

# Those nuclear scaremongers are a toxic lot

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Last updated March 31 2011 12:01AM

Don't listen to Angela Merkel and the Greens. We need a cool look at the (not so great) risks of nuclear power

We'll call him the Unnamed Farmer. As *The Times* reported yesterday, he was the first person to die as a result of damage to the nuclear plant at Fukushima. The 64-year-old from Sukagama, 40 miles from the reactor, hanged himself because his crops were no longer saleable.

I am not an expert on nuclear power or any other kind of power. Like many of you I have to read what I can, assess the arguments and the people who make them and try to come to some kind of view. Some of that opinion will be based on my experience of other, similar situations, and what was claimed at the time.

And this is what I deduce after the death of the Unnamed Farmer. A relatively elderly nuclear plant was in an area struck first by one of the five most powerful earthquakes in 110 years, and then by a 40ft tsunami. The result has been partial meltdowns and radiation contamination well beyond levels declared safe. Even so, and despite this combination of catastrophes, it looks highly unlikely, as our science editor Mark Henderson has been reminding us regularly, that leaked radioactivity will be great enough to cause serious long-term risk to human health. That compares with more than 10,000 people killed by falling buildings or in the tsunami.

There's more. Looking back on past nuclear accidents, it is now apparent that the effects on human health — although sometimes appalling — were considerably less than predicted at the time. I recall the grim warnings after Chernobyl of tens of thousands of deaths. A recent UN report on the 1986 Ukrainian fire estimated that perhaps 2,000 people developed thyroid cancer, having drunk contaminated milk, of whom a score or so died from it. Apart from those killed in the explosion or on site, the report found no evidence of other fatalities or adverse health effects.

The same was true of the much less serious accident at Three Mile Island in 1979. It was true, too, of the radiation effects of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. In other words, we are far more scared of radiation from nuclear accidents or events than the evidence justifies. The same UN report into Chernobyl argues that the psychological effects of the disaster, and the imagined radiation, were very significant.

This is not an argument for feeling smug about nuclear safety. It's an argument about relative risk. As David Spiegelhalter (Professor of the Public Understanding of Risk at Cambridge) has pointed out, we are content to endure whole-body CT scans, which

will cause a number of cancers every year. We think it's worth it but, of course, it's our decision: the risk of fallout from a nuclear plant isn't.

So the rational question then is: how risky is nuclear power among the various options that we have for providing the country with energy, and do we need to take the risk? Both the Labour Government of Blair and Brown and the coalition Government agreed that our energy strategy required a nuclear component. This was partly to fill an energy gap, partly to reduce dependence on oil and partly to reduce carbon emissions.

I accept the evidence that man-made carbon dioxide is likely to be a factor in climate change and that the greatest risks we run are those of failing to reduce emissions. I also accept the estimate that renewables and conservation — much though I support them — can't realistically hope to plug the coming energy gap, which itself constitutes a risk to wellbeing.

So before people dash down the 1980s paranoid route, brandishing their *Edge of Darkness* DVDs and chaining themselves to the fence at Sellafield wearing a luminous death's-head mask, it seems to me that they have to show that their alternative is less risky than developing the new generation of nuclear power stations. And they have to do it quickly.

What they shouldn't do is quote Germany to me. There, the Chancellor, Angela Merkel, succumbing to what one German commentator has called *Angstlust* (anxiety-pleasure), took a sudden decision before state elections last week to close down seven reactors. She also pandered to the panic by appointing a commission to look at the "ethics" of nuclear energy, the membership to include the Cardinal Archbishop of Munich. I don't imagine a similar commission exists for all other forms of energy. If it did, Germany would run out of prelates.

Of course, it wasn't enough. The Greens made the wholly absurd point that what Fukushima showed was that accidents that one couldn't even imagine might cause safety problems that were impossible to predict. As a proposition this was (a) true and (b) uselessly applicable to everything. The Greens will now lead the state government in Baden-Württemberg.

It maybe that, as some German journalists have airily suggested, nukes are not needed in their country because a massive ramping of renewables will take up the slack, while still allowing high carbon energies to be phased out.

Lucky them, but it needs pointing out that the Germans are not always great assessors of risk. Back at the time of the great MMR scare, certain parts of Germany were infected by a form of anti-vaccination madness. The places where this happened tended to be very middle-class and Green-leaning. A sort of vague desire for an additive-free "natural" lifestyle fuelled an approach that led to several serious measles outbreaks. Thus, among some of the most educated people in Europe, children's lives and health were put at risk for nothing more than a prejudice.

So what weight should we accord such irrationality? If you think none, then you are in conflict, it seems, with the ruling Liberal Democrat Party and — very improbably —

Paddy Ashdown. Last week he said that while he had previously considered nuclear power to be necessary “to stop the world from frying” he was now afraid that it was politically “unsellable”.

Yes, let’s fry rather than make a proper risk assessment! And now Nick Clegg has hinted to a plane-ful of hacks that he may well throw some of his deputy weight around to make opening new nuclear plants more difficult. This, Nick, may be politics, but it isn’t leadership.

You know why the Unnamed Farmer really died? Not because anyone would actually have been killed by his spinach — they would have had to eat tons of it to become ill. But because sales were stopped, just in case. That’s where the Merkel-Ashdown logic gets you.