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EXCLUSIVE

THATCHER PLANS FOR NERVE GAS



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THATCHER GOES FOR NERVE GAS

MRS THATCHER is on the point of forcing through a decision that Britain should restart production of nerve gases. Proposals for Britain to start production of nerve gas have already been put to an ultra-secret special ministerial committee, set up by Mrs Thatcher last summer. Although the committee has not yet taken any formal decisions, senior civil servants have been warned that a decision by the Prime Minister is imminent.

The *ad hoc* committee is so secret that it has not been given a formal Cabinet Office name or number. The Prime Minister has also ordered that extra-special precautions be taken to prevent information, put to the committee in a lengthy and secret briefing paper, from it leaking.

This information has been leaked to the *New Statesman*. They show that the Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister herself, met for the first time on 2 August last year. Seven selected ministers were given background information on the 'Soviet threat'. They were then given military proposals for 'Defence against CW (Chemical Weapons) attack', drawn up by Ministry of Defence (MoD) staff.

The secret committee paper suggested four options for Britain in the face of this threat — the pursuit of CW arms control agreements; the extensive provision of anti-CW protective suits; the counter-stockpiling of US nerve gas in Britain, and the proposal that Britain should acquire its own stockpile of nerve gas as a 'retaliatory capability'.

Mrs Thatcher was enthusiastically in favour of the final option. But both Defence Secretary Michael Heseltine and Foreign Secretary Sir

Duncan Campbell reveals the Prime Minister's secret drive for a British chemical warfare 'deterrent'

Geoffrey Howe have consistently opposed Mrs Thatcher's enthusiasm for a new British chemical 'deterrent'. Any new steps taken by the government would destroy Britain's positive record in the chemical disarmament negotiations, which are being conducted in the United Nations Conference on Disarmament in Geneva.

Special *ad hoc* Cabinet committees, such as the one involved in this case, are customarily used when a Prime Minister wishes to take a sensitive policy decision in secret, without informing the Cabinet as a whole. Discussion on the supposed Soviet chemical weapons threat might normally have been expected to take place in the Cabinet's Overseas and Defence Policy Committee (ODP). Special MISC (miscellaneous) or GEN (general) Cabinet committees and sub-committees have traditionally been used by all governments to limit discussion of major controversial issues — like the development of *Chevaline* nuclear warheads and the purchase of Trident submarines, as well as the original decision by Clement Attlee as Prime Minister to manufacture a British atom bomb. Mrs

The secret committee, top row: Thatcher, Whitelaw, Howe, Biffen. Bottom row: Lawson, Heseltine, Brittan; plus lobbyist Sir Edwin Bramall

Thatcher has now decided that even 'MISC' committees are dangerously leaky — hence the decision to settle policy in an *ad hoc* chemical weapons committee.

The key members of this CW committee are Mrs Thatcher herself, Mr Heseltine, and Sir Geoffrey Howe. Also included are Chancellor Nigel Lawson, Home Secretary Leon Brittan, Viscount Whitelaw (Leader of the House of Lords), and John Biffen, Lord Privy Seal (Leader of the House of Commons). Mr Biffen and Lord Whitelaw were included to advise the Prime Minister on the likely attitude of Tory backbenchers and peers to an announcement of chemical rearmament. Bluntly, according to one senior Defence Ministry official, she wanted them to advise her on 'can we sell this'.

MRS THATCHER was less enthusiastic about other options presented to her committee. On the first — pressing ahead with a CW treaty — MoD officials argued that, so far as Britain was concerned, the Soviet Union had no incentive to make concessions, as we presently had no chemical weapons anyway. Such a treaty would bind the Russians, therefore, to a unilateral act of disarmament. In order to give the Soviet Union an 'incentive' to sign a treaty, Britain might have to start producing chemical weapons again — in other words to 'arm for disarmament'.

The second option — to issue key industrial, government and military staff, in the UK as well as Germany, with protective 'noddy suits' and gasmasks — was strongly opposed by the Home Office, whose unconvincing civil defence proposals would be further ridiculed if

selected individuals in Britain were seen to be getting protection against chemical attack which was not generally available to the public.

The third option was to encourage the United States to manufacture new chemical weapons and bring them to Europe. The US government has already built a new production plant, but the US Congress has consistently refused to allow funds for actual production to start. But, if US chemical weapons were actually brought to Europe, defence officials in all NATO countries fear that the cycle of protest triggered off in Europe by the arrival of US cruise missiles would be repeated.

