

GOING BACK TO GAS

Duncan Campbell reports that Mrs Thatcher's desire to re-arm with nerve gas echoes earlier Tory enthusiasm

miners were 'more common' than the reverse, and are to be condemned, in the 10 December miners' strike policing report, is of a piece with Gostin's own route to the NCCL.²

So, though he rejects accusations that he'd like to see NCCL move to the extreme libertarian position of the American Civil Liberties Union (which notoriously once fought on grounds of the sanctity of free speech for the rights of neo-Nazis to march) it is Gostin's declared wish (over-turned in 1984 AGM but up for voting again this year) that legal officers shouldn't be totally prohibited from advising members of racist organisations on their rights when it isn't in furtherance of their racism. The distinction is admittedly hard to make (and a minuscule fragment of NCCL's ever-likely case-load). But was Harrington entitled to be taught at the North London Poly? Gostin: 'He had rights'.

Catherine ('Cash') Scorer, a key figure on the middle-to-hard-Left end of the EC (together with Bill Birtles and Chris Darke) is proposing a motion ten days from now which if approved should reinforce a shift towards a far more 'rainbow' effect in the NCCL public profile. The EC would be instructed, if the motion passes, to consider creating an advisory council to the EC, an honorary president and vice-president of NCCL, and a body of sponsors: 'the purpose of any such structure, to show the breadth of support for NCCL in order to encourage affiliations and membership'.

It isn't necessary to look very far for the sort of names which might be found clustering round NCCL later this year. The signatories who were rounded up for the 'golden age of liberty' letter to *The Times* on 22 February 1984, commemorating to the day the 50th anniversary of the founding of NCCL, included Trevor Huddleston, Bruce Kent, E.P. Thompson; Glenda Jackson, Dora Russell, Michael Foot, Lord Avebury. Another motion for this year's AGM (proposer, Geoffrey Robertson) would commit NCCL to supporting introduction of the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic UK law — there's another gamut of possible names in the lobby for European Convention incorporation. The all-party Parliamentary Civil Liberties group, re-established this year after NCCL lobbying, offers another 'great and good' catchment area (chair: Geoffrey Rippon — Conservative). A major trades union figure would certainly be sought.

In a letter of resignation from the EC some four months ago, John Bennett, self-described as 'somewhere between a dry Liberal and wet Tory' (and as 'honest' by a socialist long-term activist in the NCCL), wrote both that the existing EC has 'a significant Labour/Union majority', and complained that 'heavily dependent on union funding' the NCCL has perforce had actions and priorities against its own 'long-term interests'.

Echoes of the Labour Party and the political levy, and of the same kind of question that Anna Coote raised in the *NS* on 1 March — 'Might losing union funding do the Labour party good?', will be ricocheting round NCCL at ULU at the end of this month. And they will be no easier to answer. □

IN GENEVA, where almost 60 years ago the first international Protocol against poison gases was drafted, diplomats and scientists at the Conference on Disarmament are still negotiating a complete global ban on chemical weapons. But their time is running out and if progress is not made, options for placing nerve gas stocks in Britain, either by producing nerve gas here, or bringing over American 'binary' bombs are under serious study in Whitehall.

Historically, Britain has had a love-hate relationship with these grotesque weapons. Now, in the first of a series of special studies by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), British public records scholar Andy Thomas has unearthed previously unreported official documentation which casts considerable light on Whitehall's real attitude to the gas bomb.*

Proponents of nuclear deterrence have long asserted that the chemical weapons standoff between the two sides in World War II is a compelling argument that the theory works. During six years of an all-out European war, mutual chemical deterrence was maintained.

Thomas shows clearly that this argument is entirely illusory. Each side prepared in great detail to use gas and, despite the Geneva Protocol, planned specific military contingencies for its first use. In addition, it has long been known that the Italians gas-bombed Abyssinia. Thomas's new evidence shows that the Japanese mounted repeated chemical attacks on China. His research also reveals that Britain experimented with airborne gas warfare against the Soviet Union, during the 1919 expedition against the Bolsheviks — the first ever use of air delivered gas weapons.

During 1940, the RAF prepared to use chemical warfare first in two well defined contingencies — if an invasion of Britain was mounted, or if aerial warfare seriously demoralised the civilian population. In these circumstances, Britain planned to use gas, either against invasion troops and airfields, or against German cities. Gas bombs were stockpiled at 36 RAF bases, and in nearby 'ammunition parks' and gas filling centres.

British willingness to contemplate the use of chemical weapons was revealed in a secret memorandum from the then War Minister in May 1919: 'I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes. The moral effect should be so good'. The Secretary of State added that:

the loss of life should be reduced to a minimum. It is not necessary to use only the most deadly gases; gases can be used which cause great inconvenience and would spread a lively terror...

The author of these lively notes was Mr Winston Churchill. He had displayed enthusiasm for gas since the Dardanelles

campaign in 1915, when he wanted to gas the Turks. Later that year he wanted to use gas in Egypt. In May 1919, he wanted to gas the Afghans, but the India Office strongly objected. He finally got his way in Russia, where he had noted on the file that 'I should very much like the Bolsheviks to have it [poison gas]'. Britain attacked the Bolsheviks in September 1919, sending the RAF on 11 raids to drop over 500 gas bombs on the Red Army near Archangel.

British civilians might have fared little better than some of the inferior enemy, according to Home Defence Plan Y, prepared in November 1941. The RAF planned to counter invading forces by gas bombing the entire coastal strip of Kent, raiding 20 targets spread from Broadstairs to Dungeness. Far Eastern command's chemical weapons planner, Major-General Lethbridge, also in 1943 urged a major CW attack on Japanese forces, which:

must be administered with complete ruthlessness and upon a vast scale, employing a mixture of chemical agents that will not only cause mutilation and death, but by their very diversity of effect create terror and panic in the minds of their victims.

In Algeria, before and during World War II, and in Nigeria after the war, Thomas reveals that France and Britain operated secret chemical test ranges. No one knows what environmental health perils may have been created by the secret construction of these ranges during the 1930s and 1950s.

During the war, a chain of British factories, run mainly by ICI, turned out thousands of tons of mustard and other gases. Chief among them were Rocksavage, Sutton Oak and Randle, all near Runcorn on the Mersey; Rhydymwyn near Mold in Flintshire; Springfields near Preston; and Roydmills at Huddersfield. After VE-day, their managers wrote voluminous factory histories to inform later governments how to get back into production on gas bombs. Later, many of the special chemical weapons production and storage sites moved on to new roles in the nuclear era, with one — the giant underground tunnels at Rhydymwyn — being designated for a period as one of the emergency citadels for central government.

In occupied Germany after the war, teams from Porton Down eagerly sought the Nazi scientists who had experimented with nerve gas on human victims — not in order to advise on retribution, but to gain 'invaluable data as to lethal considerations for man'. No weapon can ever be called humane or reasonable — but this account illustrates the special ugliness of chemical warfare. □

1. Scotland has its own council for civil liberties.

2. Gostin was one of the six-person panel on the enquiry.

* Andy Thomas, *Effects of Chemical Warfare: A selective review and bibliography of British state papers*, published by SIPRI, Stockholm; and Taylor and Francis Ltd, London.