

Irish government edges towards legal action against Britain's Sellafield nuclear plant

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The Irish government is reluctantly edging towards taking legal moves against the British Sellafield nuclear site.

A series of health and radiation surveys have pointed to Sellafield being an ongoing health hazard for people living in much of Ireland, as it is to those living and working near the site. All liquid waste discharged from the plant ends up in the Irish Sea and nuclear waste is also transported across it. A serious accident at Sellafield could shower Ireland with radioactive fallout.

Last week, Joe Jacob, Minister for Energy in the Fianna Fail-led coalition government, instructed the Irish Attorney General to investigate the possibility of taking legal action against British Nuclear Fuels Ltd (BNFL) to force Sellafield's closure. Ireland is also collaborating with the Norwegian and Icelandic governments to indict Britain under the terms of maritime anti-pollution treaties. The move follows years in which the Irish government has verbally opposed the Sellafield plant, particularly its recent expansion into the reprocessing of nuclear fuel. Should any case go ahead it would be a further serious blow to the crisis-ridden state-owned BNFL.

In 1997, the Radiological Protection Institute of Ireland announced that reports monitoring fallout over Ireland from a 1957 accident at Sellafield (then called Windscale) were never included in the final data recording the fallout pattern from a nuclear fire. Eddie McGrady, Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) MP in the British parliament at Westminster for the Northern Ireland constituency of South Down, has long opposed Sellafield. According to McGrady, a full fallout survey was never completed. Anecdotal evidence compiled since suggests a variety of health impacts of radiation spread following the 1957 fire.

A 1998 survey by the Green Audit Irish Sea Research Group, undertaken after a lack of comprehensive data undermined a court case brought by private individuals against BNFL, focussed on coastal areas in Wales believed to be affected similarly to the Irish coast. There are no national cancer statistics maintained in Ireland. The Welsh survey revealed that between 1974 and 1989 children living

close to the Irish Sea were on average 4.6 times more likely to contract leukaemia. The statistics also showed a reduction in risk as the distance from the seashore increased. The suggestion was that, with high levels of radionuclides in the Irish Sea, seashore spray could carry radioactive particles several kilometres inland.

The *Irish Times* ran an interview in 1999 with Alan Mullen (aged 41) who was dying from kidney, prostate, stomach and liver cancers, normally only seen in much older men. Born at the time of the 1957 fire, Mullen comes from Louth, Dundalk, which is just 60 miles from Sellafield. The area has a cancer rate 12 percent higher than the Irish average. Out of a population of only 3,000, 76 died of cancer over a three-year period. Mullen called for the entire Louth district to be classified as an environmental disaster area.

In 1997, a British Department of Health survey found plutonium in the teeth of some 3,000 teenagers in Britain and Ireland. The quantity varied inversely according to how close the young people lived to Sellafield. This toxic and highly radioactive substance could only have come from Sellafield, either by airborne particles, or spray. Once inside the teeth, the plutonium stays there. The survey suggested that the plutonium was most likely ingested by the teenagers when they were very young.

While emissions from the plant fell somewhat in the late 70s and 80s, the advent of reprocessing at the THORP plant in Sellafield has led to a dramatic increase in levels of technetium 99—another toxic radio nuclide—in the Irish Sea. Levels of krypton 85, a radioactive gas monitored since 1993 and also associated with reprocessing, have also been rising.

In 1994, a group of Louth residents tried to take BNFL and the Irish government to court over Sellafield. The latter was included for having failed to take adequate efforts to prevent the THORP plant from opening. The basis of the Louth case was that Sellafield was causing medical and economic harm to people in the area. In 1996 the Irish Supreme Court granted the group leave to proceed with their case.

In 1997, following the election of Fianna Fail, the

government came to an agreement with the Louth residents. In return for providing limited financial backing—about £200,000—the group would drop its case against the Irish government and focus on BNFL. Fianna Fail hoped in this way to defuse the broad-based anger the Louth campaign represented, without embarking on any politically difficult confrontation with the British government.

In the intervening three years, the British Labour government has proved every bit as treacherous as their Tory predecessors, who left office in 1997. In 1998, Irish Energy Minister Jacob complained that Labour's decision to go ahead with the £300 million MOX production plant directly contradicted pledges previously made by UK Environment Minister Michael Meacher to reduce radioactive discharges to near zero by 2020. Jacob, who has parroted every safety assurance fed to him by the British government, accused Meacher of "bad faith", and complained that the Irish government were receiving no more information than contained in BNFL press releases.

Political opposition to Sellafield within Ireland has reached new peaks following the ongoing exposure of BNFL's systematic falsification of MOX fuel records; the exposure of its "safety culture" as inadequate and the resulting loss of overseas customers.

Sinn Fein reportedly raised the issue of radiation pollution during negotiations over the future of Northern Ireland with the Blair government last August. Sinn Fein spokesman Arthur Morgan told the *Irish Times*, "I am also calling on all political parties and environmental groups to come together and collectively call for the closure of the Sellafield complex. We need unity on this and if it is there, the governments will have to listen to us and act accordingly."

In February this year, an Irish Labour Party press statement called for new international efforts to close Sellafield, insisted that the Irish government should have the right to inspect Sellafield, and concluded, "Ritual expressions of concern by the Irish government are not enough. When the issue of international legal action to seek the closure of the plant has been raised in the past, successive governments have pleaded that there was not enough evidence. This damning report of the British Nuclear Installations Inspectorate means that there is now a new basis on which to pursue international legal action."

Later the same month, SDLP MP Eddie McGrady tabled an early day motion, supported by 16 other MPs in Westminster, calling for Sellafield to stop MOX production.

By March even Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Bertie Ahern was calling for Sellafield to close. He told the recent Fianna Fail conference, "British Nuclear Fuel's facilities at Sellafield represent a clear and totally unacceptable danger to the Irish people. This Government's objective is to bring

about the closure of the Sellafield operations as soon as possible. I believe enough is enough".

The pressure on the Irish government to take some kind of action against Sellafield was increased by new details of the intimate relationship between the British government and BNFL. A Channel Four "Dispatches" programme broadcast in Britain accused BNFL of running "dirty tricks" campaigns against both the present UK Environment Minister Meacher, and Labour MP Rudi Vis, who successfully opposed the transport of high-level nuclear waste through his Cricklewood constituency in West London.

The programme also interviewed Mildred Cox, an independent deputy in the Irish parliament for Wicklow, one of the areas polluted by Sellafield waste. Cox and two other independents are crucial to the continued survival of the minority Fianna Fail administration. In 1997 she had written to the newly elected UK Prime Minister Tony Blair expressing her "concern with the nuclear facility at Sellafield and ... respectfully request[ing] that steps be taken in order to close this plant as I feel it is a threat to public safety and quality of life." Blair's office passed this letter to BNFL who drafted a bland and patronising reply, the bulk of which appeared in a final response from junior energy minister John Battle.

Battle (or rather BNFL speaking through Battle) said, "On the subject of discharges from Sellafield, may I assure you that these are strictly controlled and monitored, and comply with the regulations laid down by the UK authorising departments, which follow internationally-set standards."



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