Security officials will be irritated by this new Defence Ministry leak, since the ministerial briefing paper bears a special anti-leakage classification invented by Mrs Thatcher herself shortly before the 1983 general election. It is marked 'CMO', meaning for 'Concerned Ministers Only'. Copies should only be held in ministers' Private Offices. The paper is also classified 'Secret - UK Eyes Only "A"', which means that it should not be shown to American or Commonwealth government officials.

The CW paper is so sensitive that only seven copies are believed to exist. But three officials from different Ministries have confirmed the authenticity of the information obtained by the *New Statesman*. Both Downing Street and the Ministry of Defence have refused to comment on the contents of the paper, but No. 10 said this week that there had been no change in British government policy of chemical weapons and claimed that 'there is no reason to expect one'.

SENIOR CIVIL SERVANTS who have leaked this information are appalled that the government should even consider the risk of destroying the only successful remaining East-West arms control negotiations, on the basis of flimsy evidence of Soviet capabilities. An MoD official said this week that the Prime Minister had summoned the special August meeting in a 'hawkish' mood. Her 'gut reaction' had been that 'we must have what they have . . . she shoots a lot from her hip'. The official asserted, however, that Mrs Thatcher's instincts had not yet won out over the Foreign and Defence Secretaries' preference for diplomacy.

Although the Prime Minister's intentions were perfectly clear, he said, so far ministers 'collectively' still have 'no plan for a retaliatory capability'. The secret August meeting did not decide to abandon efforts to negotiate a chemical weapons treaty. But other senior civil servants were subsequently advised that, if rapid progress were not made at Geneva, the Prime Minister would want a decision to produce British chemical weapons to be taken within a matter of months.

Any new British chemical weapons would probably be based on American 'binary' nerve gas technology. Binary nerve gas weapons contain two relatively non-toxic chemicals which become mixed together while a bomb, missile or shell is in flight, producing the nerve gas VX. Discussions and the exchange of technical information on binary weapons between US and British scientific and military officials were instigated by the former Defence Secretary, Mr Francis Pym, in late 1980, after he had said publicly that he favoured a UK retaliatory capability. He told *The Times* that he was 'haunted' by the Soviet threat.

Mrs Thatcher's government has always been equivocal about its future policy on CW. The usual position is: 'We have (at present) no plans to acquire chemical weapons'. (In contrast, on biological weapons the government has given an unequivocal guarantee that 'in no circumstances would we consider developing, possessing or using biological weapons'.) As the details of the type of weapons (and the nerve gases which would fill them) remain to be decided, the government has not yet been required to alter its standard statement of policy.

For more than eight years, Britain has been playing a leading role in the Geneva UN Committee on Disarmament's chemical weapons. At present, the actual use of chemical weapons is prohibited by the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which bans the use of 'asphyxiating, poisonous or other gases'. But many signatories of the Protocol - including Britain, the USA and the USSR - have reserved the right to retaliate in kind to chemical attacks. Under the Protocol, therefore, chemical weapons can permissibly be stockpiled - for 'retaliation' only.

Both the United States and the Soviet Union have extensive stocks of such chemical weapons - some of it produced during or even before the Second World War. Britain manufactured extensive stocks during the 1940s, but these were destroyed or dumped in the Atlantic between 1952 and 1957. A nerve gas production plant at Nancekuke in Cornwall ceased operation during the 1960s, and was finally closed in 1977. In 1979, scientists and disarmament experts were invited to inspect the demolished plant as an illustration of how a new chemical weapons treaty might be enforced.

THE NEW DRIVE for British chemical weapons follows a report on the Soviet CW capability, prepared by the Cabinet Office's Joint Intelligence Committee in the spring of 1984. The JIC report claimed that the Soviet Union had stockpiled some 300,000 tonnes of chemical agents - and that the stockpile was both modern and growing.

JIC also highlighted a new Soviet

technological development - a new gas which some sources refer to as a 'slippy' agent. This is believed to be able to penetrate the 'noddy suits' issued to NATO field troops. The new agent is apparently sufficiently liquid to permeate the suits' material and to creep round gas seals. Military commanders, who have been vigorously lobbying for chemical weapons for four years, fear that the new agent would lie active on the ground in contaminated areas, and seriously impede NATO military operations.

