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Nuclear's Presentational Problem

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A few weeks ago, when the British government was trying for presentational reasons to cut down its mob-handed attendance at the eco-junket called the Earth Summit in Johannesburg, there was a tremendous howl when Michael Meacher, Britain's anti-nuclear Environment Minister, was told to stay at home. The 'Greens' rushed to offer to pay his fare. It is not clear whether this included his caviar, lobster and pate de fois gras.

Mr Meacher has, of course, gone at taxpayers' expense. Yet nowhere do you find among the British delegation anybody with responsibility for trade, industry or energy. Nor is there a representative of the Treasury, which will have to find a way of paying for the consequences. And have no doubt, the real purpose of the Earth Summit is to transfer your hard-earned cash to others who mostly have governments with even less of a clue how to conduct their affairs than we do. Otherwise, they wouldn't be in the appalling mess they are.

There has, of course, been no fuss over the exclusion of trade, industry, energy or finance ministers. Yet what is this conference supposed to be about? Why, 'sustainable development'. This is seen as a real hoot when the conference's concern in the energy field is concentrated upon powering the world with unreliable, landscape-wrecking, unproven, subsidised or gleam-in-the-eye renewable technologies.

There are, for example, thousands these days who advocate the hydrogen future without knowing that highly explosive hydrogen does not exist freely in nature and has to be manufactured. They are blissfully ignorant as to how it can be manufactured and used safely. But I suspect they would be a little less keen on it when they discovered that the only viable way to manufacture it cleanly in sufficient quantities is through nuclear-generated electricity.

Lying at the heart of this ridiculous cameo of modern summitry is nuclear's fundamental problem.

It matters not that Britain has safely generated electricity from the atom for nigh on 50 years.

Nor that, in its generation, not a single death from radiation has ever been recorded.

Nor that nuclear currently generates 25% of the nation's electricity requirements, though that proportion is set to fall quite rapidly if the currently highly risky and frankly unsustainable policy is perpetuated, placing our energy supplies at risk.

Nor that, in doing so, it produces no greenhouse gases.

In fact, nuclear is not on the agenda when it comes to the prevailing view of what is mindlessly parroted as 'sustainable development'. Why, the British government even treats nuclear electricity as if it were greenhouse gas-producing – that is, mucky – electricity because it subjects it to the risible climate change levy or tax also imposed on electricity generated by fossil fuels.

Meanwhile, our supposedly pro-nuclear Energy Minister, Brian Wilson, chucks wind farms at the 'Greens' regardless of local opinion or the impact of these industrial installations on our precious upland landscapes, presumably in the foolish hope that they will become better disposed to the mighty atom.

Why, so desperate has the nuclear industry become that it connives at the myth of the so-called renewables solution, even though it is no solution at all since fossil-fuelled power stations would have to be kept in reserve for when the atmosphere is still or the sun does not shine – e.g. at night. Blow me, if some windy nuclear companies are not even contemplating going into wind themselves.

By now, since you retain some hold on your sanity, otherwise you would not be at this conference, you will have reached the understandable conclusion that you have come to live in a mad house. You will reasonably wish to know why. The answer is quite simple: the nuclear industry has allowed the lunatics to take over the asylum. It has been doing so, to my certain knowledge, for a good 25 years, and is still doing so.

Otherwise, it would be boldly, enthusiastically and unapologetically advancing nuclear power at the Earth Summit and elsewhere as a major contribution to squaring the circle of man's sustainable development on this planet – providing sustainable power for its development without offence to its atmosphere and therefore further potential damage to its climate.

It would be doing so in Johannesburg with an advocacy all the more passionate for knowing that the implications of rising populations in developing countries and their inevitable demand for Western lifestyles are horrendous.

If China's oil consumption were to reach only world average consumption, it would consume more than the whole of Western Europe. When it reaches South Korea's present state of development, it will guzzle as much as Western Europe and the USA put together. And that's only China. What about India, Africa and Russia?

If nuclear power were doing its job, it would be preaching the moral case in Johannesburg for the developed nations to go nuclear in order to make room for temporarily less clean development elsewhere and add substantially to the human race's 10 000 man years' experience of nuclear power technology.

And if nuclear power in Britain had the courage of its convictions and were serious about its future, it would identify its main problem – public opinion – and devote serious resources to the serious public pursuit of its formidable case for a major expansion of its contribution to the nation's energy. It would also launch into the utter rubbishing of the knocking nonsense routinely put out by the anti-nuclear 'Green' movement.

Instead, Supporters of Nuclear Energy, a 260-strong group of mostly ageing individuals with only £7500 in the bank, is left publicly to correct the many lies and distortions put about by unscrupulous 'Greens' about nuclear and to ridicule politically-correct idiocies which come its way.

Such as the Footsie4Good so-called ethical stock market index which excludes nuclear and uranium mining companies. Unethical? I ask you! I sometimes wonder where the British nuclear industry has put its pride.

Such as the notion that plutonium is 'the most dangerous substance known to man'. Bunkum.

Such as the 8000 people who, the Sun newspaper told us last week, have died as a result of Chernobyl – a 177-fold exaggeration since the UN/IAEA/EU/WHO substantiated figure is a mere 45.

Such as the leukaemia clusters around nuclear power stations which Zac Goldsmith, a wet-behind-the-ears 'Green' with more brass than sense or ethics, has invented without the slightest evidence.

Such as the generally-held notion that there is some problem in handling nuclear waste. Curiously enough, there is. But it isn't a scientific, technological, geological, environmental or financial problem. It is a political problem. The problem of finding politicians with sufficient guts to designate a storage site. They make politicians of sterner stuff in the USA, Sweden and Finland.

We all know the reason for this lack of spirit, this unwillingness to defend itself let alone go after its unprincipled critics. It is nuclear power's roots in the public sector as a creature of government. This does not make for defenders of nuclear power, still less campaigners. Those jobs are for politicians who don't often kick against the pricks.

But part of the British nuclear industry is now in private hands. The massed ranks of industry serving and making a living out of the nuclear industry have always been in private hands. This substantial element of the nuclear industry now needs to face reality.

The years of passivity, of abject silence, of pathetic subservience to the liars and cheats who infest the environmental movement, of abdicating the field to an enemy which has made no secret of its mortal intent, have proved to be life-threatening. They should end forthwith.

I shall not waste your time with idle chatter about the PR strategies and the mechanics of winning the battle for public opinion. The mechanics are not the

problem any more than the public are likely to be when the facts are laid out before them. Any self-respecting public relations expert could come up with an effective strategy and campaign tomorrow.

The problem is the nuclear industry's will.

Until the nuclear industry summons up the will to fight for its rightful and necessary role in British – and for that matter European and global – electricity generation, we are wasting our time.

The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars but in ourselves that we are underlings – the underlings so graphically demonstrated by who is – and more to the point who is not – attending the Earth Summit in Johannesburg.