



Supporters of Nuclear Energy

Newsletter

No 217

October 2016

ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE YEAR 2015-2016

EDUCATION, EDUCATION, EDUCATION

Strange as it may seem, the central theme of this year's annual general meeting in London this month is best described by Tony Blair's pre-election rallying cry from 15 years ago: "Our top priority was, is and always will be education, education, education." That is the direction which members appear to want to take.

I had expected proceedings to be dominated by the long-awaited financial approval for Hinkley Point C, but not a bit of it. Those attending the meeting were in a mood to move forward from that single decision to a full-scale nuclear renaissance. For that to happen, it was felt, we must find ways of involving the young and ensuring that education and employment are provided for the UK's potential scientists and engineers.

Apart from the "education, education, education" phrase the Blair speech also contained references which, only slightly modified, could apply to the situation which the nuclear energy industry finds itself in today. The former Prime Minister said he would prioritise education "to overcome decades of neglect and make Britain a learning society, developing the talents and raising the ambitions of all our young people."

Nuclear power has certainly endured decades of neglect. Sadly, the process began when Mr. Blair bent to pressure from John Prescott and Margaret Beckett, in particular, to run the existing industry into the ground as soon as they could and scrap any plans there might have been for more nuclear power stations.

A little more of Tony Blair's education, education, education speech I think. "At a good school children gain the basic tools of life and work. But they ought also to learn the joy of life - the exhilaration of music, the excitement of sport, the beauty of art, the magic of science."

Two things to note there I think. Firstly, if children are to obtain the basic tools of life and work that must surely include some knowledge of what makes life what it is, including its real rather than imagined dangers.

THE MAGIC OF SCIENCE

Secondly, children should be taught “the magic of science” according to the Blair of that time. As things turned out Harry Potter would have been a better tutor than the Labour Party, which saw the future as one dominated by coal, oil and gas which even then did not seem particularly magical.

Things didn’t improve much under the Conservatives either. Ten years ago they said that nuclear power “should be used only as a last resort” and that there would have to be “total transparency on its full lifetime costs, clarity over nuclear waste and no subsidies or special favours.”

In tree-hugging mode, David Cameron said: “We live in a fast-changing world of scientific research and innovation. I want Britain to be at the forefront of the green energy opportunities.” It’s safe to assume he meant wind turbines and solar panels. Much of the rest of the world, meanwhile, was pressing ahead with nuclear research, a very different green energy opportunity.

Back to the annual report and the discussion of its contents, which I will try to summarise. This is not easy because it was a decidedly free flowing discussion, raising several important issues and attracting proposals for action which are well worth exploring further.

CAUTIONARY WORDS

A word of caution, however. SONE does not have any full-time staff and limited resources. Of necessity it will have to draw on the expertise of its members and develop collaborative relationships with other organisations.

I will begin my attempt to provide those who were unable to attend the meeting with something of its flavour, beginning with my own Secretary’s Report. I was quick to get my views about the Hinkley Point C decision out of the way, emphasising from the outset that Hinkley is not the only game in town. Progress is also being made, albeit at different stages, with the new build schemes at Moorside in Cumbria, Oldbury in Gloucestershire, Sizewell C in Suffolk and Wylfa Newydd in Anglesey.

As for Hinkley I am aware that the majority view among the SONE membership is that the matter is now settled. I am not so sure. It may be near certain to happen and I hope it does but there are potential pitfalls.

The French elections are less than six months away and a change of leadership is possible, with Marine LePen, the leader of the National Front, potentially

having a bigger say in the direction EDF should take in future as part of some new coalition. She has already opposed the State-owned company's involvement in the Hinkley project.

Then it must at least be possible that the EPR reactors at Flamanville and elsewhere run into more difficulties or EDF's somewhat precarious financial situation worsens. Finally, what about situations which are not even contemplated today?

EVENTS, DEAR BOY, EVENTS

I reminded members of Harold Macmillan's famous response when asked what was the most difficult thing about being Prime Minister. "Events, dear boy, events," he said. To prepare ourselves for unexpected events we needed to create an atmosphere of greater understanding among members of the public, I suggested, starting with the young.

While support for nuclear energy had improved in recent years, largely as a result of concerns about fossil fuels and their global warming effects, there was still a huge vacuum in the public's understanding of nuclear issues, not least the nature of radiation and radioactive materials and the management and disposal of radioactive waste. Vacuums tend to get filled, I suggested, and Greenpeace, CND, the Green Party and anti-nuclear factions within the main political parties are not going to go away.