The new agent is probably a new and 'thickened' version of soman, a nerve gas invented by the Germans during World War II. Like all nerve gases, a small droplet placed on the skin is sufficient to kill. It enters the body and quickly paralyses the operation of the nervous system, resulting in violent spasms and a rapid, painful death.

The JIC report was circulated to the Cabinet and the military Chiefs of Staff, who prepared the options for a British 'response'. Mrs Thatcher then held a series of discussions at Downing Street with MoD scientific and military staff. Special intelligence briefings were arranged for the Prime Minister on chemical weaponry.

More money was allocated to research at the Porton Down Chemical Defence Establishment on chemical protective suits. The Home Office announced that it was 'actively considering' anti-CW protective measures for use in the UK. By June, Mrs Thatcher's enthusiasm for the issue had provoked a cautionary joint minute, signed by Mr Heseltine and Sir Geoffrey Howe, stressing that the government should remain 'committed' to an international CW arms control agreement.

The military chiefs of staff, led by Chief of the Defence Staff Field Marshal Sir Edwin Bramall, were however 'all for it [CW]', according to a senior Defence Ministry official. Questions designed to highlight the Joint Intelligence Committee's assessment of the Soviet 'threat' were planted in Parliament, and some of the contents of the JIC report were subsequently leaked by senior military officers to the *Sunday Times* at the end of August.

These were the opening shots in a campaign by the protagonists of chemical weaponry. In September, during the major NATO autumn exercise Lionheart, two military commanders embarrassed both Mr Heseltine and Sir Geoffrey Howe by issuing apparently un-coordinated demands for the creation of stocks of chemical weapons. On 19 September, the commander of the 1st British Corps in Germany, Lieutenant-General Sir Martin Fardale said: 'If you ask me as a soldier whether I should have a retaliatory capability I would say yes, I should have.' The British Army, Fardale asserted, should be able to strike back with CW, so long as the Soviet Union also had such weapons.

The next day he was backed up by NATO's Supreme Allied Commander, US General Bernard Rogers, who said that 'nerve gas shells should be produced in the United States and stored there for possible use by NATO forces in Europe'. He also called for formal CW 'release procedures' to be agreed 'so that chemical weapons could be used in war'. General Rogers has been making this demand since 1980.

The Foreign Secretary refused to comment

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on these military suggestions, while Mr Heseltine told reporters that General Farndale had been airing 'a military preoccupation' with which he did not have to agree: 'We do not simply take military judgment into account.'

ALTHOUGH THE JIC calculations are claimed to be new, in fact the *same* figure of 300,000 tonnes has appeared in British defence White Papers since 1982. Although this estimate is critical in deciding whether or not new Western moves might be desired to create a chemical weapons 'balance' (the US has a stockpile of 40-50,000 tons, some of it in Germany), the basis of the estimate is absurd. According to one of the world's leading specialists on chemical and biological warfare, Dr Julian Perry Robinson of Sussex University, the defence intelligence staff have reached this figure merely by taking the average of two widely quoted but enormously different US official estimates — of 30,000 and 700,000 tons respectively. They then converted the result from US tons into metric tonnes, and produced the figure of 300,000 tonnes, in round figures.

The Ministry of Defence this week would not deny this assertion, and refused to discuss its sources; a spokesman said that: 'We have a variety of sources for gathering information other than American figures, but I am not prepared to say whether or not we have used them.'

Ironically, although almost all sources of intelligence on the subject are American, the US government does not — even for propaganda purposes — claim to have accurately assessed the size of the Soviet stockpile. The Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff told the US Congress in 1975 that 'it is not possible with any reasonable degree of assurance to predict or estimate the size of the USSR's CW stockpile'.

Nevertheless, the British government has claimed that the Soviet stockpile is both 'massive and growing'. According to a US Special National Intelligence Estimate, produced two years ago, most US intelligence analysts believe that the Soviet stockpile is likely to be between 50,000 and 100,000 tons — only slightly larger than the American. But some of the Soviet stocks, the Pentagon acknowledges, are up to 50 years old. Dr Robinson warns that:

Unilateral pursuit of increased military preparedness for CBW [chemical and biological warfare] may soon accelerate irreversibly, into a grotesque new arms race. The prospect then may be one of CBW weapons becoming 'conventional'; poised for use wherever and whenever military necessities may be satisfied. □

