THIS WEEK'S Home Office civil defence exercise has revealed immense deficiencies in civil, as opposed to military, preparedness. In Scotland, one local authority has refused to participate at all.

For the first time ever, the Home Office and local authorities have shown the press en masse around some of their protected bunkers for wartime control. This week's tours included Sub Regional Headquarters No 62, in the Basingstoke area, and a London Sector control in the Wanstead area. (Readers may recall a more exact description of these two centres in last week's New Statesman; however, this week's tours were conditional on agreeing to pretend that the exact locations are an official secret.

At Basingstoke, a two story structure bunker, partially underground, was constructed underneath an office block built in 1970. SRHQ62 would be responsible for administering Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, Hampshire, Oxfordshire and the Isle of Wight. Roughly 200 staff drawn from the military services and most government departments would co-ordinate whatever remained in these five counties, under the control of a Sub Regional Commissioner, said to be a junior minister of the day.

The Basingstoke bunker tour presented a sorry picture of a system in extreme dilapidation, with only military facilities really operating effectively. Basingstoke, like many other bunkers, leaks badly (water, not secrets). In one of the male dormitories, dripping water had created stalactites more than an inch long on the ceiling. After an attack, these protruberances would no doubt glow in the dark. One official noted gloomily that the stalactites had enjoyed six years unimpeded growth, as the government department using offices above wouldn't let their car park be dug up to repair the mess.

Two doors away, the radio room, containing emergency standby links to the outside world, was quite large. The equipment which had been fitted there was rescued from near terminal dampeness eighteen months ago, and landlines were cut; it would have no communications at all.

Most of the centre was empty, with only the Sub-Region's Military Advisory Team operating with two or three token civilians in attendance. In the ten years since SRHQ62 was built, the civil staff designated to run the place in war have never been there. It has been activated just once or twice before, both times for military exercises. With the exception of the top few civil servants who will run the place, none of the people 'earmarked' to serve in SRHQ62 know that they're among the lucky ones with reserv-