

Cabinet protects and revises secret civil defence plans

THE HOME OFFICE has refused to reveal details of a secret plan which may turn the government's civil defence policy on its head. The Cabinet 'Shelter and Evacuation Working Party' is now submitting proposals to the Cabinet which would mean preparing to move 36 million people out of their homes in the run-up to a nuclear attack. Another option would involve moving people out of major target areas only. Since 1965 government policy has been that all people should stay at home during any nuclear attack.

Home Office Minister of State, Mr Patrick Mayhew, was challenged about the new proposals at a meeting of Britain's 'Nuclear Free Zone' authorities in Manchester last Friday (see below). But he refused to discuss the proposals, claiming that all Cabinet policy discussions had to be kept secret.

Mayhew's reluctance to discuss the subject reflects many Ministers' deep concern about the implications of the new policy. It is in essence a desperate attempt to restore credibility to civil defence plans which, at present, require the civil population to stay at home without blast protection, even in cities and near major targets. The widely ridiculed official pamphlet 'Protect and Survive' has already in effect been abandoned. A new pamphlet will be published by the Home Office early next year to replace it. It will cost around £3, be a 'glossy', and is at present known only by the revealing working title of 'Public Do-It-Yourself Civil Defence Guidance'.

If the Cabinet decides instead to go for an evacuation plan, then the Home Office will be embarrassed by the implicit acknowledgement that its previous policies and pronouncements have been dishonest. For more than 20 years the government has refused to acknowledge that particular bases or cities might be nuclear targets, on the grounds that such an admission would weaken public support for the nuclear deterrent by making citizens aware of their vulnerability.

The GLC's spokesman in the Nuclear Free Zone movement, Councillor Simon Turney, revealed details of the plans which had been given to local authorities to last week's conference. The major evacuation scheme, devised, he said, by Home Office scientists, would involve two-thirds of the



Mr Mayhew considers his bunker population. But the scheme's difficulties, from the government point of view, included 'enormous logistic problems' — clashes with troop movements, fuel rationing, protection from fallout, and food distribution and rationing.

The government has also examined a plan to renovate deep shelters underneath London which are claimed to be capable of housing 70,000 people. Another extraordinary scheme suggests using the London underground tunnels to provide shelter for a million people. All evacuation and shelter schemes would be extremely expensive.

Unlike the secret Cabinet schemes, the Home Office's pro-

posed new regulations, which will force local councils to build bunkers for officials and take part in exercises like the 'postponed' *Hard Rock*, were made available at the beginning of this week. Called the Civil Defence (General Local Authority Functions) Regulations 1983, they contain new powers for the Home Secretary to 'direct' local authorities to obey government orders, without any discretion. A new regulation will also allow the government to direct the conscription of local authority employees, whatever their normal jobs, to undergo civil defence training and take part in exercises.

The new regulations also contain hints that the government may revive a civil defence corps. They suggest, for the first time in 15 years, that providing a 'rescue service' might be a new civil defence function. The Home Office hopes to prevent 'Nuclear Free' local authorities refusing to take part in exercises like *'Hard Rock'* by creating a new duty for them to 'take part in any training exercises organised by the Minister'.

Duncan Campbell

Chris Horrie adds

A week before publication of the government's new regulations on civil defence is an odd time for a conference on local government and civil defence. Bill Risby, hosting the 3 December conference in Manchester of the 'nuclear-free zone' local authorities, admitted that the steering committee would

have to meet again this week for detailed consideration of the proposals.

Seventy-five of the 144 'nuclear-free' authorities sent around 200 delegates. It was a Labour-dominated affair. One of two Tories, Steve Fitton from Rochdale, walked out when his speech heartily praising government defence policy was ruled out of order.

The conference won from celebrity guest speaker Patrick Mayhew the concession that the time for consultation on the new regulations would be extended. However, one of the main weapons against recalcitrant local authorities is an ancient and obscure clause in contracts — 'an invisible clause, exhumed', according to undoubted conference superstar Simon Turney of the GLC — to force council employees to take part in civil defence. This, said Mike Jackson of Watford, was the 'Achilles heel' of the proposals.

As numbers in the Victorian council chamber dwindled, a steering committee resolution was put to the vote, but not before Stoke-on-Trent successfully introduced an amendment stating that the nuclear-free zone movement believes that there is 'little or no' protection for the population so long as we are a nuclear weapons state. Previous policy had been that there is 'no protection for the majority of the population'. The change said the more genned-up councillors along with the CND-observer contingent, gives the Home Office a loophole big enough to drive their propaganda through. □

Maid of all work

A DOMESTIC assistant at Cheltenham General Hospital has been sacked at the end of her probationary period for refusing to clean a private ward. Karen Robinson, 22, had been employed since 1 November on general cleaning and tea-making duties. On 18 November she was asked, for the first time, to do a cleaning job on the private Boulton-Price Ward and said she objected on principle. The following day she was told by a supervisor that she could not be employed unless she was prepared to work anywhere in the hospital. A week later she was officially told that she would not be employed after her one month's probation.

In a letter to the Area Health Authority last week, Ms Robinson asked 'why is it not possible for an individual who conscientiously objects to working in the private sector to work wholly in the NHS sector?' Michael Sutcliffe, the Sector Administrator for Cheltenham hospitals told the *New Statesman* that he thought Ms Robinson's was 'a

perfectly reasonable point of view' but that it was 'simply not practicable' to separate private from NHS work — even though there is a private ward in the hospital. Up to 1978, private patients were in designated beds but since then the government has merely set ceilings for hospitals on how many private patients to take. It's up to the hospital to decide how and where private patients should be cared for.

Out of 635 beds in Cheltenham hospitals, 15 are private. Patients pay £90 a day (excluding the consultant's fee) but, said Mr Sutcliffe, they receive no special service for their money which goes into the general hospital accounts. Apart from the consultants, no NHS staff receive any extra payment for providing a service for private patients. Although Ms Robinson is the only member of staff ever to have stated a conscientious objection to servicing paying patients, a NUPE member at Cheltenham General Hospital said a lot of ancillary staff disliked doing private work.

Sarah Benton

Deer hunters at bay

ONE OF THE only four remaining deer hunts in England could find its sport frustrated if a decision taken by villagers of Holford, Somerset, is put into practice. A private poll conducted among the 184 voters in the parish has shown a surprisingly large two-thirds majority in favour of banning the Quantock Stag-hounds from the area altogether. Apart from the village itself, Holford parish covers a large tract of the surrounding countryside and is a regular meeting place for the hunt.

This unusual vote — organised by six local residents through independent solicitors at a cost of £300 — was prompted by a series of incidents involving the hunt. In the most recent, an exhausted stag was first injured on a fence and then collapsed in a field near the centre of Holford. Eventually it was shot in front of a large crowd. 'The road was blocked for half a mile with people wanting to watch,' said Mi-