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# Moth-balling Nuclear Plants is the best plan

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# Moth-balling nuclear plants is the best plan

By Erika Simpson
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According to Ontario's new nuclear emergency plan, parts of southern Ontario could become uninhabitable from radioactive contamination if there was a serious nuclear accident at one of Ontario Hydro's atomic generating stations.

The Ontario government assigns "a very low probability" to a devastating atomic incident of this type, which so far has been experienced only at Chernobyl in the Ukraine. Nevertheless, the provincial cabinet is slated to formally approve the new plan by the end of 1999. Expect similar plans to be drawn up in other provinces, such as New Brunswick, where safety practices at the Point Lepreau nuclear power station have also received yet another poor report card.

In the past, when cabinet ministers and bureaucrats considered disturbing information about the consequences of a nuclear war, they were reticent to accept distressing information and quick to assume the aftermath could be survived.

The possibility of a nuclear war was similarly considered to be highly unlikely. However, the federal government put in place civil defence plans based on the premise it would be possible to survive a nuclear war. As Arthur Menzies, head of the defence liaison division in the Department of External Affairs during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, recalled, "I was allocated the external affairs responsibility for dealing with the survival of government in Ottawa in the event that some of the missiles planted in Cuba were to land in the Ottawa area. We had a team of special persons picked out, who were to go down a hole near Carp (about 45 kilometres west of Ottawa) and provide some continuity of government. This was just an added strain at a time of international crisis, and gave one to understand that the whole mechanism for crisis management requires a very, very elaborate structure of planning and of communications and of contingency arrangements and so on."

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But in the emergency cabinet meetings during that missile crisis, most ministers avoided discussing what the "post-attack" situation might look like, and how the general population might be affected in case of a nuclear war. Instead, they focused on the shortcomings now apparent with the national defence warbook. Rather than discuss the foreseeable effects of a nuclear war on the Canadian population, ministers focused on "certain revisions" to the warbook that were now deemed necessary. Cabinet resolved that "a thorough review should be made of the national defence warbook over the next six weeks and any necessary changes made to it, after which it should be submitted again to the (cabinet defence) committee for approval."

After the crisis ended, most cabinet ministers continued to assume the worst-case scenario would not materialize. A federal government estimate of the resources available in Canada, 48 hours after a hypothetical nuclear attack in November 1963, was presented as the most complete study to date, although it was scantily developed and disturbingly optimistic. This restricted report conveniently assumed for the sake of planning that there had been 20 nuclear detonations in Canada, of which seven were on military outposts in the Canadian north "too remote to have any significant effect on the economy." The study went on to postulate that out of a pre-attack population of 18,238,000 people, approximately 1,105,000 would be killed and 803,000 injured by direct effects of the attack.

Despite widespread public concern in the 1960s about the effects of nuclear fallout, the study merely suggested that, "More cases of radiation injury, as well as epidemics of communicable diseases in the overcrowded, unsanitary reception communities can be expected." Barely 48 hours after a devastating nuclear attack of at least 50 megatons, government bureaucrats calculated the labour force would be around 5,033,000 people, or 72 per cent of the pre-attack figure, while only about 16 per cent would consist of "evacuees whose productivity was limited." Evidently, even the best planners could not contemplate the terrifying possibility of preparing for total devastation.

We may tell ourselves that members of Premier Mike Harris's cabinet will be more knowledgable when they consider the possible aftermath of a nuclear meltdown, rather than a nuclear war. We can hope they will be scrupulous about ascertaining acceptable levels of nuclear radiation and careful to consider the possibility that fallout may disperse in all directions. That they will be any more open-minded and critical than those politicians who contemplated the aftermath of nuclear war a generation or two ago is unlikely.

Given the high stakes involved, isn't it imperative that cabinet ministers nationwide discuss a plan to moth-ball nuclear power plants? The rational long-term strategy would be to follow Sweden's example and plan to gradually phase-out nuclear power. Nuclear energy could be replaced by increased natural gas consumption, electricity imports from Quebec, some coal-fired power stations, wind power, and extensive conservation measures, until safer forms of energy production are invented.

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