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## Square leg caught out

**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 dampness 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-

ed bunker places. Nor have they received any training for their wartime jobs. Since no protected accommodation is provided for families or dependents, there is some considerable doubt as to whether any of them would turn up anyway. The impression of disarray extended throughout the bunker. No food in store, and the canteen was only running by courtesy of visiting army cooks.

Much of the rest of the Sub Regional HQ network was in the same state as Basingstoke — or worse — according to officials. In fact, despite press notices announcing that SRHQs in all 17 sub regions had been going for *Square Leg*, there are in fact only 14 SRHQs now built. Two new SRHQs have had their sites selected, and one may start construction soon. There is no hope of the third, covering North Wales, being built as yet. Where no SRHQ exists, the civil and military staffs are working from above-ground offices which have to serve in lieu of bunkers.

Of the remaining 14 SRHQs, at least one — SRHQ101 below the tax office and courts in Southport, Lancs — is more or less flooded. Others are disturbingly humid.

Even if Basingstoke's radio communications were working, they would probably have been put out of action by the Electromagnetic Pulse (EMP) resulting from nuclear explosions. An RAF officer commented that 'no one is sure of the effects of EMP'.

In charge of the military team at Basingstoke was a Brigadier, whose name was an official secret. He was on the staff of No 4 Region Armed Forces HQ, which has peacetime headquarters at Aldershot, and its own substantial bunker — 'AFHQ4' —



Home Office Minister Leon Brittan indicates the devastation that was London

elsewhere. He was sharing command of the Basingstoke bunker, for the purpose of the *Square Leg* exercise, with a senior civil servant, whose name and ministry were also official secrets.

The Brigadier fielded various press googlies on what the army would be doing to control survivors. Asked if he would put through orders for looters to be shot, he noted 'I wouldn't underestimate the difficulty of making a decision of that kind. If action amounting to shooting was desirable, I believe the military would have to do that if it was the only logical course.' On the rounding up of 'subversives' amongst the population, he agreed that the Commissioners might 'ask me to deal with difficult chaps... to round (them) up and put them away'. He did not dispute suggestions that the 'putting them away' might be done with bullets.

An even more curious spectacle of half-hearted 'openness' was presented at a press conference held in the London sector bunker at Wanstead. Home Office Minister Leon Brittan paused from his tour of bunkers for a press conference during which he refused to provide any specific details about how many bombs had fallen, or where, or the scale of casualties during the exercise. Behind him as he spoke, a six-foot high wall chart of London showed clearly that hydrogen bombs had landed on Heathrow Airport, Croydon, Potters Bar, Ongar and the Thames estuary. A second map (see picture) showed that London had been demolished save for a few east and east-central postal districts.

In Scotland the Lothian Regional Council in Edinburgh decided to bar the participation of their staff in *Square Leg*. The ruling Labour groups, which ordered the ban last Thursday before the imaginary bombs fell, issued a statement opposing the exercise as a dangerous war preparation increasing the likelihood of war.

An enraged group of three Tory councillors contested the move, and successfully got a ruling from Lord Ross in the Court of Session — prohibiting the Labour group from giving the banning order without a policy discussion in Regional council or committee. The move was futile; Lothian Chief Executive and local controller Robert Peggie had already declined the Scottish Office invitation to participate, and left for the weekend. As a result, the Region's two emergency officers planning and some twenty staff were removed from the exercise.

The game plan scenario was as grim as the Labour group might have anticipated: 3 bombs fell in the Rosyth dockyard area just north of Edinburgh, and 40 per cent of the local population were deemed killed or severely injured. Scottish civil and military officials were playing out the rest of the exercise from the Scottish Central Control bunker at Kirknewton, just a few miles west of Edinburgh. It was impossible to say whether this refuge was as damp and empty and unready as those in the south.