be breaking any secrets to say that the majority of all control rooms are no more than basements in the offices in the centres of large towns totally lacking protection against blast or radioactivity. There will be almost no air filtering systems, small stocks of food, almost no emergency generating equipment. Often there will only be limited and unsophisticated radio equipment.

Strategic centres

Even if this assertion is too sweeping the issue can always be looked at from the other end. How many authorities have at their disposal strategically located and purpose-built control centres designed to be radiation and blast proof? The answer, judged by the fierce resistance that such proposals have had, will be very few.

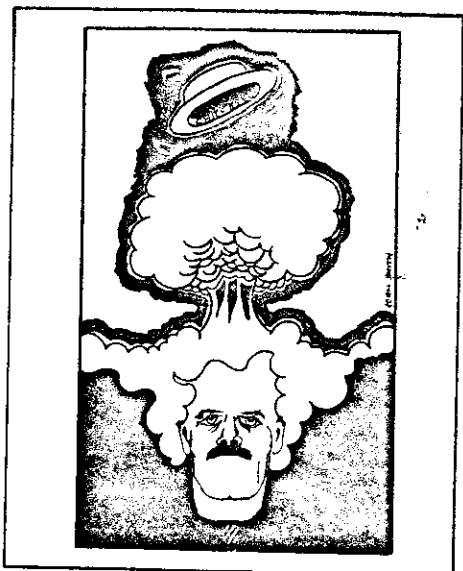
At least as fundamental is the other question; faced with imminent disaster how many local government officers will be prepared to pack their briefcase and bid farewell to their family in the almost sure knowledge that they will never see them again? Probably quite a large number will not. This is a matter of personal conscience, but as a general observation it is not given to many of us to apply to our personal lives such a degree of commitment and dedication. Particularly so where the circumstances are so hopeless. This is not a moral argument, there should be no white feathers waved; defence planning must be based on more than simple an approach to the nobler instincts.

Perhaps what really is a matter of concern is that at no time in the overt planning for home defence has this issue ever been seriously debated. The assumption is simply made that county and district controls will be manned and that remains at the base of all subsequent planning.

That must be wrong. It cannot possibly be predicted how people will behave in these circumstances. Perhaps a more realistic assumption would be that some controls could be entirely unmanned because of the reluctance or inability of staff to man them.

Turning to the other main point, if the controller and his staff do turn up and survive with enough resources

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to have some impact, will they really be able to help?

Again the question can be broken down into smaller questions. Do they have the training? Do they have the sort of command ability? Will they have made basic organisational preparation? Will they have the resources?

The only training presently available is that provided by the Home Defence College. Perhaps it is not being unfair to say with its very limited resources it has not been able to do more than familiarise its audiences with the problems which will emerge. The sheer size of the problem means that there cannot be any detailed training in coping with crisis administration. At a rough guess some 10,000 staff at least need an intensive course of some weeks' duration if every county and district control is to be properly manned.

In such training much greater emphasis needs to be placed on skills analogous with those of the senior field administrators in third world relief agencies.

Mass burials

Training for the administrative problems of mass burial, mass feeding, the provision for the homeless etc is not achieved merely by being stated. If a nuclear strike occurred tomorrow few, if any, control staff would be able to come to terms with these administrative problems in the time which post nuclear attack events would allow.

Earlier I attempted quickly and simply to describe the awful physical background against which controllers will be working. To say that it will be stressful is to understate the position on a massive scale.

What is there in the selection, training or experience of local government officers, and in particular chief executives, which suggests that they have the right degree of resilience or the strength of personality to manage? The answer is very little; selection and training in local government is highly

specialised and the range of personality types enormous, rightly no emphasis is placed on the sort of command selection common in military recruitment.

Nor should this be regarded as a criticism of serving local government officers; many would honestly accept that they have not the experience and in some cases the personality to cope. My purpose is to make this explicit. The last thing that will be needed if a nuclear strike occurs is a county controller who's peacetime machismo is replaced by fear, indecision and breakdown when confronted with the real thing. Searching assessment needs to be made of control staff's abilities to cope in this type of crisis and an important component of training would be the need to confront them with the reality of their situation.

It is easy to command a theoretical crisis in front of the television screens, quite another to know that there is no way out from a situation of endless and increasing misery which could be entirely up to you.

Will the Organisation be Prepared?

The only honest answer to this is no. By comparison with the sophisticated planning for local government re-organisation in 1974 such plans as there are very basic.

All that exists in most counties and districts is a statement of available resources and the names of these who might become responsible for them. These are not real plans. As a result the planning will necessarily fall to be done after the event when there will be little time to spare from doing what one can to cope with rapidly worsening events.

Realistically any plans to cope must be based on certainty in terms of basic resources; X tons of food will be available and there will be Y lorries to shift it. Plans which depend upon marshalling available resources after the crisis cannot be regarded as a safe base for the protection of the community.

Will it have the resources? Because 30 or 40 people in bunkers may survive it does not mean that any other particular groups will. Policemen, engineers, doctors, skilled labourers all represent vital resources if the basic needs of the population are to be met. No plan which does not start by protecting those groups, and their equipment can possibly be recognised as a serious attempt to cope with the problem, yet we have already seen there is no intention to offer such groups protection.

Just as vouchsafing basic resources is fundamental to proper planning so it is at the core of being able to do something in the event. The problem however is one of resource in the widest sense. Perhaps as many as 10 or 15 million people would need provisions over an extended period after nuclear attack. The Government may

well feel unable to commit enough resources to guaranteeing that such a large number will receive some aid. That is a political decision, but controllers should be able to assess whether in the absence of stockpiled reserves the plans for providing for the civilian community have any reality.

This article voices the concern of one senior local government officer. However, the whole matter is one of some gravity and, possible urgency. Perhaps it is not overstating the matter to say that if any of my arguments are well founded then the serious issue is whether those who will have to become controllers and carry the burden can really be satisfied with the planning assumption and the underlying resources for Home Defence which exist at present.

Real chances

It may well be that if the civilian population is to have any real chance of ordered civilised long term survival then those who will have to govern them will need to be better trained, equipped, and protected than would be the case today.

It is a matter of resources but in their absence it is least arguable that there is a serious discrepancy between what on paper will happen and what, in practice won't.

The sort of discrepancy which makes one ask whether the survivors can really be protected at all.

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