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Atomic hypocrisy

Neither Bush nor Blair is in a position to take a high moral line on Iran's nuclear programme

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Britain has played a leading role in the negotiations with Iran about its nuclear programme and the risk that it might lead to the development of an atomic bomb, and may well seek to take the matter to the UN security council. Given that the prime minister himself is determined to upgrade Trident and appears to be committed to a new series of nuclear power stations, his position as the defender of the non-proliferation treaty is not very credible, and if we are to understand the depth of western hypocrisy on this question we should look back at the history, which has been conveniently forgotten.

Thirty years ago, on January 7 1976, as secretary of state for energy I went for a long discussion with the Shah in his palace in Tehran, and much of the time was spent discussing the plans he had to develop a major nuclear-power programme in Iran. I had been well briefed on his proposals by Dr Akbar Etemad of the Iranian Atomic Energy Organisation, who had told me that he intended to build a 24 megawatt capacity by 1994, which was bigger than the programme Britain itself had at that time, and he expressed an interest in the centrifuges that are essential for reprocessing, while assuring me that he was anxious to avoid nuclear proliferation.

My diary covering my talk to the Shah about the sources of his nuclear technology reveals that he told me that he was "getting it from the French and the Germans and might even get it from the Soviets - and why not?" It was only a year later that Dr Walter Marshall of the Atomic Energy Authority, my own adviser, announced that he was also the Shah's adviser on nuclear policy, and had prepared a scheme under which the Shah would order the Westinghouse pressurised-water reactor (PWR) if Britain would do the same, and that Iran was prepared to put up the money - a plan that I was determined to fight. It was actually being suggested as part of this deal that Iran would become a 50% owner of our nuclear industry for the purpose of building the PWRs. Marshall had, without any authority from me, apparently suggested that Britain abandon our advanced gas cooled reactors and order up to 20 PWRs, and I formed the impression that he took the view, as many in the nuclear industry did, that proliferation was inevitable and there was not much you could do about it. Indeed he almost said as much. For all these reasons I was totally opposed to this whole idea, and what was most worrying to me was the virtual certainty that it would lead to nuclear proliferation and the development of atomic weapons by Iran. It was never approved. Sir Jack Rampton, my permanent secretary, who seemed to be as keen as Marshall on the adoption of the PWR, and who was directly consulted by the prime minister, was clearly pressing this approach, and Jim Callaghan himself wanted me to go along with it.

At a cabinet committee meeting held on May 4 1977, Jim, while expressing his concern about nuclear proliferation, argued that we should not reject the Iranian approach since he thought that either the Germans or the French would take it up. An added complication arose when it turned out that since nuclear power was, under Euratom, seen by the Foreign Office as being within the legal competence of the European commission, the British government might be unable to take its own view.

Most astonishing of all, in the light of the present discussions, is that the problem of Iran developing such a huge nuclear capacity caused no problems for the Americans because, at that time, the Shah was seen as a strong ally, and had indeed been put on the throne with American help. There could hardly be a clearer example of double standards than this, and it fits in with the arming of Saddam to attack Iran after the Shah had been toppled, and the complete silence over Israel's huge nuclear armoury, which is itself a breach of the non-proliferation treaty.

The International Atomic Energy Agency and its chief, Mohamed ElBaradei, were recently awarded the Nobel peace prize for their work on non-proliferation, but since that treaty provided that the nuclear-weapons states should negotiate their own disarmament agreement, which has not happened, it is clear that for them the NPT does not matter. Now there is a proposal to report Iran to the UN and ElBaradei could find himself in the same position as was Hans Blix, the Iraq arms inspector who was

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used by Washington for its own purposes, with the US seeking a UN resolution to condemn Iran and then, if that fails, acting unilaterally using force, as in Iraq. If the problems now being discussed can be dealt within a practical way through the IAEA, there is a real chance of an agreed solution, and that is what we should be demanding since neither Bush nor Blair is in a position to take a high moral line.

As I am strongly opposed to nuclear weapons and civil nuclear power, these comments should not be taken as endorsing what Iran is doing; but Britain's past nuclear links with Iran should encourage us to be very cautious and oppose those whose arguments could be presented as justifying a case for war, which cannot be justified.

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