

AUSTRALIA - U.K. - BRITISH NUCLEAR TESTS IN AUSTRALIA *

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The Minister for Resources and Energy, Senator Gareth Evans, issued the following statement at a press conference at Australia House in London yesterday:

'The first round in what is likely to be an extended series of ministerial and official talks on the recommendations of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia concluded satisfactorily here today.

'Satisfactory progress was made not only in identifying the matters on which the Australian and UK Governments have, at this stage, differing views, but - more importantly - on establishing procedures and processes which may ultimately enable those differences to be resolved.

'Following my talks with the Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, the Minister of State in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Lady Young, and with the Minister of State for Defence Procurement, Mr Norman Lamont (who is immediately responsible for this issue), agreement in principle was reached on two major procedural issues.

'First, there was agreement to the Australian Government establishing a Technical Assessment Group, (TAG), to undertake field studies and laboratory research and report in detail on options - and costs - for the radioactive and toxic decontamination of the former British Atomic Test Sites in Australia. The group will consist of two Australian Scientists, Mr D.R. Davy, Chief of the Environmental Science Division of the Australian Atomic Energy Commission

*[This is the text of a Press Statement of 23 January 1986, made by the Minister for Resources & Energy, Senator Gareth Evans QC]

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(Convenor) and Dr K.H. Lokan, Director of the Australian Radiation Laboratory; a United States plutonium decontamination expert, Mr B.W. Church, Director of the Health Physics Division, Nevada Operations Office, Department of Energy; and two British experts to be nominated by the UK Government.

'Second, there was agreement to the establishment of a Consultative Group, consisting of representatives from the Australian, South Australian and Western Australian Governments, and Aboriginal interests to discuss and monitor progress on the rehabilitation of the test sites. The UK Government has accepted our invitation to be represented at meetings of this group. Neither the Australian nor UK Government favoured the creation of a formal "Maralinga Commission" of the kind recommended by the Royal Commission, taking the view that the matters in issue can only properly be resolved by direct intergovernment negotiation.

'It was acknowledged that the most substantial of the various problems identified by the Royal Commission that remain to be resolved in discussions between the UK and Australian Governments was the question of the nature and extent of the further clean-up required at Maralinga, and who should pay for it.

'The main elements in the Maralinga contamination problem, and those with which the Australian Government is most concerned, are:

- . The approximate 1.5kg of plutonium dispersed in up to 100,000 contaminated fragments at unacceptable concentrations over a large land area, especially at the Taranaki test site;

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- . The approximate 20kg of plutonium buried amid a mass of debris in over 20 burial pits at the Taranaki and TM101 sites, many of which pits are unsatisfactorily sealed; and
- . The large quantities of uranium, and the toxic chemical beryllium, dispersed over a significant land area at a number of minor trial sites.

'The Australian Government's position, as put by me to the UK Ministers, is that the statement in the original 1956 Memorandum of Arrangements relating to the Maralinga site is still an appropriate description of both the legal and moral responsibility of the UK Government, viz. that "The UK Government accepts liability for such corrective measures as may be practicable in the event of radioactive contamination resulting from tests on the site".

'The UK Government's position, as stated to me, is that it remains to be convinced - in the light of the clean-up of the site which did take place in 1967 and the release signed by the Australian Government the following year - that it has either a legal or moral responsibility.

'Although some preliminary discussions have taken place on these issues, both Governments have agreed that at this stage the most constructive course would be to put to one side the question of liability for clean-up costs and to focus attention on what are in fact 'practicable' solutions - in cost/benefit terms - to the remaining contamination problems.

'The immediate need is for a full-scale scientific evaluation of the measures needed, and the costs involved, in order to achieve varying possible degrees of access to, and habitation of the contaminated test sites.

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'This was recognised by the Royal Commission itself:
"Various options for clean-up were considered but the Royal Commission has not been able to make detailed recommendations because insufficient data were tendered on the levels of risk, options for clean-up and the associated costs" (Conclusion 182).

'The UK Government has agreed to participate in the required scientific evaluations - to be carried out by the Technical Assessment Group - on a completely "without prejudice" basis, and the Australian Government has willingly accepted this.

'When the Group produces its final report - identifying with precision the costs and benefits involved in a series of different clean-up options - a firm foundation will have been established on which further intergovernmental discussion on the question of clean-up responsibilities can proceed.

'It is proposed that the TAG produce an interim report in May, which will also address specifically the question as to whether one of the more obvious clean-up options - an "Emu Parade" at Taranaki - might usefully proceed at an early stage.

'It is not possible to say at this stage when the TAG's final report is likely to be completed, but the research and evaluation required may take of the order of eighteen months.

'While the TAG exercise is proceeding, it is envisaged that communication on all the various matters raised in the Royal Commission report about the conditions and future of the test sites between the major interested parties - the Australian, UK, South Australian and Western Australian

'Governments, and Aboriginal interests - will be maintained through meetings of the proposed Consultative Group.

'This week's Ministerial talks, like the officials' talks which preceded them on 9-10 January in Canberra, took place in an amicable and constructive atmosphere.'