During my presentation I drew attention to the views of two of SONE's oldest and most supportive members, Roger Vaughan and Lord Clitheroe.

Both suggested that SONE needed to do much more to build support among the young and help them to make their mark within the nuclear industry. Roger, now 93 years old, felt so strongly about what was needed that he attended the meeting and was given the chance to express his views. They deserve to be heard and, if possible, acted upon.

He was kind enough to say that he admired my analyses of the political events in the nuclear world in the Newsletters. Then came the qualification. While SONE had been an acute observer of events, maybe a catalyst, it had not so far been a participant, he suggested.

During the final decades of the last century Governments withdrew all support for a British nuclear programme and sold many of the assets we had. In 2008 it produced a White Paper with many supporting documents intended to provide impetus to a nuclear awakening.

REACTOR DESIGN COMPANIES IGNORED

“The Government claimed to have consulted industry widely, seeking approval for their strategic plan but apparently found it unnecessary to talk to the reactor design companies who earned the enviable reputation the Government often likes to talk about,” Roger said in a cover note.

“The Government has allowed a foreign utility - EDF - to buy our nuclear sites and we are invited to acclaim proposals to build French, Chinese and Japanese reactors on them.

“As a founder member of the UK’s commercial reactor construction industry - and the most successful one at that - I cannot watch from the side-lines while we remain an island where these companies may come to practice their skills. Given the necessary financial backing and a steadfast political will this country could again make its mark.

“But to do this we need the 25 to 35 year olds to be the UK’s new innovators and I and my colleagues were half a century ago.

“We need to create exciting jobs for the new generation while foreign companies are attending to their own needs for staff. I invite SONE to explore all aspects of the problem and to make organisational proposals directly to Government.”

Later, during his oral presentation Roger explained what he regarded as opportunities for the UK’s young scientists and engineers. He identified the Small Modular Reactor (SMR) development and exploitation programme which the present Government is pursuing and the possibility of renewing research into molten salt fast reactors, in which he has a particular interest.

MAKE MORE USE OF THE WEBSITE

Like Roger Vaughan, Lord Clitheroe feels that SONE’s task now should be aimed more explicitly at the young. There was plenty of good information already available but this needed to be simplified and made easier to absorb. He also suggested that the SONE website was an ideal place for information but was copy heavy and not oriented towards the young. He thought that more use could be made of the website, including playing recordings of talks such as those given at the annual meeting.

I agree with him and promised a review of the website - and have already been promised help by members, which I will need.

You may recall that I devoted all of the December 2015 Newsletter to a review of “Nuclear Is For Life, “ the new book by Wade Allison, emeritus professor

of physics at Oxford and a SONE member, who was the speaker at the annual meeting.

There have been some important developments in support of the campaign outlined in the book to persuade the scientific community to get rid of the “pseudo science” represented by the Linear No Threshold” concept. First of all, however, I want to report what Professor Allison had to say about education.

PROPAGANDA AND THE ARMS RACE

Everybody should understand that “radiation” and “nuclear” were propaganda words successfully used in the Arms Race, he said. The objective was to frighten the life out of people (sometimes literally) and deter the more belligerent nations from actually using atomic weapons - and it worked. At a price.

The older generation, of which I am part, became convinced at the conclusion of the second world war that we faced the prospect of annihilation and that generation included most scientists and politicians. But as the data from Hiroshima and Nagasaki now confirm radiation was not the major cause of death that most supposed.

“For 70 years society has treated nuclear technology as an exceptionally fearsome and ghoulish aspect of nature, without reason,” Professor Allison said.

“We should hope that our children and grandchildren will show greater sense than our own generation has done. Nuclear safety is a matter for education, psychology and biology not just engineering. Fear of radiation should not endanger the choice of an economically viable environment.”

Professor Allison is convinced that the younger generation no longer carries the “baggage” of fear about radiation effects to the extent that we have done. I agree, both from talking to my own children and grandchildren and from my contacts with young people who from time to time approach SONE for information.

NUCLEAR POWER IS GOOD

One such was Louise Merry, a graphic design student at Nottingham University, (no nuclear scientist she) who earlier this month asked me for help with a group project centred on “taking a stance for a cause.” This is what she had to say:

“We were given the subject of pro-nuclear power and have had an interesting time discovering the reality of how good nuclear power is and how our

mainstream media has disguised certain facts. I was wondering if I could ask a few questions for my research,” she said.

I was delighted to help her to pick her way through such issues as renewable energy sources and whether it was possible for the renewables and nuclear power to work together to create more environmentally friendly energy sources. She also sought my opinion on the long term prospects for nuclear energy and the current technology in nuclear power plants.

