

FROM THE RT HON MICHAEL MEACHER MP  
MINISTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT AND AGRI-ENVIRONMENT

**DEFRA**  
Department for  
**Environment, Food  
& Rural Affairs**

25 OCT 2002

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Steve Webb Esq MP  
House Commons  
London  
SW1A 0AA

Your ref: cour/mrp  
Our ref: 173883/on

17 October 2002

*Dear Steve*

Thank you for your two letters of 6 September about questions raised by your constituent Mr Edward Courtney, 7 Orchard Close, Charfield, Wootton-under-Edge, South Gloucestershire. Mr Courtney was concerned at the low number of people who responded to two recent consultations about radioactive discharges and the management of radioactive waste and also asked about radioactive waste from the MOX plant.

As far as the consultation on radioactive discharges was concerned, this was published on the Department's website and was launched with a press conference and parliamentary announcement. Some national newspapers ran stories about it. Over 1400 copies of the draft document were distributed throughout the UK, to local authorities, health authorities, academic institutions, special interest groups and environmental organisations. The consultation document was also discussed the week after it was published, at the OSPAR 2000 meeting in Copenhagen, which was widely reported in the Press. The final version was published in August this year and was also distributed widely.

The consultation paper "Managing Radioactive Waste Safely" was sent to over 1,000 contacts in England, including trades union groups, ethnic minority organisations, pensioner groups and branches of the women's institute, as well as to each of the local authorities in England, which were asked to encourage debate. A copy was also placed on the DEFRA website. The devolved administrations employed similar techniques in their regions. We held focus groups to discuss the paper, and the paper generated both local and Parliamentary debates which attracted further interest. Although we also had a press briefing, we are unfortunately unable to dictate to the media what coverage they give to current government issues, neither can we force the public to get interested. As the radioactive waste programme develops, we will continue to look for new methods of encouraging the public to get involved in the process, as it is important that we gain widespread support for whatever final management option is chosen.



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Mr Courtney also asked about the MOX plant at Sellafield. The plant will not give rise to any high-level waste. As far as solid waste is concerned, in its application to the Environment Agency, BNFL estimated that about 120 cubic metres of plutonium-contaminated waste would be produced by the plant each year. This is a little more than the volume of a modern London double-decker bus (112 cubic metres) and represents around 2% by volume of the total plutonium-contaminated waste currently stored at the Sellafield site.

*Yours sincerely  
Michael*

MICHAEL MEACHER



**Steve Webb MP**

**LIBERAL DEMOCRAT MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT FOR NORTHAVON**

**House of Commons, London SW1A 0AA**

Mr. Edward Courtney  
7 Orchard Close  
Charfield  
Wotton-under-Edge  
South Gloucestershire  
GL12 8TJ

4 October 2002

Our ref: cour/mrp

Dear Mr Courtney

I have received two more of the replies to the various letters I sent on your behalf last month. These are from the Foreign Office and the BBC.

The letter from Mike O'Brien is interesting and gives some comfort about the attitude of the Russian Government, but I find it otherwise unconvincing. Britain has been too much implicated in this and other aspects of US defence policy for a Government minister to adopt such a neutral tone. He also fails to grapple with issues such as the inadequacy of the proposed defence system to deal with non-ballistic weapons or a plethora of warheads. The risk of its causing a new or accelerated arms race is dealt purely in terms of relations with Russia which, as Mr O'Brien himself says elsewhere, is an anachronistic way of looking at current defence issues.

The BBC's letter is friendly in tone, but I do not agree with Gavyn Davies that promoting a consultation would necessarily compromise the BBC's independence. Unless the consultation was heavily weighted – a finding that would itself be worth reporting – it would surely not harm the BBC to encourage the public to engage with the Government in debating a major issue. They would not know whether the resultant response from the public would serve to strengthen the Government's line or challenge it, and this would be entirely appropriate.

I am still awaiting replies to letters I sent to Margaret Becket, BNFL, the Nuclear Installations Directorate and the South Gloucestershire Primary Care Trust. You can therefore expect to hear from me again soon.

Yours sincerely

Steve Webb MP

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From the Chairman

30 September 2002

Mr Steve Webb MP  
House of Commons  
LONDON  
SW1A 0AA

Your ref: cour/mrp

Dear Steve

Thank you for your letter of 6 September, previously acknowledged, on behalf of your constituent, Mr Edward Courtney, of 7 Orchard Close, Charfield, Wotton-under-Edge GL12 8TJ, who is concerned about the level of public response to recent Government consultations on issues about radioactivity and nuclear waste.

As I am sure you will be aware, the BBC has a commitment under the terms of its Charter and Agreement to report controversial issues with due accuracy and impartiality, both in news programmes and in programmes that deal with matters of public policy or of political or industrial controversy. Reflecting all aspects of the debate on a particular topic is a core value of the BBC and one which it is vital to safeguard if the BBC is to maintain credibility with its audience.

It is therefore entirely appropriate for the BBC to report the outcome of a Government consultation on any issue if it is of interest to viewers and listeners, but I do not see how BBC programmes could take the initiative and promote such consultations without compromising their editorial independence. To do so would also undermine the audience's confidence in the BBC's impartiality and make it difficult to call the process or outcome of such consultations into question subsequently.

However, I do agree with Mr Courtney that environmental matters are of great public concern, and that is why they feature frequently in BBC news and other programmes.

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For instance, BBC News has been following the return of mixed oxide waste from Japan and developments with GM crops, while regular series such as *Countryfile* on BBC One and *Costing The Earth* on BBC Radio 4 include documentary features and investigations into environmental issues, including examining Government conduct and new research. The BBC Children's programme *Newsround* also frequently carries environmental stories.

The BBC will continue to report on environmental matters, including Government consultations where appropriate, but I hope I have explained why the approach Mr Courtney suggests would not be something we could consider.

I enclose a copy of my letter for you to forward to him, should you wish to do so.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gavyn', with a long horizontal stroke underneath.

Gavyn Davies