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□ Urging all-out opposition to the scrapping of the £1 note, Mr David Prowse told the committee the present coin was a 'nonsensical coin'. It was inconvenient to carry and confusing for the blind. It should, he said, be called the 'Thatcher' because it was 'thick, brassy and wanted to be a sovereign.' — *The Western Morning News* (L. F. Robinson)

A STOCKPILE OF IDEAS

Public money flows into new defence technology — with little spin-off for civil products. Bill Niven proposes how to liberate it

AS MINISTER of Defence Michael Heseltine scrutinises the reports his chiefs of the armed services, produced last week on their vast spending commitments, he would do well to look at an ignored area of potential savings: defence 'spin offs'.

One justification for the vast amount of public money which the defence industry absorbs on new equipment is that new defence technology has valued applications to civil life. If this is true in theory, it has not been put into practice. The Ministry of Defence has itself admitted that new developments in defence, funded by public money, are 'hoarded' by the defence contractors.

In the 1984 Defence Estimates the MoD comment is restrained:

We are concerned, however, that technology generated in (defence) industry in this way at the taxpayer's expense should be made available for exploration more widely in non-defence fields.

The MoD (and also the Department of Industry) should be concerned. £2,100 million is being spent this year on military research and development (R and D). That represents 18 per cent of the total procurement budget and is over half of *all* government funded R and D. £1,543 million will be spent extra-murally, that is with the defence contractors, and the remainder in the government's own R and D establishment. The record shows that technological breakthroughs in defence tend to 'fall off' at a ripe old age rather than 'spin off' onto civil design boards at a time when they could help exploit a civil market opportunity.

Last summer the MoD brought together representatives of industry, financial institutions and government to probe the question of spin off. The report of the seminar quotes only two actual examples — liquid crystal displays developed for aircraft and armoured vehicles were applied to digital watches; and the development of car components from carbon fibres.

There are others, of course, but in the MoD's own words: 'the number of success stories in the field of civil exploitation is relatively few'. The Royal Signals and Radar Establishment won two Queen's Awards in 1983 for technological achievement; one for work on infra-red detectors, the other for X-ray detectors. 'Both areas have significant potential benefit in medicine and other civil work,' stated the MoD.

The question which needs asking, is how precisely this potential (and many others discovered by the defence contractors) is to be exploited. What administrative, managerial or even institutional machinery needs to be created (because none exists) to assist the transfer of technology from defence to civil application?

The National Economic Development Council commissioned Sir Ieuan Maddock,

former Chief Scientist at the D of I, to identify barriers to technology-transfer in the electronics industry. His report, published in 1983, is one of the most valuable contributions to the subject of spin-off. The report found that:

Whilst they (the defence contractors) were clearly aware that their high skills in advanced technologies could be or should be applicable to a wide range of purely civil uses, they also argued that they were not the right kind of company to do this because:

- The purely civil work was of a relatively 'simple' kind that therefore was unworthy of the very high quality scientists and engineers they employed.

- It was difficult in the civil field to get customers to define clearly what they required. If only they would do so and also pay in advance for the associated development costs the companies would be interested in undertaking the work.

- They were likely to find themselves in head-on competition with those with a much stronger civil technology base, particularly from Japan.

Maddock later comments: 'What was striking was the distance between the attitudes of the civil and defence-oriented companies even when they existed within the same large groups. There already exists a large culture gap and it is getting even wider'.

THE INEVITABLE consequence of these corporate attitudes is that Britain's civil technology platform is now well below its defence technology platform. The civil side of most defence contractors' business has been relegated to the second division.

It would be more difficult to be critical of this if real efforts were being made by Government and the contractors to achieve greater civil benefit from military R and D. But many of the reasons they put forward for not working on civil spin-offs, simply do not stand up to examination.

On occasions there may be security reasons which inhibit civil exploitation of a military invention. There are however no legal problems. The intellectual property rights (IPR) arising from R and D work, done under contract to the MoD and paid for by the taxpayer, are generously vested in the contractor. In addition, technological developments arising from the MoD's own establishments are patented and licensed to firms to exploit for non-defence purposes.

The MoD seminar asked itself the big question:

Was there a case for including in our contracts an obligation on those obtaining property rights under them to report on what use they had made of them, thus providing some antidote to the tendency to 'hoard' property rights rather than to use them?

No action has been taken yet on whether to impose 'an obligation to report' on the use made