I had no idea of what she would make of the very full response I sent to her. I need not have worried. “Thank you very much for your detailed reply,” she wrote. “It has helped to confirm the research we had undertaken with your creditable source. We are in the process of editing a short animation about how nuclear power is needed to provide the electricity we need.

“I wondered if you would be interested to take a look when it’s done. It’s been a very interesting project and we are presenting this to a group of young adults (18-25), most of which are anti-nuclear power so we are excited to see if we can persuade them otherwise with facts and overcome the stereotypes that the media portrays nuclear power as.”

I have asked Louise to send me a copy of the pro nuclear animation piece and offered to speak at Nottingham University at some future date - or attempt to get Wade Allison to do so.

MOTHERS FOR NUCLEAR

He believes that young people are relatively easily reassured and pointed out that initiatives to replace current international regulations have been started in the USA by an international group of doctors, engineers, oncologists, scientists and journalists. (Yes there are journalists who are prepared to move away from the stereotypical attitudes noted by Louise.)

Professor Allison has been working with a group of scientists from Canada, the United States, Poland, New Zealand and elsewhere to establish the case politically for science-based radiation regulations in clinical medicine and nuclear technology.

The group has made three petitions to the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission to relax limits and its views are being noticed, although there is a long way to go.

On the same day as SONE’s annual meeting took place there was a pro-nuclear march by young environmentalists in Chicago, including a group called Mothers For Nuclear - another encouraging event.

THE TREASURER'S REPORT

Terry Westmoreland, our Treasurer, reported that members had responded generously to the Chairman's appeal for donations and by the date of the annual meeting £7,790 had been raised. We now have sufficient funds to continue until June 2018.

Membership declined during the year - six members died, 15 resigned and three new members joined. In summary we started the year with 239 members and ended it with 221 members.

As far as our finances are concerned the deficit this year was only £364, due largely to the generosity of a former member, David Erskine, who left SONE £5,000 in his will. Subscription income continued to fall with the gradual decline in membership from £3,277 in 2015 to £2,875 in 2016. Total expenses were also down on last year from £8,649 to £8,475 .

The financial position was adversely affected by the Nuclear Industry Association's decision not to provide financial support to SONE. It had been making a donation to cover the Accountancy Fee but this year we had to pay the £836 fee ourselves. The NIA had also been paying the annual maintenance cost of SONE's website but that will stop next year.

Sir Bernard Ingham, my predecessor as Secretary, asked me to publish the following note on the subject.

"Infirmary kept me from attending the SONE agm but I would like to comment on one subject covered - the Nuclear Industry Association's withdrawal, without so much as a word of warning still less consultation, of its modest financial support for SONE, the only independent promoter of nuclear power in the UK.

"In my experience, this is entirely in keeping with the history of nuclear power in the UK. It is own worst enemy."

ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was plenty of discussion on a variety of issues but I was particularly interested in a contribution from Ann Robinson, a SONE committee member. She told the meeting that the Autumn Statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond, was expected to contain a long-term review of energy policy, including a comprehensive narrative about the prospects for nuclear energy.

The Autumn Statement, which will be delivered by the Chancellor on November 23rd, is based on the latest forecasts from the Office for Budget Responsibility for the economy and public finances. I am looking forward to

hearing what the Chancellor has to say and will report on the statement in the November Newsletter.

In the same Newsletter I will carry a piece written by another committee member, Gerald Clark, who has been giving some thought to the relationship which the nuclear energy industry has with the Government.

In particular he questions whether direct Government investment in the industry could be used to support it rather than the mechanism of the Contract for Difference.

We had a very good attendance at the annual meeting, which I now record.

Attendance: Sir William McAlpine, Harold Bolter, Terry Westmoreland, Kevin Stagg, Robin Smith, Ann Robinson, Bob Campbell, Richard Garnsey, Eric John Robbins, George Nissen, Robert MacLachlan, Gordon Adam, Ian McFarlane, George M. Jennings, Stephen Redburn, Terry Wynn, Neville Chamberlain, Wade Allison, John Assheton, John Crawford, Jack Simmons, and Roger Vaughan.

Apologies: Ian Currie, who has also resigned from the committee, Lord Clitheroe, Lord Vinson, David Chatfield, Jim Jones, John Hole, Angus Ross, Bob Burton, Adrian Bull, Dr. Joseph Lamber, Peter Vey, Steuart Campbell and Ray Dafter.

HAROLD BOLTER
SONE SECRETARY